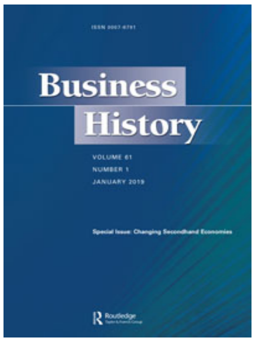

Business History

ISSN: 0007-6791 (Print) 1743-7938 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fbsh20

History as business: Changing dynamics of retailing in Gothenburg's second-hand market

Staffan Appelgren

To cite this article: Staffan Appelgren (2019) History as business: Changing dynamics of retailing in Gothenburg's second-hand market, Business History, 61:1, 172-186, DOI: 10.1080/00076791.2018.1447563

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2018.1447563

Published online: 16 Mar 2018.

BUSINESS HISTORY
2019, VOL. 61, NO. 1, 172–186
https://doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2018.1447563

History as business: Changing dynamics of retailing in Gothenburg's second-hand market

Staffan Appelgren

School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This article traces developments in the second-hand market over the last 15 years in Gothenburg, Sweden. Outlining how the second-hand market is characterised by rapid shifts in ownership, location and type of business, it explores how retailers perceive and negotiate these shifting forces. With an analytical focus on people and things in motion, it aims to increase our understanding of the factors and forces involved in such movement and transience. The article shows how retailers develop an adaptive apparatus for navigating the second-hand market and that market growth translates into motion and flux rather than stability.

KEYWORDS

Second-hand; vintage; retro; reuse; retailers; sourcing; circulation; heritage; circular economy; anthropology; Gothenburg; Sweden

Introduction

> We, who run Rosens Antikvariat today (Lovisa and Lars) succeeded Jonas and Marita. They called their bookshop Liljans Antikvariat. Liljans Antikvariat has ceased to be a physical bookshop, but continues to trade in second-hand books online. Jonas and Marita in their turn succeeded the bookshop from Ulf, who ran Vasastadens Antikvariat. Ulf managed second-hand bookstores for many years in Gothenburg, and today runs one in Borås city called Aderno Antikvariat. Before Ulf moved into Aschebergsgatan 21, the bookshop was called Röde Orm for eight years during the 1990s. Today, Antikvariat Röde Orm, run by Stein, is located in the Haga district.[1]
>
> Message on website, Rosen's antiquarian bookshop, Gothenburg

> This bookshop has now closed. Thank you all for your visits during the years we have had the pleasure to run this wonderful little second-hand bookstore.[2]
>
> Subsequent message on the same website

The quotations above, written a year apart, illuminate the rapid and intricate shifts in ownership, location and type of business that are common in second-hand markets. Like the things that circulate through this market, the infrastructure facilitating these flows – physical shops, businesses and shopkeepers – is characterised by motion and flux.[3] When I began fieldwork on second-hand markets in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 2014, I experienced this flux immediately. The volatile nature of the second-hand market – shops coming and going, owners changing, businesses relocating – was apparent when I started to search for information on the Internet, and then walk through the city to cross-check it. I quickly

CONTACT Staffan Appelgren staffan.appelgren@globalstudies.gu.se

discovered that what I assembled on the Internet did not match the situation in the streets. Already in the first district, I saw a second-hand bookstore with a notice announcing that it had shut down the week before. Cursing my luck, I took notes and carried on. A few hundred metres down the street, a popular vintage clothes store had a sign on the door saying that it would soon be turned into an Internet shop. I began to worry whether I would have time to conduct my research before all the shops went out of business and the whole project come to nothing.

Simultaneously, public interest in second-hand, vintage and retro seemed higher than ever before. In Sweden, as in many countries, buying second-hand, once associated with poverty and low status, became the latest in fashion, with lifestyle magazines, Internet blogs and television programmes communicating its benefits and attractions.[4] Indeed, acquiring goods in ways that differ from the dominant modern form of purchasing newly produced commodities has become mainstream in many parts of Swedish society. By this I mean that alternative forms of acquisition – buying, receiving, sharing, swapping and simply finding (even in your own closet) pre-used and unwanted stuff – have entered into a dialectical relationship with the dominant model of acquiring goods, producing a situation in which reuse has lost much of its critical edge while conventional consumption has gained a sustainability dimension. Buying and using second-hand stuff is now a common everyday phenomenon, not a hip alternative championed by trendsetters and celebrities, nor a radical act of anti-materialism, nor associated with the stigma of poverty as has been discussed in other cases.[5] Lately, even Swedish state authorities have been affected by the passion for pre-loved things, leading to a debate about the tax exemption enjoyed by charities and promoting reuse as part of moral citizenship.[6]

Considering how mainstream history as business has become, perhaps one cannot talk about a second-hand 'scene' in Gothenburg anymore.[7] The established second-hand shops, charities, flea markets, car boot sales, yard sales, online auctions, social media communities, swapping apps, housing associations' reuse rooms, swapping events, etc., are now supplemented by major conventional retailers carrying their own line of second-hand commodities.[8] However, while this growth and diversification happens throughout Sweden, Gothenburg is particularly fertile ground for these phenomena. A major European port and hub for Northern European trade and commerce for well over two centuries, Gothenburg has seen a continuous inflow and outflow of migrants, commodities and ideas, and the circulation of people and things has been a cornerstone in the city's socioeconomic development. This is still reflected in the city's economy and industry and encapsulated in the city's slogan: 'Sustainable City – Open to the World'.[9] Shipping, shipbuilding, commerce, finance, textile, fisheries and manufacturing have all been important industries, and while some have not survived global competition (most significantly shipbuilding), most have overcome years of crisis through transformation and restructuring, and now contribute to Gothenburg's hybrid economy where industry, trade and commerce constitute the backbone alongside cultural and creative industries. Today the city, with a population of half a million, is home to a lively alternative arts scene, hosting significant music and film festivals, local fashion labels and a vibrant bar and café culture. The rise in popularity of retro and vintage sits well with its creative arts culture and 'sustainable ethos', seen for example in the annual mega flea market. It also sits well with how the city has become increasingly segregated with expanding income gaps and growing poverty.[10]

With the spread of second-hand consumption, and the increase in its popularity and state interest in its potential, why did my observations of second-hand shops in Gothenburg seem to indicate a sector in trouble? Once I began conducting interviews with shop-owners, I became aware that my initial impressions were an effect of my own expectations. My assumptions had been informed by a 'sedentarist' perspective in which fixity and stability constitute established points of departure for analysis, and where mobility and flux are considered irregularities and anomalies. This perspective, which has dominated social analysis, has led to the omission or downplaying of processual and emergent aspects of social life. In the context of the second-hand market, such a perspective risks overlooking the forces behind this dynamism and how they can be understood as inherent to this particular market. Conventional retailing's linearity has privileged this type of assumption, but the circularity of second-hand retailing provides an opportunity to rethink how the flows of commodities restructure the retail infrastructure. By shifting the perspective to seeing movement and transformation of people and things as analytical fundamentals, I began to re-evaluate the character of this market, seeing change as an aspect of conducting business with pre-owned and used material culture.

By tracing developments in the second-hand market over the last 15 years in the city of Gothenburg, I aim to increase our understanding of the factors and forces involved in such movement and transience, and how shop-owners negotiate them. I compare data available in a 2003 overview of Gothenburg's second-hand market to a 2014 survey conducted by our research team and material collected through recent fieldwork and interviews with market actors.[11] I use quantitative data about the development of shops, actors and business concepts over time to measure the changes that have occurred over the years and establish a framework for interpreting the personal narratives and understandings of some of the actors involved.[12]

While the quotations above pertain to second-hand book businesses, here I focus on how the market for used objects for interior design and home decoration, such as furniture, lamps, chinaware, utensils, trinkets, gadgets, toys, etc., has evolved. The bewildering and rapidly changing labels of second-hand goods and actors are part of the market's transient nature. Some categories of used items, such as classic antiques, artworks, cars, watches, coins, books and vinyl records, have their own specific histories and trajectories, and will not be of central concern here. I focus on trade with everyday objects for the home and the body to relate the market's unfolding to developments in the wider society, specifically the doctrine of circular economy that has become a cornerstone in the Swedish government's sustainable consumption strategy. According to this, reuse and recycling play crucial roles in turning waste into resources, combatting the environmentally destructive consequences of further diffusion of materials in waste management and helping achieve a more efficient use of limited economic resources.[13]

Scholarly engagement with second-hand, retro and reuse has tended to focus on consumers and the exchange itself rather than on traders.[14] When traders have been studied, they tend to belong to the categories of charities and sellers on flea markets, garage sales and car-boot sales.[15] Research specifically on second-hand retailers and their businesses, in contrast, tends to be concerned with circulations between the Global North and the Global South.[16] In what follows, my aim is neither to establish actual causal factors for the mobility of the second-hand market in Gothenburg, nor to assess the reliability or accuracy of shop-owners' perceptions of such factors. Rather, I convey a sense of how key actors on this market spoke about, made sense of and handled the fluctuations and changes that they experienced, to further our understanding of the shifting nature of this field.

The ebb and flow of shops

In 2003, arts and culture journalist and author Björn Höglund published an overview of second-hand shops in Gothenburg. This is not an academic analysis, but a comprehensive guide directed at readers interested in touring the city's second-hand scene.[17] The guide lists second-hand shops in seven categories (second-hand and antiques, antiquarian bookshops, stamps and coins, flea markets, second-hand clothing, second-hand records and charities), and contains brief information and a short evaluation of each shop, as well as maps of a several districts where second-hand trade was particularly dense. As such, it makes a useful comparison to the current second-hand scene.

When I compare second-hand stores in Gothenburg in 2003 with the current situation, the second-hand market looks highly transient. Of the 121 shops listed in the guide, only 50 are still in operation; three out of five shops have closed in less than 15 years. Second-hand and antiques shops fared the worst, with two out of every three shops having disappeared. This category contains the second-hand shops trading in furnishings and interiors products that are my focus. Interestingly, the other category containing shops with a similar business focus, charities, shows an entirely different trend. Nearly all of the 15 shops in the guide are still in operation, some after having been reorganised or merged. This suggests that smaller, privately owned and commercially operated second-hand stores (the first category) are more vulnerable to market shifts and trends and broader social developments than charities. The latter are generally backed by larger non-profit organisations, and so have the capacity and resources to persevere through periods of decline and transform themselves in the face of new demands. My interviews with representatives of charities confirm that even if the pressure has increased on charities to deliver good economic results, many have been successful in making their operations more efficient, expansive and business-like. Thanks to the exemption from taxes on second-hand goods that charities enjoy (unlike for-profit second-hand businesses), and staff who are often recruited as part of publicly subsidised labour market programmes[18] (thus keeping labour costs down), charities are economically stable operations on a competitive commercial market. Indeed, major charities like the Salvation Army's Myrorna and Emmaus Björkå have formed a lobby organisation to strengthen the position of second-hand charities on the market.[19]

When our research team set out to investigate the circulation of objects on Gothenburg's second-hand market, we mapped the field to get a grasp of the number of second-hand shops and their business profiles. The categories of shops trading in used and old things vary over time, and concepts, such as second-hand, retro, vintage and reuse, shift in content and popularity.[20] However, by and large, the 2003 guide and the 2014 survey overlap in content. Of the 88 establishments listed in our 2014 survey, 78 are still in operation today (two and a half years later) and 10 shops have closed. All the discontinued shops fall into the category of shops dealing in furnishings and interiors objects, meaning that 10 out of 55 shops have shut. In other words, nearly every fifth shop has been discontinued in two and a half years' time. This shows that in the short time span of two and a half years there is considerable change, and suggests that the wider timespan of 15 years very likely includes an even higher number of actual shops appearing and disappearing, including some which show up in neither the 2003 guide nor the 2014 survey, since they only existed for a short period within this time span.

Looking at the numbers from the perspective of new businesses, rather than closed shops, a similar pattern emerges. Comparing the 2014 survey with the 2003 guide, there are 42 shops that are not mentioned in the earlier source. While a few might have been overlooked in the first survey, most are new shops emerging in the 11 years that have passed. Seven of these shops have already closed, meaning that the 35 remaining shops are the ones that now constitute a vital part of the second-hand scene in Gothenburg. Comparing 2014 with early 2017, we find that no less than 17 new second-hand shops have opened, suggesting an increase in the pace of new shops opening.

In short, the period between 2003 and 2014 the number of shops were relatively constant, whereas the last few years have seen more new shops (17) than closed ones (10). A cautious interpretation suggests that there is an increase in the number of shops during the last few years, and that previously the number of shops was relatively constant. Above all, it is clear that the market has been volatile, with shops, owners and businesses coming and going.

'It all goes in waves'

The number of discontinued businesses and the frequency of new shops appearing can be read as indications of market decline and growth respectively. Shop-owners often shared this contradictory view of the market. Many agreed that we were currently witnessing a general interest in second-hand on a scale not seen before, with wider and more intense circulations of used stuff. This 'love affair' is mentioned already in the 2003 guide, where the author notes that public interest is 'greater than ever' and shops are 'opening constantly'.[21] Still, converting this popularity and success of the market into stable and expanding business operations was challenging for my informants. 'It all goes in waves,' sighed one of the shop-owners when pondering the market he tried to navigate.

Shifting the analytical focus to mobility is not intended to diminish the challenges shop-owners face, but to cast a different light on the situation, illuminating factors and forces contributing to this transience and highlighting the practices people employed to navigate a changing environment. More than being a problem for retailers to work out, mobility is an everyday reality that they work with and through. What were their experiences of this transience over time? How did they understand the mutability of the market? How did they negotiate a field that continuously transforms due to both internal and external forces?

Changing profits and margins

'Once I came across this leather sofa and sold it for 20 times the price. Such things you just don't find anymore.' Anders was the owner of a second-hand shop in an urban area that once had many second-hand shops, most of which had closed down. He was sorting through his stockpile of second-hand stuff that he had purchased to sell in his shop. Buying was a continuous activity, he told me, with certain peak periods during the year for sourcing trips to ensure there would always be 'cool things' to sell in the shop. These things would wait in storage if there was no room for them in the shop, if there were multiples of the same item or if they needed a bit of care. Sometimes unsold stuff would return to storage. It was a space for handling market fluctuations and uncertainties by building up stock, but had over the years become a reservoir of unsold items, triggering costs rather than yielding profits. For the shop-owner, the storage had become a burden that needed to be taken care of. For the anthropologist it was an archaeological treasure of second-hand objects assembled over 15 years. As we sorted, examined and carried away stuff, Anders generously shared the histories and memories behind the objects, their design-historical value and how they had fared in the second-hand market over the years.

The storage was an assemblage of missed opportunities for making profit, and our task was to re-evaluate the items and find channels for their further circulation. Their faded attraction triggered narratives about their successful peers that were sold in their prime, such as the leather sofa. Anders told me that previously it had been easier to turn a small investment and a little effort into a large gain. This golden age of second-hand retailing had no clear delimitation in time, but Anders thought it was before second-hand, flea markets and retro became a national craze and 'everyone became an expert on second-hand'.

The theme that business used to be easier and more lucrative recurred in many conversations and interviews with shop-owners. Many reminisced that before, the gap between purchasing price and selling price, the net profit, was wide, largely controlled by expert retailers. They spoke about how coveted and marketable things had been easy to find, and, being able to distinguish the valuable from the ordinary, they could pick out the cherries and turn them into a handsome profit. One shop-owner recalled how he used to bid for things at the local auction house with little competition from others, since auctions were usually held during the mornings, when most people were at work. He would then carry the stuff a few hundred metres to his shop and sell it by afternoon with a good return.

According to the shop-owners, things changed in late 1990s and early 2000s. With the rapid increase in popularity of second-hand goods and the emergence of widely accessible information on the Internet, shop-owners saw the price gap diminish considerably. The problem, they stated, was not that there was a shortage of beautiful and desired old things. On the contrary, increased demand for and circulation of second-hand items have led to their preservation, rather than disappearance. Margareta, who runs a tidy and popular second-hand shop in the inner city, commented that 'there is wonderful stuff out there, and easy to get, but it is expensive, sometimes crazily expensive'. Retailers felt that, today, everyone was out there looking for economic value in old things. 'People want to know the value of their belongings,' said one shop-owner, concluding that people had started to see their possessions as commodities with commodity potential and repeated 'commodity phases' in their life trajectory.[22]

For retailers, diminishing net profit meant pressure to make their sourcing more efficient and their sales more effective. It also necessitated routinely explaining why they could not pay the prices people expected when buying stock. Sometimes people understand, sometimes they don't, said one shop-owner and continued: 'Anyway, I tell them to sell it on Tradera (an online auction site).' When customers had what she saw as unrealistic expectations, she felt it was better to suggest that they sell it themselves rather than trying to reach an agreement. If the item was in mint condition, my informants thought the threshold for when it was worth the trouble to buy it from someone walking through the door was a 50% margin, meaning the sellers of the stock would be paid half the estimated revenue. If sold quickly, this would cover tax, costs and yield a small profit.

The declining value of expertise was not the only reason for the experience of diminishing profits. Margareta, who specialised in Scandinavian design from the 1950s to the 1970s, suggested that a crucial difference today was that 'original' items from these decades, now peaking in the second-hand market, were rapidly disappearing. In other words, although actual objects from this era proliferated, they were rarely available directly from the people who bought them new, the 'original consumer'. In her experience, the vast majority of things for sale from these decades had already entered into the second-hand circuits, and most of their profit margin had been exploited. This suggests that, analytically, one should not only distinguish between the linear consumption of first-cycle goods, and the circular consumption of second-hand things, but also single out first-cycle objects within the second cycle, and the 'original consumer' from subsequent consumers.[23] 'Virgin' second-hand goods have a greater chance to enter the second-hand market underpriced, thereby affording opportunities for a greater profit margin when discovered.

Surfing the ebb and flow of trends

The second-hand market shares one crucial transient feature with first-cycle retailing in a market economy: demand. Trends in the second-hand market come and go, despite the fact that novelty and fashion have been said to stand in contrast to the value of patina as the standard and currency of social status.[24] What stood out in the experiences of the retailers I interviewed was a sense that the pace of trends has intensified, requiring retailers to be more sensitive to the shifts of popular taste. 'You have to be right here and right now with your stuff. It's crazy really,' said Peter, who managed a second-hand shop noticeable for its well-organised premises. Sometimes one would misjudge a trend. Anders, for example, ended up with a handful of unsold Italian bathroom cabinets, gathered after demand had already peaked, and people had moved on to something else. He picked up one of them and explained that they were made in the 1960s and popular in Sweden at the time. Some years ago, they suddenly re-emerged on the market as popular second-hand goods, and sold quickly. 'They used to be around SEK 700, but now you can only get like SEK 350, if you are lucky.'

Trends and demand were negotiated differently by my informants. Some were pragmatic and tried to build a reputation for having the latest stuff available. Others would refrain from taking in items to meet temporary demands, instead keeping their own business focus, and also for reasons of reputation. As one shop-owner exclaimed when I asked him what he would not take into the shop: 'Lisa Larson figurines! They just don't fit into the shop's profile.' Clearly, he thought these popular cute ceramic figurines from the mid-1950s onwards would undermine his carefully curated shop and be bad for his business, even if he knew he could make some money from them in the short run.[25] Others cleverly reconciled diverging business interests by being strict with what was sold in the shop, and using other channels, such as online auctions, for selling 'inappropriate' objects they knew would bring in money.

Working with and through trends, and developing strategies for handling this unpredictable terrain, was seen as a manifestation of a shift in authority. Information and knowledge used to be the perquisite of the retailer on the second-hand market, much in line with Clifford Geertz's classic study of the bazaar economy. Geertz argues that since information is not openly accessible in the bazaar, buyers need to form close relationships with specific merchants.[26] This observation fits with how my informants spoke about retailing prior to the changes around the millennium shift. Then, expert knowledge used to be accessible to shop-owners through books, evening courses and subscriptions to high-profile designer, craft or art magazines. For shop-owners on the second-hand market today, however, this kind of information is free and readily available to anyone, and new authorities have appeared, setting the agenda and initiating trends. Many pointed to popular niche magazines, TV shows, and blogs and other social media platforms as highly influential in what became trendy.[27] Another category of trendsetters was interior designers, styling homes for sale on the real-estate market. Retailers gave examples of trends that had emerged through these channels, both singular types of items, such as the craze for deer heads a few years earlier, as well as broader classes of objects, such as the popularity of having a group of different Windsor-style chairs around the eating table.

Thus, while knowledge and authority were understood as once having been external to the market, vested in design and art history experts and marked by a stability, it was now experienced as diffuse, with a number of trendsetting voices who had more or less formal education but the social and aesthetic power to influence audiences.[28] Moreover, a clear difference in types of usable knowledge had emerged. Knowledge in design history had increasingly been accompanied, or even supplanted, by knowledge of what was currently in vogue. Here, we see a reversal of Geertz's hierarchical relationship between patron and client. Listening to customers had become an important means of acquiring crucial information about the market and staying in tune with the trends.

Sourcing: 'The eternal hunt'

Information about market desires was only one side of the trade, however. The other uncertainty that needed attention, consideration and work was sourcing. 'It's a damned job, really. It's an eternal hunt,' as one retailer put it. Margareta, who had a close friend running a shop in mainstream retailing, sighed enviously: 'It's new clothes that they just, like, order, and that's a bit unfair, right?' Unlike ticking boxes in an order form, sourcing was understood to be as shifting and unpredictable as the trends.

To cope with the vagaries of sourcing, retailers established different strategies. One was secrecy, having one's own favourite haunts, and making purchasing trips to distant rural areas and small towns, or even abroad. Another was forming networks and alliances, both vertically and horizontally. All retailers had developed some form of sourcing network, sometimes including repair. Most sophisticated was probably Annika and Sten's network around The Thrift Shop. They had been in business for nearly eight years and their shop was popular and well stocked with 1950s and 1960s objects, with ceiling lamps as a speciality. Despite having entered the business after the 'golden age', their business appeared to have expanded with the current vogue of second-hand. Their shop was a nexus of suppliers and sales channels. Their main task was to sort and direct the flows of things.

Three major channels constituted their base for the continuous inflow of marketable things. The first was a clearance company that would buy up large quantities of used items such as the estate of a deceased person and provide The Thrift Shop with 'a pile' of what the clearance company thought would be of interest. A second was two wholesalers, who would offer objects that they knew were on The Thrift Shop's list of wanted things. Where and how the wholesalers got their things was a mystery they would not disclose, but the shop-owners guessed it was through flea markets, auctions and private persons in a wide catchment area in the countryside. Lastly, private persons would contact the shop with pictures of items they wanted to sell. This ranged from individual objects to a whole house full of things, in which case the shop-owners would contact the clearance company. What The Thrift Shop did not do, but some of the other shop-owners regularly did, was to source in the field themselves. Sourcing was something they had done intensively when they entered the market: indeed, finding 'cool' and exciting items was the very reason they got involved in the first place. With time and the expansion of the shop, however, sourcing had become too time-consuming and was best delegated to specialists. Annika and Sten took on the role of managing and directing flows of things in and out of their business operation.

The flow of second-hand stuff out of The Thrift Shop, and their diverse channels, were as regulated as the inflow. Assessing and sorting were crucial to directing flows and creating revenues. Simply keeping things out was as important as assembling stock, since unwanted items were time-consuming and incurred costs. This, Annika and Sten explained, meant turning offers down and disappointing people with unrealistic hopes. Next was unwanted things that had made it over the threshold of the shop, mainly through the items that they received from the clearance company, but also objects that had been unsold in the store for too long. In rare cases things would be disposed of, but a preferred option, especially for newer second-hand items, i.e. used things that as yet had little historical value, was to donate them to charity. A third option, and the only one creating revenues, was to send them to a countryside auction, where customers had different expectations from those in the city. This option was further refined by sending various types of items to different destinations, depending on local demand. These strategies were aimed at items not meeting the stop's standard or profile. For objects deemed to be rare or have high value, there were basically two options. First, the shop-owners had started another second-hand company that specialised in more upmarket second-hand and antiques. They could easily transfer such objects to this shop, sporting a different profile and aimed at a different clientele. A second option was to hand an item over to a renowned auction-house to make sure the best possible price was attained.

While these hierarchical networks seemed functional and smooth, networking horizontally with owners of similar shops in the city was more sensitive. In the case of Annika and Sten, this dimension of networking was less developed and important. They felt that even if other shops claimed to offer the same type of goods, they in fact rarely did. Annika maintained that a customer on the hunt for a particular item who was directed to another shop would still return in the future. Other shopkeepers also said that they did not see the benefit of networking with other shops in the same trade. Peter, who ran a vintage clothing store, saw this as an important difference between second-hand apparel and furnishings. In his experience, shops trading in second-hand and vintage clothes would collaborate, even to the point of publishing a map of similar shops, whereas shop-owners trading in furnishings had a more cautious approach. Many confirmed this indirectly. Except for a few trusted friends in the business, reserve characterised the relationships between shops. Not wanting to disclose sourcing strategies, fear of jealousy and an undefined suspiciousness were mentioned as reasons for keeping a certain distance from each other on the market.

The role of external factors

Most aspects of market transience brought up in interviews referred to developments within the market's unfolding. However, two other factors that shop-owners identified as significant had more an external character. These were the expansion of the Internet and escalating real estate prices.

The Internet was the most significant change over the last 15 years that shop-owners mentioned. Both challenges and opportunities followed in its wake, with actors having different capacities to navigate in the new landscape. Auction houses went online to enlarge their market, private persons intensified trade through online auction sites, knowledge became readily available and new trendsetters emerged through blogs and social media. However, intensified connectivity and speed also meant an increase in public interest in second-hand things, leading to an intensification in exchange of things as well as tips, stories and pictures about the latest finds. With more than 20 years in the business, Bengt, who ran a shop specialising in military collectibles and antiques, had seen all these changes, and experienced how a tight network of second-hand shops along one of the city's wealthiest streets had faded away. 'We used to be nine shops here, along this street,' he said, pointing along the sloping street. 'Now it's only me.' Older shop-owners had struggled to keep up with new technologies.

Another reason for the demise of shops in this once prominent second-hand district was something that many touched upon when discussing how the market had evolved over time. A favourable rent arrangement, with only one price increase in 10 years, was a key reason Bengt had survived. Not everyone had been that lucky. An elderly couple who had run a second-hand shop further down the street had suddenly seen their rent doubled, then doubled again a few years later. Bengt was of the opinion that some real estate owners used this method to squeeze out the shop tenants. 'But we are not all Seven-Elevens or trendy chain cafés,' he sighed, hinting at his lack of leverage against such setbacks.

Conclusion

Second-hand retailing differs from conventional retailing in that there is no direct manufacturer or wholesaler to order new products from when stock is low or size is sold out. Yet, trends and fashions are as erratic and demand as unpredictable as on most first-cycle markets. The second-hand shops covered in this article experience considerable uncertainty and movement in supply and demand. They find themselves in a flexible and transient market, continuously striving to secure marketable goods to match the standards and expectations common in conventional retailing.[29]

Over the last 15 years Sweden's market for second-hand goods has gone from a socially and economically marginal phenomenon, to a trendy alternative to mass-consumption, to a consumption-reinforcing popular past time, to an optimistic expression of hope for the circular economy's capacity to solve major environmental and economic challenges of our time through reuse, upcycling and sharing. Still, second-hand retailing meant uncertainty and hardship for many shop-owners in Gothenburg. 'It's shockingly bad business in this trade, right … in a trade that is very trendy', 'You have to marry rich, or have a wealthy partner', 'People come to us, and think what we do is fantastic … but I can't pay any bills from that, really' are comments I collected when we discussed the general business climate. Some talked about an unfair market, where they as store-based commercial retailers felt squeezed between charities, on the one side, and private online-traders, on the other. Charities and online traders were understood to operate under more economically advantageous circumstances, the former through government subsidisation and the latter through government inattention. Others spoke in visionary terms about a trade rooted in popular ideas about the circular economy as extending the lifespan of things and reducing waste. Reuse businesses and repair shops should, they argued, be targeted for government interventions such as start-up support programmes and tax easements. Furthermore, by fostering local consumption and revitalising the local economy, the trade was also socially sustainable. This viewpoint accords with the government's new strategy for sustainable consumption, but concrete policies to substantiate this new political will had yet to appear.

Understanding second-cycle retailing demands an analytical perspective that accounts for the dynamism inherent in the circulation of second-hand things. First-cycle retailing as a waystation on the linear trajectory of the conventional production/consumption system (the 'take, make and dispose model'[30]) makes the orchestrated coordination of production, marketing and sales feasible and desirable, preferably on the principles of 'lean production' and 'just-in-time'.[31] Stable access to resources, materials and products along the commodity chain ensures retailers' capacity to meet market demands and can measure how well-oiled and efficient the production machine is. Not so in second-cycle retailing. While first-cycle manufacturers and retailers have been (at least, until recently[32]) unconcerned with the afterlife of the commodities they have produced, distributed and sold, thinking of them as the responsibility of public waste management operations, this is exactly the point where second-cycle actors source for commodity potential. While the former makes from scratch, the latter forages among what exists.[33] 'Leanness' and 'timing' are needed to produce things for consumers, but also in order to produce consumers for things. Retailers' role as matchmakers between people and things makes second-cycle business unpredictable and complex, and dependent on knowledge and information. Navigating the transient terrain of reuse, recycling and repair demands strategies and routines that closely follow the shifts of the market. Capacity and infrastructure for sourcing, information retrieval, sorting and assessing, storage, repair and multiple outlets were all part of an adaptive apparatus for navigating as a second-hand retailer. Even so, the rapid shifts in physical shops, business operations and shopkeepers in Gothenburg over a 15-year period suggests that the dynamism of this market extends even further. The popularity of second-hand shopping and sustainable consumption contributes to an infrastructure of shops, business operations and actors where growth translates into motion and flux rather than stability. The inflow of used things further destabilises the infrastructure as retailers search for proper outlets for their continuous circulation. A mobility perspective is useful for understanding the challenges and opportunities that these actors face, how they make sense of this shifting reality that is at once both promising and unfavourable, and why shops vanish while the market expands.

In the 2003 guide to second-hand shops in Gothenburg, the author lists a number of familiar motives for shopping second-hand, such as nostalgia, sustainability and bargaining, concluding that it is to 'shop with one's heart'.[34] For the shop-owners I knew, who navigate a shifting terrain on a fluctuating income despite the market's expansion, and await the desired reforms, the reason for keep trying to make business of history seemed to be to 'sell with one's heart'.

Notes

1. http://rosensantikvariat.se/2013/03/gamla-agare/. Accessed January 11, 2017.
2. http://rosensantikvariat.se. Accessed January 11, 2017.

3. See Larkin, 'The Politics and Poetics' for a discussion on the role of infrastructure and Tsing, 'The Global Situation' for a dynamic view of 'channel making'.
4. Appelgren and Bohlin, 'Growing in Motion'; Fredriksson, 'Second-Hand Values'; Knowles, 'Locating Vintage.'
5. See for example Balthazar, 'Made in Britain'; Gregson and Crewe, *Secondhand Cultures*; Pipyrou, 'Cutting *Bella Figura*.'
6. See Göteborgs Posten, 'Momskrav' and Ministry of Finance Sweden, 'Strategy.'
7. Straw, 'Some Things' discusses the concept of scene.
8. The major e-commerce company Ellos is one example of this: https://www.ellos.se/page/vintage-collection. Accessed Januari 27, 2018.
9. The city of Gothenburg's international website: http://international.goteborg.se. Accessed January 27, 2018.
10. Malmberg, Andersson and Östh, "Segregation"; Scarpa, "Looking Beyond."
11. This study is part of the research project 'Re:heritage. Circulation and Marketisation of Things with History', funded by the Swedish Research Council 2014–2017.
12. Methods of the 2003 and 2014 surveys will be presented in detail below. The recent fieldwork was carried out intermittently during 2015–2016, involved semi-structured interviews and conversations with 17 shop-owners in Gothenburg, as well as participant observation in two shops. The latter included participating in everyday on-site routines, excursions related to sourcing and sorting activities in storage locations. This study follows the ethical guidelines for social sciences developed by the Swedish Research Council, including informing informants on the research project and their rights in participating and withdrawing, seeking voluntary participation and consent, as well as maintaining confidentiality and anonymity: http://www.codex.vr.se/texts/HSFR.pdf.
13. Gregson et al., 'Interrogating'; Ministry of Finance Sweden, 'Strategy.'
14. Botsman and Rogers, *What's Mine*; Appelgren and Bohlin, 'Circulating Stuff'; Jenss, *Fashioning Memory*; Gregson and Crewe, *Secondhand Cultures*; Alexander and Reno, *Economies of Recycling*; Czarniawska and Löfgren, *Managing Overflow*.
15. Gregson and Crewe, *Secondhand Cultures*; Horne and Maddrell, *Charity Shops*; Larsen, 'Objects'; Sherry Jr., 'A Sociocultural Analysis'; Hansson and Brembeck, 'Market Hydraulics'; McColl, 'It's Vintage'; Nickel, 'Thrift Shop'; Watt and Dubbeld, 'Enchanting'; Herrmann, 'Gift or Commodity.'; Herrmann, 'New Lives'; Herrmann, 'Valuing Affect'; Herrmann, 'Negotiating Culture'; Herrmann, 'Garage-Sales'; Brembeck and Sörum, 'Assembling Nostalgia.'
16. Hansen, *Salaula*; Norris *Recycling Indian*; Brooks, 'Riches from Rags'; Milgram, 'Reconfiguring Margins.' For research on retailers in the Global North see Baker, 'Retailing Retro'; Crewe, Gregson and Brooks, 'The Discursivities' and Handberg, 'Montreal Modern.'
17. Höglund, *Gamla grejer*.
18. Charities in the second-hand market are often enrolled in active labour market policies directed at long-term unemployed persons and thus provide labour market training opportunities financed by government funding. This arrangement often has the duals goal of involving the unemployed in productive labour and promoting sustainable consumption.
19. Ideell Secondhand, see further http://www.ideellsecondhand.se
20. See Gregson and Crewe, *Second-Hand Cultures*; Franklin, 'Consuming Design'; Cassidy and Bennett, 'The Rise of Vintage'; Baker, *Retro Styles*; and Fischer, 'Vintage' for more on these categories.
21. Höglund, *Gamla grejer*, 7–8.
22. Cf. Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, '"I"ll sell this'; Fredriksson, 'E-handelns virtuella.' See Appadurai, 'Introduction', 13–17 for a discussion of the commodity phase.
23. See Gregson and Crewe, *Second-Hand Cultures,* 2–13 for a discussion on first and second cycle consumption.
24. McCracken, *Culture and Consumption*.
25. Lisa Larson is a Swedish ceramicist and designer.
26. Geertz, 'The Bazaar Economy.'
27. See, for example, Fredriksson, who explores the role of bloggers, 'Shabby Chic.'

28. Cf Baker, 'Retailing Retro' and Appelgren and Bohlin 'Second-hand as "Living"'.
29. Crewe, Gregson and Brooks, 'The Discursitivities of Difference', 63–64.
30. See for example https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/circular-economy
31. Enkawa and Schvaneveldt, 'Just-in-Time'.
32. For the world's largest furniture retailer, IKEA, closing the loops of material flows is now an explicit corporate goal according to their latest sustainability report. However, this mainly translates into aiming to recycle materials, rather than facilitating the reuse of things. IKEA Group, "Sustainability Report."
33. See Appelgren and Bohlin, "Growing in Motion" for a discussion about making new objects and growing second-hand things.
34. Höglund, *Gamla grejer*.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Anna Bohlin and Maris Gillette for reading drafts and giving helpful comments, and the editors and anonymous reviewers for constructive criticism and suggestions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council under [grant number 421-203-1923], the research project 'Re:heritage. Circulation and Marketisation of Things with History'.

Notes on contributor

Staffan Appelgren is senior lecturer in social anthropology at the School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, and associated with the Centre for Critical Heritage Studies, University of Gothenburg/University College London. His research revolves around the dynamic relationships between transformation and stability, expressed in phenomena such as heritage, consumption, tourism, architecture and cities. Currently, he investigates the circulation of material culture through the second-hand markets as an alternative form of heritage.

ORCID

Staffan Appelgren http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8945-6757

References

Alexander, Catherine, and Joshua Reno, eds. *Economies of Recycling: The Global Transformations of Materials, Values and Social Relations*. London: Zed Books, 2012.

Appadurai, Arjun. "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value." In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, 3–63. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Appelgren, Staffan, and Anna Bohlin. "Circulating Stuff through Second-hand, Vintage and Retro Markets." *Special issue Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 7, no. 1 (2015): 1–168.

Appelgren, Staffan, and Anna Bohlin. "Growing in Motion: The Circulation of Used Things on Second-hand Markets." *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 7, no. 1 (2015): 143–168.

Appelgren, Staffan, and Anna Bohlin. "Second-hand as 'Living' Heritage: Intangible Dimensions of Things with History." In *Routledge Companion to Intangible Cultural Heritage*, edited by Peter Davis and Michelle L Stefano, 240–250. London: Routledge, 2017.
Baker, Sarah Elsie. "Retailing Retro: Class, Cultural Capital and the Material Practices of the (Re)valuation of Style." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 5 (2012): 621–641.
Baker, Sarah Elsie. *Retro Style*. London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.
Balthazar, Ana Carolina. "Made in Britain: Brexit, Teacups, and the Materiality of the Nation." *American Ethnologist* 44, no. 2 (2017): 220–224.
Botsman, Rachel, and Roo Rogers. *What's Mine is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010.
Brembeck, Helene, and Niklas Sörum. "Assembling Nostalgia: Devices for Affective Captation of the Re:heritage Market." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23, no. 6 (2017): 556–574.
Brooks, Andrew. "Riches from Rags or Persistent Poverty? The Working Lives of Secondhand Clothing Vendors in Maputo, Mozambique." *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 10, no. 2 (2012): 222–237.
Cassidy, Tracy Diane, and Hannah Rose Bennett. "The Rise of Vintage Fashion and the Vintage Consumer." *Fashion Practice* 4, no. 2 (2012): 239–261.
Crewe, Louise, Nicky Gregson, and Kate Brooks. "The Discursivities of Difference: Retro Retailers and the Ambiguities of 'The Alternative'." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 3, no. 1 (2003): 61–82.
Czarniawska, Barbara, and Orvar Löfgren, eds. *Managing Overflow in Affluent Societies*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2012.
Denegri-Knott, Janice, and Mike Molesworth. "'I'll sell this and I'll buy the that': EBay and the Management of Possessions as Stock." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 8, no. 6 (2009): 305–315.
Enkawa, Takao, and Shane J. Schvaneveldt. "Just-in-Time, Lean Production, and Complementary Paradigms." In *Handbook of Industrial Engineering: Technology and Operations Management*, edited by Gavriel Salvendy, 545–561. New York: Wiley
Fischer, Nancy L. "Vintage, the First 40 Years: The Emergence and Persistence of Vintage Style in the United States." *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 7, no. 1 (2015): 45–66.
Franklin, Adrian. "Consuming Design: Consuming Retro." In *The Changing Consumer*, edited by Steven Miles, Alison Anderson and Kevin Meethan, 90–103. New York: Routledge, 2002.
Fredriksson, Cecilia. "E-handelns virtuella etnografi: Om förtroende och tillit på Tradera." *Nätverket* 17 (2010): 33–59.
Fredriksson, Cecilia. "Shabby Chic och slitenhetens estetik." *Nätverket* 18 (2013): 36–42.
Fredriksson, Cecilia. "Second-Hand Values and the Making of a Green Fashion Eco-Market." In *Making Sense of Consumption*, edited by Lena Hansson, Ulrika Holmberg and Helene Brembeck, 197–212. Göteborg: Centre for Consumer Science, Gothenburg University, 2013.
Geertz, Clifford. "The Bazaar Economy: Information and Search in Peasant Marketing." *American Economic Review* 68, no. 2 (1978): 28–32.
Göteborgs Posten. "Momskrav mot second-hand står fast." http://www.gp.se/nyheter/ekonomi/momskrav-mot-second-hand-står-fast-1.79657
Gregson, Nicky, and Louise Crewe. *Second-Hand Cultures*. Oxford: Berg, 2003.
Gregson, Nicky, Mike Crang, Sara Fuller, and Helen Holmes. "Interrogating the Circular Economy: The Moral Economy of Resource Recovery in the EU." *Economy and Society* 44, no. 2 (2015): 218–243.
Handberg, Kristian. "Montreal Modern: Retro Culture and the Modern Past in Montreal." *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 7, no. 1 (2015): 67–89.
Hansen, Karen Tranberg. *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
Hansson, Niklas, and Helene Brembeck. "Market Hydraulics and Subjectivities in the 'Wild': Circulation of the Flea Market." *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 7, no. 1 (2015): 91–121.
Herrmann, Gretchen M. "Gift or Commodity: What Changes Hands in the U.S. Garage Sale?" *American Ethnologist* 24, no. 4 (1997): 910–930.
Herrmann, Gretchen M. "Negotiating Culture: Conflict and Consensus in U.S. Garage-Sale Bargaining." *Ethnology* 42, no. 3 (2003): 237–252.
Herrmann, Gretchen M. "Garage Sales Make Good Neighbors: Building Community through Neighborhood Sales." *Human Organization* 65, no. 2 (2006): 181–191.

Herrmann, Gretchen M. "New Lives from Used Goods: Garage Sales as Rites of Passage." *Ethnology* 50, no. 3 (2011): 189–207.
Herrmann, Gretchen M. "Valuing Affect: The Centrality of Emotion, Memory, and Identity in Garage Sale Exchange." *Anthropology of Consciousness* 26, no. 2 (2015): 170–181.
Höglund, Björn. *Gamla grejer i Göteborg – en guide till antikt och second hand*. Göteborg: Tre Böcker Förlag AB, 2003.
Horne, Suzanne, and Avril Maddrell. *Charity Shops*. London: Routledge, 2002.
IKEA Group. "Sustainability Report FY16." http://www.ikea.com/ms/en_US/img/ad_content/IKEA_Group_Sustainability_Report_FY16.pdf
Jenss, Heike. *Fashioning Memory: Vintage Style and Youth Culture*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
Knowles, Kim. "Locating Vintage." *Necsus. European Journal of Media Studies* 4, no. 2 (2015): 73–84.
Larkin, Brian. "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2013): 327–343.
Larsen, Frederik. *Objects and Social Actions – on Second-hand Valuation Practices*. PhD diss. Copenhagen Business School, 2015.
Malmberg, Bo, Eva Andersson, and John Östh. "Segregation and Urban Unrest in Sweden." *Urban Geography* 34, no. 7 (2013): 1031–1046.
McColl, Julie, Catherine Canning, Louise McBride, Karina Nobbs, and Linda Shearer. "It's Vintage Darling! An exploration of vintage fashion retailing." *The Journal of The Textile Institute* 104, no. 2 (2013): 140–150.
McCracken, Grant. *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.
Milgram, B. Lynne. "Reconfiguring Margins: Secondhand Clothing and Street Vending in the Philippines." *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 10 no. 2 (2012): 200–221.
Ministry of Finance Sweden. *Strategy for Sustainable Consumption*. Fi2016:7, 2016.
Nickel, Patricia Mooney. "Thrift Shop Philanthropy: Charity, Value, and Ascetic Rehabilitation." *Cultural Politics* 12, no. 2 (2016): 173–189.
Norris, Lucy. *Recycling Indian Clothing: Global Contexts of Reuse and Value*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.
Pipyrou, Stavroula. "Cutting bella figura : Irony, Crisis, And Second hand Clothes in South Italy." *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 3 (2014): 532–546.
Scarpa, Simone. "Looking Beyond The Neighbourhood: Income Inequality And Residential Segregation In Swedish Metropolitan Areas, 1991–2010." *Urban Geography* 37, no. 7 (2016): 963–984.
Sherry, Jr., Jr., John F. "A Sociocultural Analysis of a Midwestern American Flea Market." *Journal of Consumer Research* 17, no. 1 (1990): 13–30.
Straw, Will. "Some Things a Scene Might Be: Postface." *Cultural Studies* 29, no. 3 (2014): 476–485.
Tsing, Anna. "The Global Situation." *Cultural Anthropology* 15, no. 3 (2000): 327–360.
Watt, Kathryn, and Bernard Dubbeld. "Enchanting The Worn-Out: The Craft of Selling Second-Hand Things at Milnerton Market, Cape Town." *Social Dynamics* 42, no. 1 (2016): 143–160.