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The Connection Between Gen Z and Online Fast Fashion Media; Aiming to Create a Sustainable Future in Fashion.

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The Connection Between Gen Z and Online Fast Fashion Media;

Aiming to Create a Sustainable Future in Fashion.

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of

Honors Studies in Graphic Design

By

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Graphic Design

J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

The University of Arkansas

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I.   Introduction

It is impossible to think about culture in the past two decades without referencing social media. My generation, commonly known as Gen Z (born between 1997-2010), has been on the forefront of social media development. One of the first generations to grow up with some form of unfiltered online social experience, Gen Z has been hard wired to consume media. Social media applications have become the main communication channels for both consumers and businesses. This relationship is very new, and very fascinating to me. As social media has evolved, we have also evolved our language and ways of communicating. I've been interested in studying these relationships as a designer and what my impact will be.

While using social media alongside my peers, I have observed a problem that has resulted from this: mass consumption. A mass consumption of food, beauty products, home decor, and clothing in particular. On social media we see hundreds of videos of hauls and shopping sprees. This phenomenon is terrible for the environment. The fashion industry is one of the leading polluters in the world, as well as depending on exploitive labor practices. The fashion industry produces 150 billion garments a year and 87% (40 million tons) end up in a landfill. Workers are paid less than the minimum wage in countries in the global south which does not nearly constitute a "living" wage. (earthday.org 2023) Social Media drives this need for consuming, no matter the cost to the environment. Gen Z is very aware of

global environmental issues, like climate change and ocean pollution. These issues have developed since our childhood. The reality is that a good portion of the population continues to consume despite turning a blind eye to it. There is a feeling of hopelessness. What can our actions do to address these problems?

Because of these observations, I decided to research how designers can encourage younger social media users to shop for clothing more sustainably and consciously. I wanted to discover what role social media users embody in the fashion industry and how this will continue to evolve with new technologies. The solution to overconsumption of fashion is not up to the consumers. But we have the power to fix our own consumption habits and educate others. My goal is to create something that will be educating and empowering for consumers in my generation.

II.   Secondary Research

Literature Review

a. *Environmental Impact*

"Fast fashion" can be defined as cheap, trendy clothing that takes ideas from high-fashion and turns them into low-priced garments at insanely high speeds to meet consumer demand. It creates a toxic system of overproduction and consumption that has made fashion one of the world's largest polluters. This phenomenon is relatively new. Online shopping and quick changing trends have caused consumers to feel as if they constantly

need to buy new clothes. Clothing consumption has reached an all-time high. According to Dana Thomas in her book Fashionopolis, "In 2013, the Center for Media Research declared that shopping was becoming 'America's Favorite Pastime.' Shoppers snag up to 5 times more clothing now than they did in 1980" If fashion production maintains its current pace, the demand for water will surpass the world's supply by 40% by 2030. (Thomas 2020, p. 71)

The antithesis to fast fashion is "sustainable fashion." Sustainable fashion refers to a clothing supply chain that is 100% ecologically and socially responsible. We are seeing a gradual shift from fast fashion to sustainable and socially responsible fashion, but these brands are very expensive and unattainable for most consumers. Truly sustainable products last for ideally forever, moving in a loop or circular manner where materials are recovered repeatedly, reducing waste. Collaborative consumption is the shared use of a good or service by a group and is one way a piece of clothing can be used to its full potential. (Khandual & Pradhan 2018) There is a wide knowledge gap when it comes to sustainable fashion. "Greenwashing" is a term created in the past decade that is a marketing strategy in which environmentally friendly marketing is deceptively used to persuade consumers that a brand's products, aims and policies are sustainable. It Is very hard for consumers to get accurate information and data about where their clothing comes from.

  b. *The Modern Fashion Industry & Social Media*

The fashion industry heavily relies on social media. The purpose of social media in the fashion industry is to act as a main channel of communication from consumers to the industry. (Hoskins 2014, p. 34) From video shopping "hauls" to influencer culture, we are prompted to buy unneeded articles of clothing because of social media. In The Impact of social media on Fashion Industry: Empirical Investigation from Karachiites, Ahmad and Salman describe social media as the most important runway for fashion (p.1) Social media does not diminish the role of traditional media, but it provides another channel for consumers to experience the brands they love. Popular applications allow brands to directly respond and listen to consumers.

Users have become the deciders of what trends will come next and what is no longer in trend. This is extremely beneficial to fashion brands but has generated the demand for fast fashion. "Micro-trend" fast fashion brands, like the Chinese fashion retailer SHEIN, have become the norm for online shoppers. According to Natalie Singh, Head of Denim & Street at WGSN (Worth Global Style Network): "Trends are what drive the fashion industry. It's what makes people have to buy something new every few months. Without the trend part of it, without telling people: 'that bits over, scrap that bit of your wardrobe, you need this now,' it wouldn't be the industry it is. The purpose is to make you feel that what you've currently got is not quite right." (Hoskins 2014, p. 46) It has also become the norm to purchase trendy items for the sole purpose of posting on Instagram or TikTok to seem fashionable, not because

the buyers like the item. This creates closets over-stuffed with trendy tops and skirts, only for them to be worn a few times then tossed or donated when no longer in trend. But social media also creates the need to stay on trend, for fear of becoming out of style.

The fashion industry creates the narrative that we are to blame for the fast fashion trend cycles, but this is far from the truth. In Fast fashion, fashion brands and Sustainable Consumption, authors Buzzo and Abreu claim that social media is directly to blame for the influx of fast fashion brands targeting consumers. "It is therefore essential to relate social networks to unsustainable consumption in fashion. Zara, the brand of Spanish group Inditex, has 24.9 million followers on Instagram, followed by Sweden's H & M (24.7 million) and Forever 21 (14.5 million) (Instagram 2018)."

Not only has social media perpetuated the need for fast fashion, but it has also allowed for plagiarism in the fashion industry. In Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Social Media's Influence on Fashion, Ethics, and Property, Minh-Ha Pham discusses how it has reinforced norms about what constitutes copying and what counts as creativity. Fast fashion brands will directly copy an article of designer clothing, seen on social media, and sell it at a fraction of the price. Although this allows for high fashion to be more accessible to consumers, it lessens the value of these items with no credit to the original designer.

c. Young Consumers

According to the article How Do We Form Identities in a Consumer Society, throughout a consumer society, individuals construct their identities partially through what they buy and what they are exposed to in the media. Gabriel says, "we can observe and take part in this process through media that are predominantly used as avenues for identity construction: from real-time projections (Twitter and Snapchat) to visual sketchpads (Instagram, Facebook), entrepreneurial and corporate platforms (LinkedIn, Bandcamp), and personal dating slideshows (Tinder, Bumble). These platforms seem to provide a high level of control for the user to engage in creative identity-construction and self-presentation." This idea is what is happening online currently. We use social media as an outlet for a fake kind of self-expression. It is the perfect platform for building the idea of a better life for others to see. This concept fuels the need for consuming. We need to buy to be unique, no matter the costs or consequences. Our generation has become eager to define themselves by what they consume. "...we effectively mirror the exchange relationships of economics by treating identity like a social competition." (Gabriel 2019)

This phenomenon is of course the driving factor for trends. Social media fashion advertising takes advantage of this, preying on our insecurities and our desires to fit in. According to marketing charts, 39% of Gen Z social media

users are directly influenced to purchase an item of clothing after seeing it on TikTok. (Baracski 2022)

The key to combatting these issues is consumer education. In a study done in 2018, The impact of knowledge on consumer behavior towards sustainable apparel consumption, authors Okur and Saricam investigate consumers' behavior towards sustainable apparel consumption and the constructs of knowledge of environmental issues, knowledge of social issues, motivation for environmental responsibility, and purchasing intentions. They surveyed 796 participants in Turkey. The results of the study revealed that the knowledge that consumers have about environmental issues had a significant impact on purchasing intention. On the other hand, knowledge of social issues was found to have little to no effect on consumers' sustainable apparel purchases. "…knowledge is the key issue triggering the consumers towards sustainability in apparel purchasing. That is to say; if consumers know more about sustainability, then they are more likely to purchase sustainable apparel products." (Okur & Saricam 2018) The solution is more education about sustainable practices and buying habits.

Concept Map

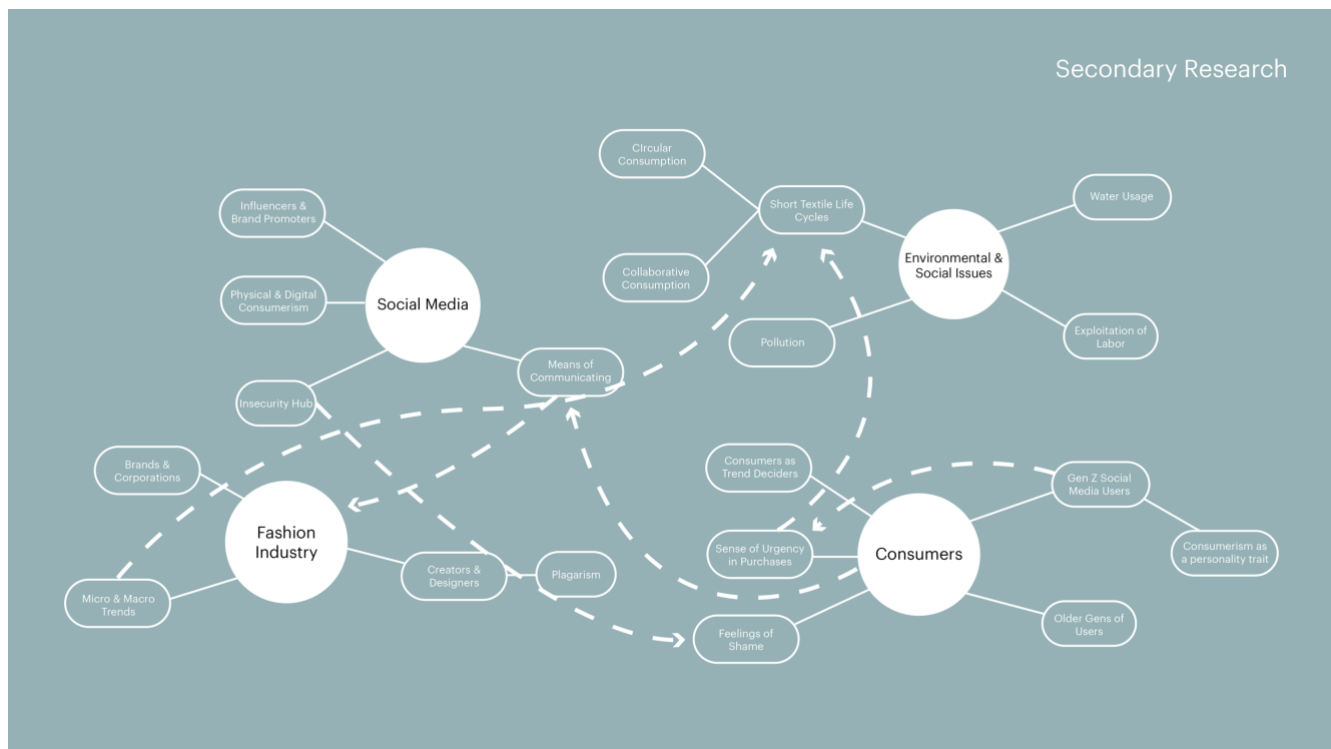From my secondary research, I created a concept map to organize my thoughts and make connections between my findings.

Fig. 1

III.   Primary Research

Methodology

My first step in conducting my primary research was to investigate Gen Z's general feelings towards shopping sustainably. I also wanted to discover how commonly participants bought an article of clothing seen on social media. These findings would provide me real-world context for my design solution.

a. Survey

I conducted a 14-question survey and sent it out among my peers, other students at the University of Arkansas, and my Instagram followers. I received fifty-two responses ranging from ages seventeen to seventy. Out of all the

responses, only one said they trash their clothing when they no longer want them. More than thirty responses said they thrift most of their clothing and donate them back when no longer used. Most participants said they are not aware of where and how their clothing is made, and don't know how to find that information.

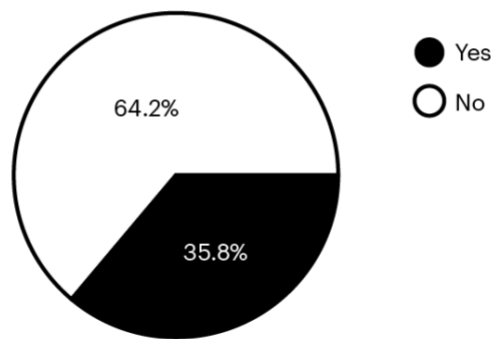### Do you know how to find out if an article of clothing was ethically made?

64.2%

35.8%

● Yes

○ No

Fig 2.

b. Personal Inventories

Following the survey, I conducted a Personal Inventory Survey. A personal inventory survey is an assessment of a subject's personal belongings and their associations. Personal inventories allow the designer to see and understand the relevance of the objects in a subject's life from their point of view. (Hannington & Martin 2012) I chose four participants who had completed my survey and volunteered for more research. I asked them to

send me five to ten images of their favorite pieces of clothing. I then requested that they add a description naming when and where they bought these pieces. I also asked them to complete a secondary survey as a reflection. This survey had eleven long answer questions.

Using these personal inventories, I was able to see the personality of each participant through their clothes. Each participant had their own style and connections to their pieces of clothing. To my surprise, most of the clothing items from my participants were in fact second-hand. However, some of these second-hand items were purchased because the participant saw something similar on social media. All participants said their relationship to their clothing was very important in expressing their identities.

Fig. 3

Key Findings from Primary Research

*Bolded statements were most important to my research.

1. **Clothing is a direct indicator of personality and identity**.

2. Style is the easiest form of self-expression for participants.

3. Participants framed their wants around items seen on social media, specifically Pinterest and Instagram.

4. **Participants were more likely to buy something that they knew would last for multiple years.**

5. Consumers do not research how or where an article was made before purchasing, unless looking for something specifically from a sustainable brand.

6. Participants would be more willing to spend more on sustainable clothing if the information was clearer.

7. Most participants donate old clothing to secondhand shops when no longer used.

8. **Thrift stores are considered a primary resource for clothing among Gen Z, with most shopping weekly or monthly.**

9. Thrifted clothing holds more sentimental value to the consumer.

10. **Participants considered thrifted clothing to be more unique and personal than fast-fashion pieces.**

The most revealing finding from my research was that to get young people to shop consciously, we must provide a personal or emotional

connection to sustainable clothing. The most important pieces in a person's wardrobe are the ones they are most attached to and truly reflect their identity. One survey participant said, "My clothing is my most outwardly expression of my identity and I love the flexibility it provides regarding how I will present myself. Expressive clothing brings me joy and it is very important to my identity." For consumers to keep an article of clothing, they must feel like it reflects who they truly are, not who they want to be. Through thrifting, online or in person, participants felt a deeper connection to the articles of clothing, which then compels them to keep the clothing longer. Sustainability also must be more financially attainable and easier to learn about.

IX.   Research Through Design

From my key findings, it became clear that my direction was to create a design solution that involves thrifting. Although thrifting has become popular in some social groups in the past decade, there is still a stigma about shopping at thrift stores. Through two design research methods – a concept map and a mood board – I was able to develop a concept that I believed was best fit to address the findings from my research.

I felt that a concept map would help me organize my ideas and thoughts. I created the map to decide what I needed to include in my design intervention. All ideas are proposed features that are needed based on my research. The three topics I focused on were thrifting, style, and education.
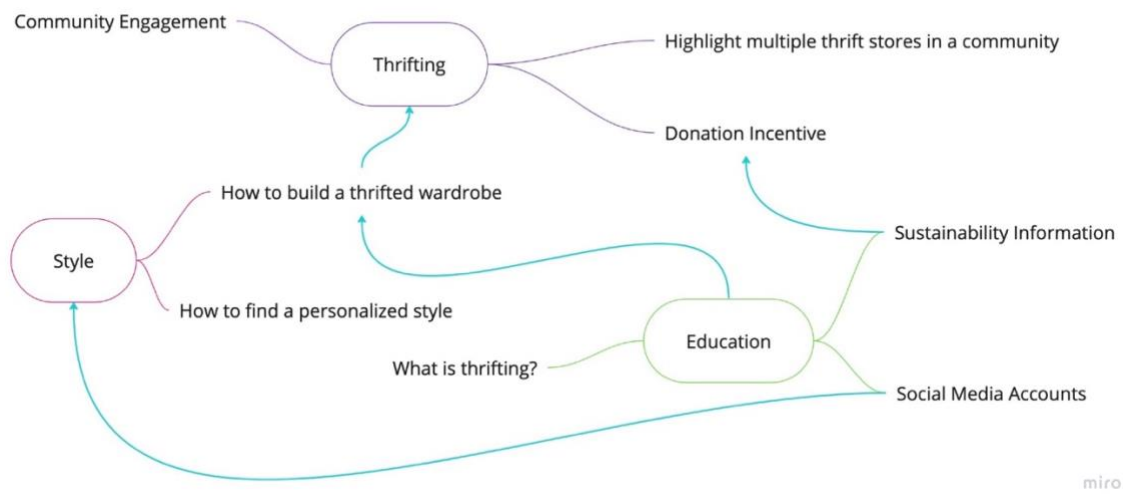
Fig. 4

When brainstorming a creative direction for my design intervention, I created a mood board using high-contrast images, bright colors, and a lot of textures.
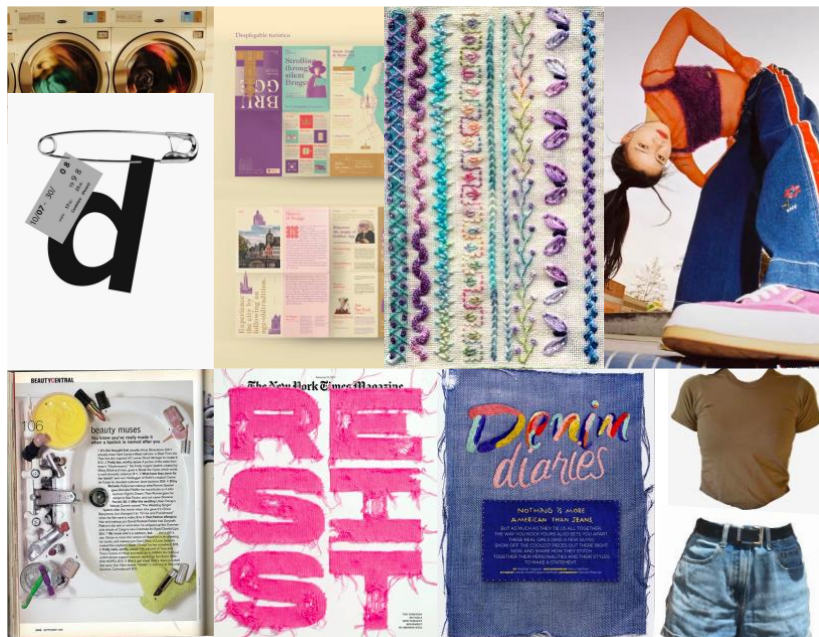

Fig. 5

X. Design Intervention

To educate consumers, gain community awareness, and allow for deeper connections to articles of clothing, I propose an event called Thrift Day. The first occurrence of this event would be held in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Fayetteville Thrift Day would be a city-wide event, with ten participating thrift stores across Fayetteville. Fayetteville has a large population of college-age citizens and is already known for having a large thrift community. Thrift Day would allow for the already established community to celebrate their hobby, while also inviting new thrifters into the community and educate them about collaborative consumption.

For the Thrift Day branding, I created a logo and style guide. The branding consists of very simple black and white graphic elements contrasted by photographs of pieces of clothing. I used these photographs to emphasize the textures of the garments. One of my favorite things about textiles is the many different textures they provide, and I incorporated that as one of the main elements in my design. The logo is a simple clothing tag shape with Thrift Day and the city name below. The city name would be interchangeable. The font Obviously Variable was chosen for the logo and headers because it is very versatile and is different than a common sans serif font, with little notches in the letterforms. It evokes the feeling of being stitched together. Paired with Obviously Variable is Graphik, a versatile body font for both print and digital experiences.

Fig. 6

Header
Obviously Variable Medium

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz
1234567890 !#*?

Body
Graphik Regular

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz
1234567890 !#*?

#FFFFFF

#000000

#e0bc33
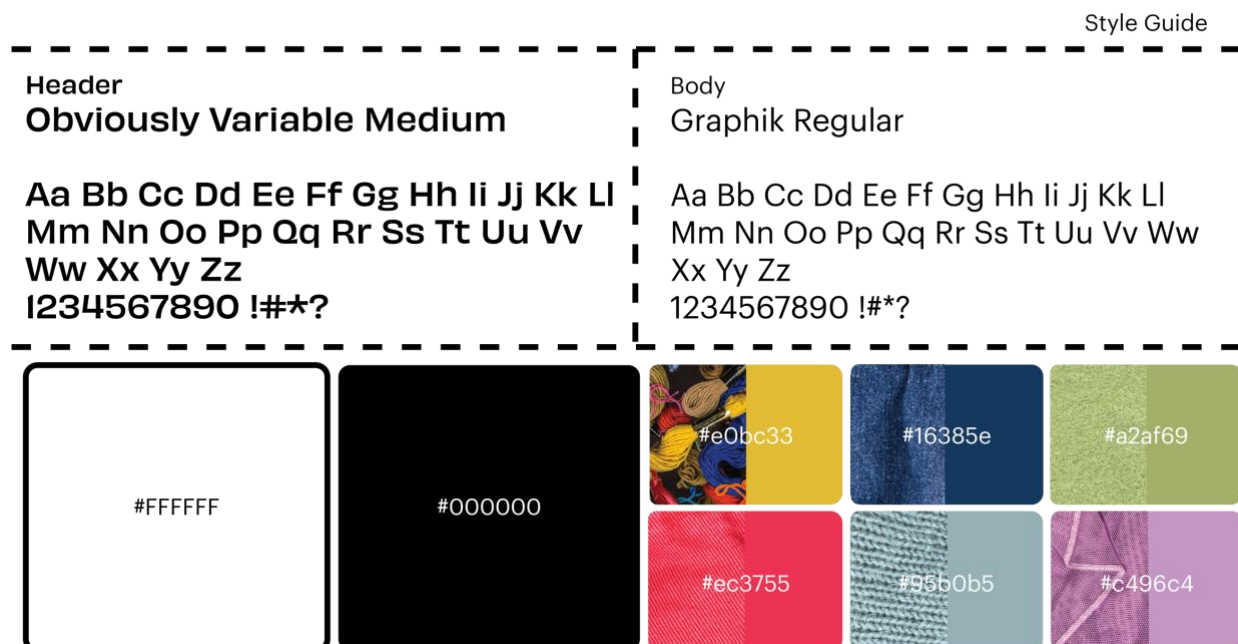
#16385e

#a2af69

#ec3755

#95b0b5

#c496c4

Fig. 7

One key element I thought was important to include was to express to participants that they have the power to live a more sustainable life, and it simply begins with their purchases. I created graphics that illustrate information about shopping sustainability and highlight the importance of consumer participation. I used catchphrases like, "the cycle of sustainability starts with you" to personify and empower the reader.

My goal with Thrift Day is not only to educate consumers about their consumption habits, but also illustrate to young consumers that building a wardrobe or clothing identity from thrifted clothing can be more personal and rewarding that online shopping. It was necessary to emphasize the emotional connection that comes with purchasing a secondhand article of clothing and reinforce the idea that when you purchase an item of clothing, make sure it is something you love. To achieve this, I included a story that focuses on a person who is familiar with thrifting and has a unique style because of it. I interviewed one of my good friends Erin who is an avid thrifter and has a distinctive style. She provided insights on her style, favorite thrift stores, and tips for new thrifters. "My biggest thrifting tip is to treat the thrift store as an actual store. When you pick something up, ask yourself if you would actually wear it. Don't just buy something because it's cheap. Think about the item's longevity."

Both elements are included in a brochure for Thrift Day. The brochure would be distributed at Thrift Day and has an information section, a map and list of participating stores, and a punch card. The punch card would be used as a checklist and coupon for participants. When they visit each store on Thrift Day, they will get $20 off any of the stores the next time they shop. This encourages participants to visit every store.
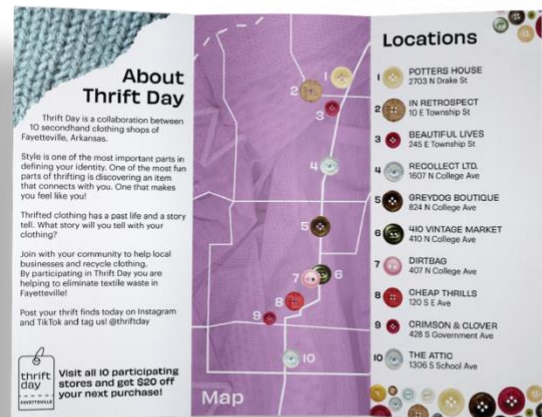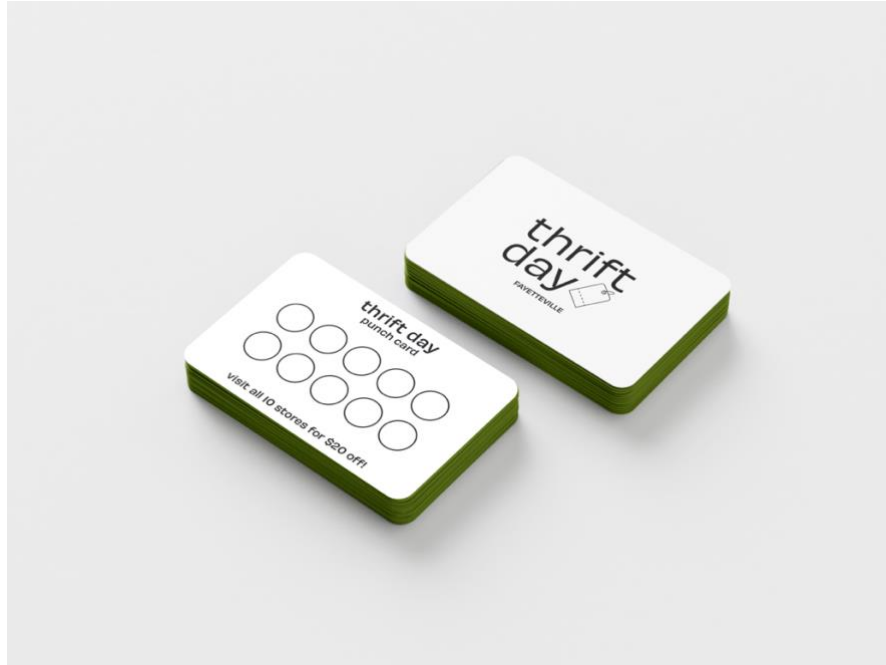

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

While Thrift Day would be an in-person event, it would have its own social media accounts on TikTok and Instagram. These accounts would be a space for promoting and advertising Thrift Day while also posting educational content about thrifting. This would allow for more reach to my target demographic, Gen Z. The social media would be used to create content that follows traditional fashion advertising, like hauls and get ready with me videos, but only using secondhand articles of clothing. By keeping up with current trends, the Thrift Day social accounts can gain more interaction and promotion for the next Thrift Day event.
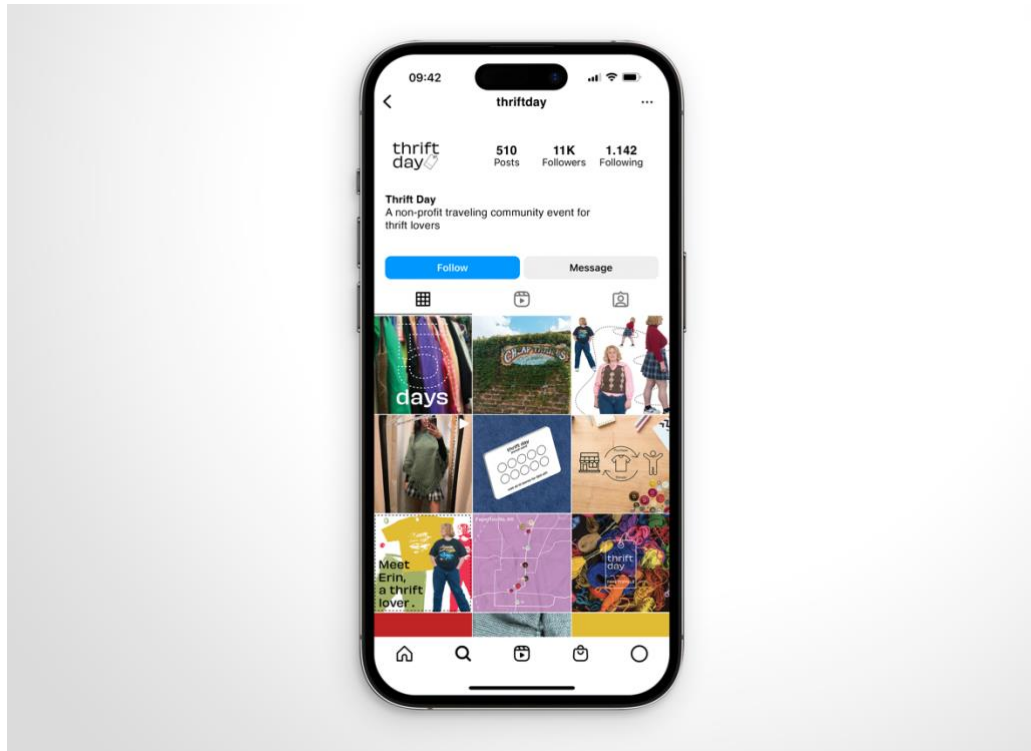
Fig. 10

Thrift Day branding and content would ideally be transferrable to other cities with a large thrifting community. This way the social media accounts could be active year-round, with content corresponding to the current city participating. The brochure and thrift kit would be editable assets to be interchangeable among cities.

XI.   Analysis

Thrift Day aims to connect the digital shopping space to the physical. By encouraging consumers to create relationships with their clothing instead of following trends, Thrift Day allows the consumer to feel truly satisfied by their purchases. Emulating a style seen on social media is ultimately not

fulfilling to a consumer. What is fulfilling is creating a wardrobe that is unique and reflects who you are.

My design solution's goal is not to solve the world's fast fashion problem. There is no solution to the mass production of garments that can be tackled solely by the consumer. What consumers can do is change their shopping habits and influence others to do the same. When brands see that there is a change in their customer base, then we will see a change in the quality and production of clothing. Some brands are already doing this. Urban Outfitters, the American fast-fashion brand, now has a line called Urban Renewal that upcycles vintage clothing and sells them for double the original cost. Online thrift apps, like Poshmark and Depop have become very popular over the last decade. Consumers are starting to take initiative and change their consumption style, but in today's world it is almost impossible to shop completely sustainably.

My goal was to create something that would educate and empower Gen Z consumers. I believe that Thrift Day accomplishes these goals through community outreach and educational content.

XII.   Conclusion

I have always been fascinated by fashion and the limitless possibilities it holds. But it is impossible to be interested in fashion without facing it's social and environmental implications. Sustainability can sometimes feel like a heavy burden. As a result of my research into this topic, I have come to realize

that sustainability is not as impossible as it may seem. It is my hope that this

project will show others how easy it is to make a change for the better.

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