Resale Stores in the United States: Do They Communicate an Earth-Friendly Message?

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study explored the eco-friendly communication of thrift stores in a region ravaged by environmental degradation. This study was inspired by the discovery that active curbside recyclers in one city reported lower rates of donations of items as a landfill diversion. The primary goal of this study was to detect if these thrift shops communicated an earth-friendly message. The secondary goal was to identify and categorize the values communicated based on the framework by Montgomery and Mitchell (2014). Assumptions for this study included that curbside recycling and donations for reuse would be part of eco-thrift behavior; thus, the focus of this study was on questioning the role played by thrift stores in marketing their earth-friendly benefit. A website search of thrift stores in one city was conducted to identify their stated value to the community as communicated on these websites. Those values were then categorized into themes. Most of the messaging appealed to self-interest. It was also common for these stores to frame a mix of other-interest or altruistic (do-good) and self-interest (tax-deductible, self-promotion, and pick-up donations service) behaviors, as well as feel-good promotions. Only those thrift stores associated with a national organization listed an eco-friendly contribution on their website. The study included a practical guide for the message framing of thrift stores and an invitation for future studies in this largely untapped field of research.

Keywords: message framing, thrift stores, landfill diversion, eco-friendly behaviors

INTRODUCTION

According to the National Association of Resale Professionals (NARP), resale is the "ultimate in recycling" (NARTS Industry Statistics and Trends, 2022, para. 7). Resale may or may not be the ultimate in recycling, but donations to charitable thrift stores allow a second life for clothing and home goods that might otherwise end up in landfills. Thrift shops, defined as for-profit or nonprofit stores that sell preowned goods (Hochtritt, 2019), have a long and curious *do-good* rebranding history, stretching from "saving the waste in things and men" [and] "not charity but a chance" (Le Zotte, 2013, pp. 179, 184) into the early twentieth century. Each branding suggests a different message frame as an adaptation to the cultural lens of the time. More currently, the societal concern shifted to environmental protection (i.e., recycling-reuse to reduce landfill use).

Concern about the global impact of climate change resulted in an agreement among most citizens surveyed in 17 advanced economies, including those in North America, indicating their willingness to change lifestyles (Bell et al., 2021) to take a more proactive stance on the environmental reduction of waste. Consumers, however, remain relatively uneducated as to helpful behavior changes that could be used to combat climate change. Clear communication of climate-friendly behaviors is necessary to help individuals act on those desired behaviors (Thøgersen, 2021). Thrift stores can do their part by marketing their eco-friendly advantage to donors, but it remains unknown if that is common practice among these stores.

Purpose of the Research

The primary goal of this qualitative research study was to determine if thrift stores market themselves as environmentally friendly, as evidenced by the communication of that value to the community. While our main interest was communication engaging donors, both buyers and donors are a part of the circular economy and thrift-store eco-friendly messaging would potentially be important to both groups. Secondarily, this study identified and categorized the values communicated by these thrift stores based on the framework of donor motivations by Montgomery and Mitchell (2014). This research responded to the recommendations for extending message frameworks to other settings

and other forms of giving and donations (Chang & Lee, 2009; Feiler et al., 2012), as well as considering the cultural values of the marketing area (Bang et al., 2021).
No study to date has conducted an empirical examination of the message framing of thrift stores or sought to identify if they communicated an earth-friendly value.

These shops, once only considered a part of the *shadow economy* – often tax-exempt, less expensive, and focused on both interpersonal and economic interactions (James et al., 2007), have become an economic force with global sales projected to increase to $36 billion by 2024 (Evans et al., 2022). Thrift stores are also pivotal in advancing reuse and diverting waste from landfills. Fashion textiles are nearly 100% recyclable (Juanga-Labayen et al., 2022), yet 21 billion pounds of textiles were dumped into landfills in the United States in 2015 (Hirschlag, 2019) and by 2018 the recycling rate for all textiles was only 14.7% (Environmental Protection Agency, 2022). Over 60% of fashion textiles discarded as waste are appropriate for reuse (Carborne et al., 2016). Reuse is kinder to the environment than recycling in terms of environmental impact (Sandin & Peters, 2018), and thrift stores are the conduit between reusable items and buyers. A study by thredUp reported that the donation of a dress can save 21.4 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions and a purse saves even more carbon emissions, compared to buying the items new (Woudenberg, 2021). In images and in words, thrift stores can communicate the environmental savings and landfill waste diversion that one person can generate through donations.

As Steward (2015) noted, thrift stores do not exist in a vacuum – they are a part of a neighborhood and a city. As such, these shops are an integral part of a circular economy and a culture of sustainability. Thrift shops can and should play a role in educating the public by clearly communicating the climate-friendly behavior of thrift donations and purchases. Thrift stores can communicate this eco-friendly behavior through the messages of their values broadcast to the public, highlighting the benefit of engaging in pro-environmental behaviors or the harm in failing to do so (Claudio, 2007; Li & Su, 2018; Nelson et al., 2021; Tong et al., 2021). Even social media posts communicating pro-environment messages can influence sustainability behavior (Frick et al., 2021). Eco-values can become a part of the brand image of stores, and thus influence charitable giving and impact social change (Michel & Rieunier, 2012). Environmental threats require an "all-hands-on-deck" (Frantz et al., 2021, p. 1) approach to shift norms and inspire pro-environment behavior. Therefore, reframing to eco-concerns requires concerted efforts from all sectors, including businesses, researchers, and the media to address the threats of environmental degradation (Khan et al., 2020). This reframing is particularly important because of the need to remind a *throw-away* society that donations to thrift stores reduce the environmental footprint by diverting clothing and household items from landfills. Ecological consciousness is one reason for secondhand shopping (Ek Styvén & Mariani, 2020; Evans et al., 2022), and thrift stores that communicate the benefit of helping the environment can effectively position themselves not only to meet donor needs but to earn loyalty in return (Sarigöllü et al., 2021).

In the next section, the literature on donor motivations will be introduced as background information. The review also presents a brief discussion of message framing, including a study on self-reported recycling behaviors of Baton Rouge residents conducted in 2010-2011 (Douglas & Parsons, 2021). The review of the literature is followed by the methods and results, findings and general discussion, limitations and implications for future research, recommendations for practice, and conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Thrift stores are unique among stores because the marketing focus is to attract both buyers and donors. These shops are also outliers in using any framework in which to categorize the messaging efforts. In terms of environmental philanthropy, the giving of time and money, the authors of a study in 2020 concluded that environmentalism is not a unified concept, suggesting that a different theoretical framework may be needed to understand this form of philanthropy and environmental behaviors (Handriana & Ningsih, 2020). There are reasons why the need exists for a new framework, particularly when it is known that: social awareness about the environment continues to grow (Handriana & Ningsih, 2020), recycling rates continue to rise due to environmental concerns (Czajkowski et al., 2017), and donors consider philanthropy and environmental sustainability in their clothing disposal behavior (Bianchi & Birtwistle, 2012; Fenitra et al., 2021; Wai Yee et al., 2016).

A study of college students identified five motivational factors for clothing disposal (i.e., environmental, economic, charity, convenience, and information) and of those, donation behaviors were explained by environmental and charity concerns, with convenience related to discarding behaviors (Joung & Park, 2013). Interestingly, Sarigöllü et al. (2021) discovered that the concerns about product redistribution of mobile phones and sunglasses are waste minimization and waste *aversion*, rather than general environmental concerns. Mobile phones and sunglasses are neither representative of thrift store donations nor the interplay between waste *diversion* and donations. The lesson to be gained from the Sarigöllü et al. study is that the motivation for eco-behaviors may depend on the item.

Generally, the motivations of nonprofit thrift store buyers are like that of donors (Hanson, 1980), at least for categorical purposes. A qualitative study set in Korea used a dichotomous framework of hedonic (feel good) versus utilitarian (rational motives) to examine donor motivations (Baker & Yurchisin, 2014). Similarly, donor motivations can be grouped as altruistic or self-serving (Montgomery & Michell, 2014), and as Mitchell et al. (2009) observed, self-interest trumps altruism. Borrowing from Park et al. (2017), donations are impacted by values (benevolence and power) and reasons (other orientation and self-orientation), and each value and reason can be related to donation behavior.

Clear self-interest motivations exist, such as tax incentives, self-esteem, recognition, and convenience (Montgomery & Mitchell, 2014, p. 3). Donors consider cost versus benefit when they judge the relative disposable convenience of those donations (Laitala, 2014). There are other motivations that may also be a part of self-interest, but the benefit to the donor remains indirect. Donating is considered *other benefiting*, but the donor gains a sense of *doing good* or *self-gratification* (feeling good) in the act of donating (Gaiter, 2012; Wai Yee et al., 2016). The feel-good response of donors is self-interested giving (Anik et al., 2009) and egotistically motivated, but perceived as altruistic (Feiler et al., 2012). Passion for a cause can also be a self-interest motivation (Dietz & Keller, 2016, p. 3) and a major reason for money and time donations.

Is the base eco-motivation for donations a *feel-good* response or strict altruism or a mix of altruism and self-interest? Montgomery and Mitchell (2014) grouped environmental consciousness with other altruistic motives – sympathy, a moral sense of obligation, and believing in a cause (p. 3). The Montgomery and Mitchell framework is based on value theory, a theory commonly used to categorize values as self-enhancement or self-transcendent, with environmental values as transcendent (Graham & Abrahamse, 2017). A study of charity messaging found that increased donation intentions were related to altruism or other-benefiting, rather than self-orientation (Kim & Childs, 2021), and are predicted by environmentalism and charity (Park et al., 2017). Among second-hand buyers, concern for the environment is one motivation for shopping at thrift stores (Borusiak et al., 2020; Lorenzen, 2012; Sorensen & Jorgensen, 2019), and *thrifty practices* of thrift shoppers are linked to recycling behaviors (Bardhi & Arnould, 2005). The literature is clear that sustainability is one reason for thrift store buyers (Seo & Kim, 2019; Tu et al., 2022), but few studies include an examination of environmental consciousness as a motivation for donating items to charitable thrift shops (Montgomery & Mitchell, 2014).

Message framing studies are common in the literature on health communication (Pope et al., 2018), as well as marketing research, because of the power of persuasive messaging on behavior (Florence et al., 2022). Persuasive messages can sway attitude change which, in turn, can lead to intention and behavior changes (Carfora et al., 2021). The persuasive influence of framing a message is evident, considering the use of framing in news media and political messages, which are focused on shifting the attitudes of people (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Message framing is both a "process of selecting and the manner in which information is presented" (Wicks, 2005, p. 335). Framing models have been used for decades to understand how individuals construct meaning to interpret information (Wicks, 2005). A recent review of the literature emphasized the complexity of message framing because of the variety of ways a message can be framed and the different behaviors that can be the target of those messages (Florence et al., 2022).

There is an abundance of literature on message framing to promote environmental behaviors. Pro-environmental behavior is described as behavior that either actively benefits the environment or minimizes harm and can include subjects, such as biodiversity conservation, pollution, and climate change, green consumption, water usage, and energy consumption, transportation, and waste production and management (Homar & Cvelbar, 2021, p. 2). Studies on sustainability message framing encompass a wide variety of topics such as red meat consumption and plant-based diets (Niemiec et al., 2021; Wistar et al., 2022), purchasing recycled products (Li et al., 2021), species reintroduction (Niemiec et al., 2020), greening crowdfunding campaigns (Rossolini et al., 2021), green hotels (Nimri et al., 2022) and, of special interest to this study, green message framing and sustainable consumption (Borusiak et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2022).

Within the pro-environment behavior body of literature, green consumption, waste, and recycling are examined more often than other topics on sustainability (Homar & Cvelbar, 2021), with different studies using different typologies – generally framed as a loss or gain messaging (Homar & Cvelbar, 2021; Grazzini et a l., 2018; Lee et al., 2022). While the research often concludes that sustainability subjects should be framed with a positive message (Dasandi et al., 2022; Li & Su, 2018), a study of Dutch homeowners discovered that pro-environmental intentions were stronger if framed as a loss, but a *loss to the self* rather than the environment (Nab et al., 2020). A 2021 review of the literature on message framing and environmental decisions examined 61 studies and concluded that loss framing was equally effective in studies on behavior and intentions, and gain framing was more effective if attitudes were examined (Homar & Cvelbar, 2021)

A quasi-experimental study by Douglas and Parsons (2021) conducted a decade earlier of Baton Rouge residents used four recycling message frames: social norms (neighbors recycling), economic reasons (job creation in developing recycled materials for market), environmental/bio-spheric messages with regard to both loss (landfills) and positive/gain (depicted in the study as an aesthetic frame of an unlittered biodiverse Louisiana Cypress swamp). Those four frames used photos that represented the most prominent values of interest to Louisiana citizens. These Baton Rouge residents were more likely to increase the frequency of their recycling efforts because of social norms. The primary influence of the social norms message frame was expected and affirmed the results of prior studies (Blose et al., 2020; Knickmeyer, 2020; Lede et al., 2019; Li et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2019).

The motivation frameworks for curbside recycling often emphasize moral motivation, private costs/efforts, and social norms, with the latter being the dominant reason for household recycling (Czajkowski et al., 2017). These frames have yet to be tested with thrift store messaging, but still are present or inferred in some thrift store communication. Social norms are important to one segment of thrift store buyers, but this begs the question of whether that concept can be applied to donors, as well. Oddly, the answer is yes, but only in part. Some segments of the donors of goods do so to communicate communal or social intent (Gershon & Cryder, 2018). An example of this message would be inviting donors to be a *positive influence in the community*. A study of environmental messaging about plastic grocery bags found that shoppers used fewer free bags in response to two messages, normative (*shoppers in our store believe that reusing shopping bags is a worthwhile way …..*) and environmental (*we thank you for helping the environment……*) compared to the environmental message alone (De Groot et al., 2013, p. 1837).

The study by Douglas and Parsons (2021) included one question about the frequency of donations to charitable organizations as a means of landfill diversion. One assumption of this study was that donations and curbside recycling would share a common theme of eco-friendly behaviors. Bivariate analysis of the sample did show that a mild, but statistically significant, relationship existed between the frequency of donations of home goods and clothing to charitable organizations (0 to 3 – rarely/never to once a week) and curbside recycling frequency (.223, p. = .001). This result, although not generalizable, picked up the thread started by Granzin and Olsen (1991) who found that the environmental protection activities of recycling and donating reused items may be different environmental protection activities, but they are related and linked to environmental concerns. Consistent with the results of prior studies (Hunter, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2009), donations were also related to income (.343, p. = .001), education (.390, p. = .001), and age (.225, p. = .001).

Unexpectedly, while nearly half (49.3%, 258 of 523) of the Baton Rouge residents reported that they participated in curbside recycling once a week, only 16.4% (86) of the respondents reported always donating items to charitable organizations as a means of redirecting waste. This finding was odd, considering the generous nature of Americans who gave $324.10 billion in 2020 to charities (Jin et al., 2021). In terms of general charitable giving in Louisiana, the residents of East Baton Rouge led the parishes in the state. An obvious disconnect exists between generosity in giving money and in giving donations of home goods and clothing to charitable thrift stores as landfill diversion.

It was this disconnect resulting from the study on curbside recyclers, which inspired the current qualitative research. Donors are just one part of the equation. The stores receiving the donations are the other part of the equation and may possibly be one reason for any gap in connecting donations to eco-friendly behaviors. The literature is clear that linking the organizational mission and values to messaging matters to charitable thrift store donors (Mitchell, 2010). Further, the motivation of personal values of donors to support charitable causes influences giving (Sneddon et al., 2020), and environmental protection is an emerging and rising personal value in America (Granzin & Olsen, 1991; Jia et al., 2017; Mondéjar-Jiménez et al., 2018).

METHODOLOGY

Setting

One assumption guiding this study was that curbside recycling and donations for reuse would be related. The results of the Douglas and Parsons study did provide weak evidence for that supposition. However, there was a major difference between the self-reported curbside recycling frequency and the frequency of donation of items as landfill diversion.

We were unsure if thrift stores would use eco-friendly communication because of the newness of this topic, as well as the location of the study, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In 2019, Louisiana ranked 50th as the least-green state in the United States with the worst eco-friendly behaviors (Kierman, 2019). Yet, if any area should be interested in safeguarding the environment, south Louisiana should be at the top of the list.

Hurricane Ida leveled parts of Louisiana in 2021 on the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina 16 years prior. Climate change, the eroding coastal land, and the disintegration of barrier islands and sheltered wetlands provided a welcome

mat for Hurricane Ida. Louisiana has been subject to the nearly unfettered removal of resources to benefit other states and nations, draining the state with "cuts and nicks, one acre at a time" (Gene Turner as quoted in Carey, 2013, para. 2). The idea that it is necessary to sacrifice the environment for economic prosperity has been a long-held view in the state. Until recent years, the mission statement of the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality promoted a balance of *economic well-being* with environment and health.

Despite the compelling evidence of climate change in the state, there remains a lack of political will coupled with citizen distrust in government and skepticism about the reality of manufactured environmental degradation, all of which erodes the impetus for solutions (Boesch, 2019). As sociologist, Arlie Russell Hochschild, explained, Louisiana citizens see (petrochemical) "companies as the givers of jobs and gifts (to nature conservation nonprofits). The company looks very generous, and the state doesn't really regulate the polluters; so, victims of the pollution blame the state" (Woodruff, 2016, para. 24). The uphill battle for the state's Climate Initiatives Task Force, charged with mapping a direction to zero out net greenhouse-gas admissions by 2050, is the engrained view of the state as an oil-and-gas state with politicians echoing the industry's message that the enemy is emissions, not fossil fuels (Verchick, 2021)

East Baton Rouge Parish has been devastated by storms and flooding (Epstein, 2021; Horowitz, 2014; Lotfata & Shrinidhi, 2019). The risk of storms and flooding will continue with hotspots of moderate to extreme risk in Lafayette, New Orleans, and Baton Rouge (Schleifstein, 2020). Baton Rouge was ranked at the bottom of 100 cities for energy efficiency by the 2021 City Clean Energy Scorecard, evaluated by the American Council for Energy-Efficient Economy (Baurick, 2021). Subsequently, Baton Rouge, the capital of Louisiana, provided an ideal site from which to investigate eco-friendly message framing.

Traveling the streets of Baton Rouge would lead any newcomer to question if conservation matters in a city where litter has become a landmark and "speaks to the innate culture of Louisiana" (Landry, 2018, para. 4). Changes to this throw-away culture require not only reforms with landscape and enforcement, but with the *lazy* attitudes, as well (Landry, 2018). Accumulated litter is a "decades-old problem" (Kemker, 2021, para. 3), now potentially clogging the stormwater drainage system and adding to the risk of flooding. From a conservation point of view, missed opportunities to recycle exist with much of the material ending up in landfills. Additionally, these opportunities exist in a city with a state mandate to reduce landfilled solid waste by 25%, and an estimated 30 thrift, vintage, and consignment shops.

Data Collection Steps

There were several steps in the data collection and analysis. The first step was to search for thrift stores based on the inclusion criteria. Second, the values communicated were identified. Additionally, the thrift stores' platforms were investigated using Stage Theory and branding images were identified based on Le Zotte's (2013, 2017) historical account of thrift stores. Last, the values were categorized. Lacking a framework specifically for thrift store messaging, we used donor motivations (Montgomery & Mitchell, 2014) to categorize the values communicated by thrift stores. The conceptualization and development of message frameworks often start with preexisting individual characteristics, such as beliefs and values (Lewis et al., 2016); therefore, we were confident that the values identified via the review of the literature and captured by Montgomery and Mitchell (2014) would offer a good fit for identifying and grouping the communication of the thrift stores. Image 1 is an example of an image from Goodwill.org

To collect data on the thrift store values communicated to the community, a Google search was conducted to identify those thrift stores in Baton Rouge and to note the benefit-values communicated on each website and social media. Search terms included *thrift store, second-hand store,* and *resale shops* in Baton Rouge. If an annual report was posted, that too was used to identify values communicated. The study objective was to pinpoint any thrift listing an environmentally-friendly value, as well as to identify all values communicated. This search necessarily excluded any thrift stores (a) without a website or social media presence, (b) with a website but offering no information other than directions to the store, and (c) that was only Internet-based. This list excluded also those that were exclusively consignment. Table 1 lists 17 for-profit and nonprofit thrift stores. It is important to also mention that from the original date of the data collection in 2021-early 2022, there have been shifts – both in terms of additions and deletions of thrift stores and in environmental messaging. It should also be noted that one store was contacted by phone to verify the option of the pick-up service. The website of the store listed a pick-up service with the image of a community collection container.

Table 1: Thrift Store Values Communicated

Thrift store	Value to Community	Eco-friendly value listed?	Other messaging
Goodwill Industries of Southeastern Louisiana	Offers opportunities to people with disabilities and other employment barriers. Food bank donations	Diverted from landfills; 4 recycling programs.	Tax purposes. Pick up donations.
Connections for Life	Helping incarcerated women achieve sustainable stability and success. Recycle unused items		Tax deductible
The Salvation Army	Emergency assistance – food, shelter, drug/alcohol rehab services, & transitional housing		*Money* donation. Tax deductible. Pick up donations.
My Faith Thrift Store & Donation Center	Be a positive influence in community and clothe and feed the homeless.		
Purple Cow	Helping struggling families. Housing the homeless.		Give meaning to your spring cleaning. Tax deduction. Pick up furniture donations.
Here Today Gone Tomorrow	Helping the community. Supports charities: food bank, homeless shelters, help for women & Africa Program.		Making a difference and donations. Tax deduction
Our Hope Thrift Store & Donation Center	Local veterans dealing with PTSD & BRCC's students with autism or other related intellectual challenges		
America's Thrift Store	For-profit. Share profits with charities – substance abuse and children with illnesses	Keep donatable goods out of the landfills (2019) "Save Your Planet" Every time you donate or buy thrift, the planet thanks you for saving fresh water	Donation receipt for 1 of 6 charities listed. Pick up available.
St. Vincent de Paul	Feed, clothe and shelter the poor and homeless of our community.		Empower people in need. You can make a difference. Pick up donations.
Habitat for Humanity ReStores	Help Habitat for Humanity partner build, rehab and repair safe and affordable homes	"Some save green, while being green" saved more than 2,500 tons from the landfill. Support sustainable development	Tax deduction. Pick up donations.
Plato's Closet, Style Encore,	For-profit	Reduce. Reuse. Recycle. Live sustainably	
Joseph's Storehouse	Funds residential rehab program		Pick up donations.
Living Water's Thrift Store	Offer treatment options – drug addiction, gambling, and alcoholism.		
Refinery	For-profit		
Hope Cares	Service to homeless/needy in North BR		
Shiloh's Bargain Center	Underprivileged, educational, social & economic improvement. Offering high quality clothing, shoes, and accessories at a low price to the South Baton Rouge community.		
Family Thrift Center	For-profit	Saving the planet by recycling clothes that can be worn again	

Finally, the communication on these websites and social media was cataloged using Montgomery and Mitchell (2014) altruistic motives (sympathy, moral sense of obligation, and believing in a cause) and self-interest (tax incentives, self-esteem, recognition and status, and convenience). The first step in grouping the messages was to identify the wording on the websites and social media pages. That wording, other than advertising sales and value-less script, was recorded and later compiled in Table 1. Examples of value-less scripts would be directions to the store, store hours, partnerships, donations accepted, store descriptions, customer reviews, and so forth. Self-interest values

cataloged were primarily tax deductions, offers to pick up donations, and pleas to status. Altruistic or other- interest values identified and grouped included: eco-values, pleas to help (do-good), sharing profits with charities, and the cross-over value, feel good.

RESULTS

Website Analysis

The communication on nationally affiliated nonprofit stores' websites was more sophisticated. Their websites were generally more attractive, informative, and interesting to explore. Just as is true for organizational development, websites also go through stages with most of the websites of these thrift stores at a rudimentary level. In their study of human services nonprofit websites, Hoefer and Twis (2018) concluded that many websites and social media platforms are just a "billboard for services" (p. 263), rather than strategically-crafted approaches to engagement. Applying Kirk et al.'s (2016) case study on Stage Theory to this set of thrift stores, these shops were primarily at Level 1 in terms of basic presentation (mission, purpose, and programs) and one-way information comparable to a "brochure-ware format" (p. 198). However, not all met every criterion for Level 1. For example, the Salvation Army and Shiloh's Bargain Center did publish a list of services (or *how we serve*) but did not list a clear mission statement on their thrift store websites.

Some of the characteristics of the websites of Goodwill and Habitat also met Level 2 (goals, financial reports, staff, and newsletters), other than listing all board members for Goodwill. Both also met some, but not all, of two-way interactivity of Level 3 and the e-transactions of Level 4 (such as donating online). Connections for Life, St. Vincent de Paul, Joseph's Storehouse, and the Salvation Army also provided a tab for online monetary donations. To our knowledge, none of these thrift stores had the e-transaction capacity to sell items via their website, although there are nonprofit thrift stores in other regions that sell through eBay, for example.

In reviewing the website information of the charitable organizations, there were reminders of lingering branding images indicated by Le Zotte (2013) of "not a charity, but a change" [expressed as] "a hand up, not a hand out" (p. 184). Further, there are for-profit vintage shops in Baton Rouge, but not included in the analysis because of missing information. The communication of vintage store websites was reminiscent of Le Zotte's (2017) exploration of the later counterculture evolution of thrift stores. For others on the list, marketing their thrift store, if that can be judged by the message communication, consisted of *selling* (stating) their missions -- for example, *feed the homeless, help veterans,* and so forth.

Preliminary Results

Some of the communication of these thrift stores was a mix of altruistic and self-interest appeals, with the messaging geared more toward the self-interests of buyers. Seven of the stores offered to pick up donations – an appeal to the self-interest of convenience for donors. Only five of the 13 charitable thrift stores listed tax deductions (self-serving) for donors of items to the stores, and that benefit was not well advertised by any of those stores. It was common among the five to wrap that tax benefit with a *feel-good* benefit. In a qualitative study of donor motivations, self-interest in terms of tax credits and other-benefit mattered to respondents; the participants wanted to feel good about receiving something in return, even if symbolic (Mainardes et al., 2017, p. 9).

A bundled self-interest and other-interest were evident in the following message: *Be a positive influence in the community and clothe and feed the homeless*; this can be categorized in multiple ways, and likely, the *influence in the community* statement would appeal to self-interest (social status and power) or what has been termed an *impure altruist* achieving self-enhancement through an otherwise altruist behavior (Gandullia et al., 2021). It was common for the thrift stores to appeal to the *feel-good do-good* semi-altruistic motive of donors. Five shops did refer to an eco-value which represented a *selling* point for other-serving, and classified, according to Montgomery and Mitchell (2014), as altruistic. Nationally affiliated for-profit thrift stores appealed to the altruism of donors in terms of environmental sustainability and the charities supported.

There were some obvious distinctions among the list of thrift stores in terms of eco-friendly value communication. If a store were associated with a national organization, even if independent, an environmental contribution would be listed. Eco-friendly values were also easier to find in the for-profit thrift store websites and nationally affiliated nonprofits. Goodwill Industries of Southeastern Louisiana, for example, listed the eco-value in the home link and the annual report. The website for Habitat for Humanity Restore of Greater Baton Rouge was more difficult to navigate to identify eco-values. Connections for Life did list *recycle unused items for a good cause* within

donations, but did not connect that to landfill diversion, possibly because the stated expectation was that the items would be unused. If a for-profit thrift shop only had a social media presence, those outlets, with two exceptions, seldom offered any usable information on value to the community other than marketing items for resale and upcoming sales.

FINDINGS AND GENERAL DISCUSSION

There were several findings of interest in the messaging of these thrift stores. The first finding indicated that some charitable thrift stores still followed the messaging paradigm categorized by La Zotte (2013) of "not charity but a chance" (p. 184) expressed by Goodwill, for example, as a *handups* and *self-sufficiency*. The Salvation Army emphasized its role in helping individuals become *productive members of society*. One of Our Hope and Thrift's stated goals was to help autistic children get *ready for a job in the workforce*. The mission of the Purple Cow was to *help struggling families who need a hand up, not a handout*. Even Habitat for Humanity added the emphasis of working in partnership with *deserving* low-income families.

Self-interest was the major value communicated with nine of the 17 listing tax incentives and/or picking up donations. Appeals to other-interest were rarely articulated, but presumably inferred by the mention of populations served and services provided. Two of the 17 did use appeals of *sharing profits with charities* and *help clothe and feed the homeless*. Five shops bundled self-interest and other-interest: *give meaning to your spring cleaning and tax deduction*, *be a positive influence in the community and clothe and feed the homeless*, *make a difference and tax donations*, *save green while being green*, and *empower people in need and make a difference.* Eco-friendly values were the most common of the other-interest values communicated with five listing that value. Three of the five that communicated an eco-value, referred to landfill diversion, but none of the thrift stores used an image of an actual landfill.

Among the local nonprofit thrift stores, the common service themes were substance abuse, post-incarceration, and homelessness. The local, unaffiliated religiously thrift stores communicated only their services/mission without an appeal that could be easily interpreted as other- or self-serving. None of those local, unaffiliated religiously thrift stores included eco-messaging as their community contribution. This outcome may be due to the fact that Louisiana is considered a conservative state with high religiosity among its residents. Southern Baptists and other evangelical Protestants are like secular climate skeptics in their beliefs (Zaleha & Szasz, 2015, p. 19). In part, this may also be because these small, religiously based stores are more-or-less add-on services of a church, and the pastors in Baton Rouge may be more sensitive to the perceived immediacy of environmental injustice (Mufson, 2022) than climate change, per se.

We acknowledge that thrift stores, both for-profit and nonprofit, bring other values to the community such as an economic impact in the billions of dollars (ARC, 2019), job creation (Huang & Fishbach, 2021), funding needed community services, and of course, customer savings, and fun (Bardhi & Arnould, 2005). Thrift stores, through the reuse benefit, may check most or all the sustainability boxes, yet it is important to note that just because thrift stores communicate values attached to eco-friendliness does not mean that these organizations are free of controversy. Value to the environment could be as symbolic as factual, considering that thrift shops may employ other eco-unfriendly practices, or at least can and should apply greener practices (Watson, 2021; Woudenberg, 2021). An additional consideration is that unsold items in shops may still end up in landfills. Further, the good deeds of charitable thrift stores may be offset by the high pay of their executives (Cordes, 2016). For-profit thrift stores may mislead the public about their support of charities (Cowles, 2014). Questions also remain about the impact of thrift stores in low-income communities (Ma & Riggio, 2021).

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There were numerous limitations and delimitations of this study. It was beyond the scope of this study to survey donors and determine if their motives matched the values communicated by these thrift shops. We were also restricted to the Internet presence of the thrift stores. More thrift stores exist in Baton Rouge, but under the Internet radar. Further, we narrowly restricted our study to one city and one group – thrift stores. For convenience, we used information available on store websites and social media pages for the data. In our defense, that method of collecting information is not uncommon, and more and more studies are using websites to collect information and draw conclusions (Booth & Jansen, 2010).

Seventeen thrift stores were a small number to investigate and a major limitation of our qualitative study. The thrift stores in our study were not only few but exist in an area with a rather lackadaisical attitude about litter and landfills, unless those landfills are in their backyards. We suggest using website information from a larger sample

of nonprofits and for-profits. The results may have been different if New Orleans was selected. After all, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 prompted a serious examination of the effects of climate change and the creation of a Resilience and Sustainability office in the City of New Orleans. Or the results may have been different if the thrift shops in the city chosen were a part of a state or national alliance. The influence of a national connection was apparent in those few thrift shops in Baton Rouge. However, the case for most thrift shops in any locale is that they often act as free agents, and the question is – how does one penetrate that market to instill the concept of message framing and emphasize the importance of educating the public on their value in a sustainable environment? Who or what stirs the messenger to message?

Nonprofit message framing is a neglected but fertile field of investigation (Zheng et al., 2016) with little scholarly research on thrift stores (Baker & Yurchisin, 2014; Leandro Zampier et al., 2021). This current study is significant in breaking new ground in understanding the values communicated by these stores, particularly eco-friendly values. This study can be the point of departure for future research that provides guidance for thrift store managers to attract donors. Such information can offer new marketing strategies (Mainardes et al., 2017).

There is a need for more research on donor perceptions and preferences to guide marketing efforts (Kureshi & Thomas, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2009). Most studies on donations of goods were specific to clothing or baby items (Handriana & Ningsih, 2020; Wai Yee et al., 2016), neglecting items such as cars and household furniture or appliances (Luchs et al., 2011, pp. 8-9). At least two charitable organizations on our list, St. Vincent de Paul and Habitat Restore, solicited donations of vehicles. Future studies should investigate shopper and donor motivations on the array of items donated to thrift stores, considering that clothing fashionability (Ferraro et al., 2016) and recreation (Roux & Guiot, 2008) would likely no longer be top motivators for many household items.

There is a definite need for a framework to categorize thrift store message communication, and within that framework, a method of classifying environmental messages. Are there environmental appeals in use other than landfill diversion? Is a landfill diversion message simply altruistic or does it matter how that message is framed? Future studies could also expand the research on the differences between nonprofit and for-profit environmental messaging. Shin and Ki (2022) analyzed the environmental messaging tweets of for-profit and nonprofit businesses and found that the messaging of for-profits featured their green products with numerical evidence, while the nonprofit organizations used more negative message frames – describing a severely degraded environment.

We reflected on the reasons the nationally affiliated thrift stores included eco-friendly messaging. What if the motive, assuming for the point of argument, is just simply environmental sustainability? The likely answer for the two nationally affiliated nonprofits is the use of a common template and top-down-driven values. Can the same be assumed by the affiliated for-profit thrifts? Possibly they are driven to add *do-good* strategies, such as charitable contributions, as a marketing tactic. Is it as simple as *charity sells* and if so, sells to donors, buyers, the community, or existing nonprofit thrift stores? (Christmann, 2011; Privett, 2014). From the literature review, it can also be assumed that an eco-friendly value of for-profit thrifts sells to at least some donors.

The authors speculate that communicating eco-friendly values, such as those used by Goodwill's calculator (see Figure 1), may add a degree of tangibility to an otherwise intangible message of *doing good*. Both Goodwill and Habitat use actual persons as success stories, rather than anonymous people. The use of specifically identifiable victims increases helping intent (van Esch et al., 2021), likely because of a decrease in psychological distance. Locally (versus globally) framed environmental messaging encourages climate change engagement and that then would increase relatability (Scannell & Gifford, 2013) and help make the psychological distance seem less abstract and more tangible (Kusmanoff et al., 2020). While the use of psychological distance is a promising strategy in climate messaging (Jones et al., 2017), the results remain limited, with more research needed on this relatively new topic (Maiella et al., 2020).

Scannell and Gifford (2013) found that those with stronger place attachment would be more likely to be engaged with climate change. We speculate that there would be no city with greater place attachment in Louisiana than New Orleans (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2009). Although we could not find an actual number of thrift stores in that city, the count via Google is likely near 100, including vintage and consignment stores. The thrift stores in that city would be a good testing ground for any number of propositions about bridging the environmental messaging distance between donors and thrift shops.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The final contribution of this study is to offer a guide to thrift stores in communicating their value to the community. This guide is the cumulation of a thorough search of the literature on donor message framing. A specific search was also conducted of donor and eco-communication studies to identify opportunities for message framing. There are several practical recommendations, particularly for charitable thrift shop retailers, as follows.

Take a fresh look at your website and presence on social media. Do not simply state a mission and list of services; market the benefit to donors – not just what matters to the organization (Kusmanoff et al., 2020). A website or social media page is an opportunity for impression management, so what message do individual thrift shops wish to broadcast to the community? Clearly communicate other-benefit – how donations help others (Kim & Childs, 2021).

Use messages about donations that embody a *feel-good* message. There is a psychological lift in charitable giving (Anik et al., 2009), much the same as for curbside recyclers (Douglas & Parsons, 2021). Donors gain a sense of well-being, even if it is motivated by the self-interest to create order in their homes (Cruz-Cárdenas & Arevalo-Chávez, 2018).

Consider featuring actual client success stories (van Esch et al., 2021). Donors are less likely to connect with anonymous, photo-less clients. One goal of marketing benefits should be to reduce psychological distance.

Assure that staff acknowledges donations (Mainardes et al., 2017). Donors like some recognition, even if symbolic, as a part of their *feel-good* motive. Also, use self-interest motives as an advantage. Do not make it difficult for donors to identify if donations are tax deductible or that a store offers free pick-up of donations. Reconsider wrapping self-interest (such as a tax deduction) and other-interest (such as *make a difference*); either can be persuasive, but less so if combined in a message (Feiler et al., 2012).

Include eco-friendly messaging as a part of the contribution to the community. In this manner, thrift stores promote sustainability (Rakib et al., 2022), as well as attract buyers and donors sharing that same value. Sustainability has emerged as an essential business strategy, although nonprofit organizations, compared to other sectors, are behind the curve in including designated landing pages on their websites (Ott et al., 2016, p. 671). Every thrift store contributes to environmental sustainability. Be clear about how the thrift store is contributing to sustainability and its impact.

Do not be intimidated by showing a landfill with the eco-messaging. Despite warnings to avoid negative messaging (MacKinnon et al., 2022), a photo of a landfill framed as a loss paired with a tangible message of a gain of tonnage diverted from the landfill can be an effective motivator (Grazzini et al., 2018). Such pairings can illustrate more concretely negative outcomes if the donor does not help (Chang & Lee, 2009). That loss-gain messaging may help the psychological empowerment of donors (Dong et al., 2021). If an image of a landfill does not fit the desired messaging, then incorporate optimistic environmental messaging (MacKinnon et al., 2022), such as gratitude for the benefits of nature, which can trigger donations because of environmental motivations (Tam, 2022). In terms of the church-based thrift stores, messages of gratitude can be introduced with spiritual passages encouraging stewardship.

Consider illustrating the earth-friendly value from a local perspective. We could not identify if the tons diverted from landfills for Goodwill, for example, were all affiliated stores or just the Baton Rouge store. Habitat Restore did state that since the store's opening in 2003, more than 2,500 tons of useable materials were diverted from landfills. Review the guide for sustainability communication on organizational websites: *A Practical Guide to Sustainability Reporting Using GRI and SASB Standards* by the Global Reporting Initiative and the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (2021).

Last, consider creating a consortium of thrift stores in the region. To the best of our knowledge, the state or this region has no association of thrift stores. A consortium could introduce best practices in marketing. If a consortium were created, the role of thrift shops in climate action could be a part of the agenda.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this qualitative research study was to identify and categorize the values communicated by thrift stores in one location and, in particular, to determine if eco-friendly values were communicated by these thrift stores. This study used the framework of Montgomery and Mitchell (2014) on donor motivations to categorize the messaging of these thrift stores. This study was precipitated by the results of a survey of curbside recyclers and the low self-reported rate of donations as landfill diversion.

As emphasized early in this study, environmental threats require an "all-hands-on-deck" (Frantz et al., 2021, p. 1) approach to inspiring pro-environment behavior. Thrift shops are a part of a city and an integral part of the circular economy. These stores offer a good testing ground for determining if a city's public campaign messaging on conservation through reuse is reaching that audience.

In response to the basic question asked in the title of this study, some thrift stores do communicate an earth-friendly value. An eco-friendly value was the major other-interest marketed to donors. Nationally affiliated for-profit and nonprofit thrift stores included eco-friendly values. Landfill diversion was the eco-friendly marketing approach of those affiliated stores, but at the time of the data collection, no store featured a negative image of a landfill. The

results also indicated that these thrift stores primarily communicated values of self-interest to donors (charitable contributions, tax deductions, picking up donations), as well as to buyers (coming sales).

While research on thrift stores remains an apparent novelty, these stores are a vibrant and growing part of the economy with the power to benefit sustainability efforts across the globe. Currently, there are in excess of 25,000 resale and consignment shops in the United States with revenue predicted to be $64 billion by 2028 (NARTS, Census Bureau, 2021), and 77 billion worldwide by 2025 (Smith, 2022b). More individuals, worldwide, are shopping at thrift stores, possibly as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic or concerns about the environment (Marcus, 2022, para. 1). Recycled clothing is one of the fastest-growing sectors in the worldwide fashion market (Marcus, 2022, para. 2). Thrift stores are important to study because of the impact on the economy (Ayres, 2019), community, buyers, donors, and because of environmental reasons. Further, as Ayres (2019) emphasizes, thrift stores are important to investigate because they represent a microcosm of the larger shifts in the economy.

The effects of global warming are happening in real-time and ransacking the planet. Consider that landfills, as the third largest supplier of methane emissions resulting from human activity (Smith, 2022a, para. 1) are an important contributor to climate change (Zhang et al., 2019). Unless there is a change in the global disposal of textiles, an estimated 25% of the world's carbon budget will be used by the fashion industry, emphasizing the urgent need for sustainability through circular economy approaches (Chen et al., 2021, p. 11).

Consider that environmental awareness is growing not only in the United States, but in emergent countries, as well; therefore, it is important to study diversion and green behaviors (Handriana & Ningsih, 2020). Last, consider that thrift stores, despite the controversy, can make a difference, but to do that, these organizations need to understand their integral role in environmental protection, honestly measure their contribution to eco-friendly actions, and market that value to the local community. Our qualitative research study was just a small first step in exploring the topic.

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