

Reconstructing Student Identity through Thrifting Culture: From Second-Hand Clothing to Cultural Capital

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Consumer society;
Cultural capital;
Social identity;
Student lifestyle;
Thrifting culture

Thrifting has evolved beyond an alternative consumption practice into a significant cultural phenomenon through which university students negotiate identity, lifestyle, and symbolic distinction. While previous studies have predominantly interpreted second-hand clothing consumption from economic and sustainability perspectives, limited attention has been devoted to understanding its role in constructing social identity and cultural capital. This study examines how thrifting culture reconstructs the meaning of second-hand clothing and shapes student identity within contemporary consumer society. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with university students actively engaged in thrifting and supported by digital documentation of Instagram and TikTok content. The findings reveal three interrelated themes. First, symbolic satisfaction and social recognition have become stronger motivations than economic necessity. Second, second-hand clothing functions as a medium of visual distinction that challenges the homogeneity of fast-fashion consumption. Third, social media transforms the negative stigma associated with used clothing into a marker of cultural sophistication, environmental awareness, and symbolic prestige. Drawing upon Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and Baudrillard's theory of consumer society, this study argues that thrifting represents a process of identity reconstruction through symbolic consumption rather than merely an economical shopping practice. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of youth consumption as a socially constructed strategy for negotiating identity, distinction, and cultural legitimacy.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary consumer culture has transformed clothing beyond its utilitarian function into a powerful medium through which individuals communicate identity, social position, and cultural affiliation. Within this transformation, fashion is increasingly understood as a symbolic resource that

enables individuals to express taste, negotiate belonging, and distinguish themselves from others. (Brown & Vacca, 2022) argues that clothing functions as a form of cultural communication rather than merely a material necessity, while (Yates, 2022) contend that everyday consumption practices play a crucial role in constructing social identity within contemporary society. Consequently, the meanings attached to clothing continue to evolve alongside changing cultural values, digital interactions, and shifting patterns of youth consumption, making fashion an important subject within contemporary cultural sociology.

One of the most notable manifestations of this transformation is the rapid growth of thrifting culture among university students. Originally associated with economic necessity and financial limitation, second-hand clothing has increasingly been reinterpreted as an expression of creativity, individuality, and ethical consumption. Across many urban communities in Indonesia, thrifting has developed into a lifestyle supported by digital platforms, fashion communities, and social media influencers, where unique clothing items are valued for their symbolic rather than purely functional characteristics. As (Aldon et al., 2026) observe, social media has significantly accelerated the normalization of second-hand fashion by reshaping public perceptions of used clothing. Similarly, (Dwivedi, 2024) emphasizes that young consumers increasingly associate thrift shopping with authenticity, sustainability, and aesthetic distinction instead of economic deprivation.

Previous studies have examined thrifting from diverse disciplinary perspectives. Several scholars have interpreted thrift consumption primarily as a rational response to rising clothing prices and changing patterns of consumer expenditure (Yadav & Sijoria, 2024). Other researchers have highlighted its contribution to environmental sustainability by extending product life cycles and reducing textile waste (Edirisinghe et al., 2024). More recent studies have explored the influence of digital media and online communities in popularizing thrift culture among young people (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022). While these studies have generated valuable insights, they largely conceptualize thrifting as an economic, environmental, or communication phenomenon. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how second-hand clothing functions as a mechanism through which university students actively negotiate identity, accumulate cultural capital, and pursue symbolic distinction within contemporary consumer culture.

From the perspective of cultural sociology, consumption cannot be separated from broader processes of meaning-making and symbolic interaction. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital explains that individual preferences are socially produced and subsequently function as mechanisms of distinction through which social actors differentiate themselves from others (Pitzalis & Porcu, 2024). Complementing this perspective, Baudrillard argues that

consumption within contemporary society increasingly revolves around symbolic value rather than functional utility, where commodities operate as signs communicating prestige, identity, and lifestyle (Warde, 2022). These theoretical perspectives provide a valuable analytical lens for understanding why university students continue to engage in thrifting even when economic necessity is no longer the dominant motivation.

Despite the growing body of literature, two important gaps remain evident. Empirically, previous research has focused predominantly on explaining why young people participate in thrifting, whereas relatively few studies have investigated how thrifting reconstructs the social meaning of second-hand clothing and transforms it into cultural legitimacy among university students. Theoretically, existing studies have tended to employ either Bourdieu's framework or Baudrillard's perspective independently, leaving limited understanding of how cultural capital and symbolic consumption simultaneously shape identity formation within contemporary thrift culture (Hack-Polay et al., 2023; Mars, 2026).

Responding to these gaps, this study offers a different analytical perspective by conceptualizing thrifting not merely as an alternative consumption practice but as a process through which students reconstruct identity, negotiate symbolic status, and accumulate cultural capital within digitally mediated consumer society. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize economic rationality or environmental awareness, this research demonstrates that second-hand clothing acquires new meanings through the interaction between aesthetic preferences, social recognition, and digital visibility. By integrating Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital with Baudrillard's theory of consumer society, this study proposes a more comprehensive explanation of how symbolic consumption operates within contemporary youth culture (Philip et al., 2022; Prieur et al., 2023).

Based on these considerations, this study aims to examine how thrifting culture reconstructs the meaning of second-hand clothing and contributes to the formation of student identity within contemporary consumer society. Specifically, it seeks to explain how symbolic consumption, cultural capital, and digital representation interact in shaping lifestyle practices and social distinction among university students. Through this analysis, the study is expected to contribute to the development of cultural sociology by providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between everyday consumption, identity construction, and symbolic power in the digital era.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore how university students construct

identity through their lived experiences of thrifting culture. A phenomenological design was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand the subjective meanings that participants attached to second-hand clothing beyond its economic function, particularly as these meanings relate to lifestyle, symbolic consumption, and cultural identity. Rather than examining thrifting as a purchasing activity alone, this research positioned it as a socio-cultural practice through which students interpret, negotiate, and express their identities within contemporary consumer society. The unit of analysis focused on the participants' lived experiences and subjective interpretations of thrifting as part of their everyday lifestyle. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) actively engaging in thrifting for at least one year, (2) regularly using second-hand clothing as part of their daily fashion practices, and (3) voluntarily sharing their experiences during the research process. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and digital documentation of participants' visual representations on Instagram and TikTok, including outfit of the day, thrift haul, and other fashion-related content. The combination of interviews and digital observations enabled the researcher to compare participants' narratives with the identities they publicly performed across social media platforms.

The data were analyzed using the interactive analytical framework of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing with continuous verification throughout the research process. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly examined to identify recurring meanings and patterns associated with identity construction, symbolic consumption, and cultural capital. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader analytical themes that reflected participants' shared experiences while preserving the uniqueness of individual narratives. Cross-data comparisons between interview findings and digital documentation were conducted to strengthen analytical consistency and identify convergent as well as divergent patterns. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and member checking with selected participants to verify the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. Ethical considerations were maintained by obtaining informed consent from all participants prior to data collection, ensuring anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, and emphasizing participants' voluntary involvement and right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. Through these procedures, the study sought to produce a rigorous and credible interpretation of student identity construction within contemporary thrifting culture.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Participant Characteristics	Criteria
Population	University students actively engaged in thrifting
Sampling Technique	Purposive sampling
Inclusion Criteria	Active thrifting for ≥ 1 year; regularly wear second-hand clothing; willing to participate
Data Collection	Semi-structured interviews; digital documentation (Instagram and TikTok)
Data Analysis	Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña interactive model
Trustworthiness	Source triangulation, methodological triangulation, member checking
Research Ethics	Informed consent, anonymity, voluntary participation

RESULT

The analysis of in-depth interviews and digital documentation generated four interrelated themes describing how university students experienced and interpreted thrifting as part of their everyday lives. The findings demonstrate that participants no longer perceived second-hand clothing merely as an economical alternative but as an important medium for expressing identity, constructing visual distinction, and negotiating social meaning. The four themes identified were: (1) the shift from economic necessity to symbolic satisfaction, (2) thrifting as a form of visual distinction, (3) the reconstruction of second-hand clothing through social media, and (4) the paradox between sustainability narratives and consumption practices. This section presents the first two themes emerging from the participants' lived experiences.

Table 2. Summary of Emergent Themes

Theme	Description
Theme 1	Economic motivation gradually shifted toward symbolic satisfaction and emotional fulfillment.
Theme 2	Second-hand clothing became an important medium for expressing individuality and visual distinction.
Theme 3	Social media reconstructed the social meaning of second-hand clothing and normalized thrifting culture.
Theme 4	Participants experienced tension between sustainability ideals and repeated purchasing behavior.

From Economic Necessity to Symbolic Satisfaction

Participants consistently described that financial affordability was no longer the principal reason for engaging in thrifting. Although inexpensive prices initially encouraged them to visit thrift markets, the interviews revealed that emotional satisfaction increasingly became the dominant motivation. Participants explained that discovering rare clothing items, discontinued collections, or vintage products created a sense of excitement and personal

achievement that could not easily be obtained through conventional retail shopping. Rather than emphasizing monetary savings, they associated successful thrift shopping with the pleasure of finding distinctive pieces that reflected their personal preferences and aesthetic values. These experiences transformed thrifting into an enjoyable and meaningful activity instead of a strategy for minimizing expenditure.

The interviews further revealed that participants developed personal attachments to the clothing they selected. Many described second-hand garments as possessing unique stories, characteristics, or visual identities that distinguished them from mass-produced fashion products. Participants frequently expressed greater confidence when wearing thrifted clothing because they believed their appearance reflected originality rather than conformity with mainstream fashion trends. Digital observations of Instagram and TikTok accounts supported these narratives, showing that participants intentionally displayed carefully selected thrifted outfits as part of their everyday appearance. Across both interview narratives and digital documentation, second-hand clothing was consistently presented as an extension of personal identity rather than merely a functional necessity.

Thrifting as Visual Distinction

Another prominent finding concerned the role of thrifting in creating visual distinction among university students. Participants explained that they intentionally searched for clothing that differed from items commonly available in commercial fashion stores. The uniqueness of colors, designs, cuts, and vintage characteristics became important considerations during the selection process. Rather than pursuing branded products solely for their commercial value, participants preferred clothing that enabled them to express individuality and avoid visual similarity with their peers. This process often required considerable time spent searching, comparing, and combining garments until they found clothing that matched the personal image they wished to project.

The digital documentation strengthened these findings by demonstrating that participants carefully curated their online visual representations. Photographs and short-form videos uploaded to Instagram and TikTok frequently featured coordinated thrifted outfits presented through aesthetically arranged compositions, suggesting deliberate attention to appearance rather than spontaneous clothing choices. Participants consistently portrayed second-hand clothing as an important component of their everyday lifestyle and public self-presentation. These observations indicate that thrifted fashion functioned not simply as an alternative source of clothing but as a visible element through which participants communicated uniqueness and constructed their preferred public image.

DISCUSSION

Identity Construction through Symbolic Consumption

(Prieur et al., 2023) argues that social distinction is continuously reproduced through the accumulation of cultural capital, particularly through everyday practices that reflect individual taste and aesthetic preferences. The present findings resonate with this perspective by demonstrating that participants no longer perceived thrift shopping merely as an opportunity to obtain inexpensive clothing. Instead, they described the experience of discovering rare items as a meaningful process that generated emotional satisfaction and reinforced their sense of individuality. Rather than emphasizing economic savings, participants attached greater value to uniqueness, authenticity, and the personal stories embedded in second-hand garments. Similar observations were reported by (le Grand, 2024), who found that taste increasingly functions as a symbolic resource through which young consumers negotiate social recognition.

The findings further indicate that participants intentionally transformed second-hand clothing into a visible representation of their personal identity. This pattern reflects what (Vlahos et al., 2022) describes as symbolic distinction in everyday consumption, where appearance becomes an important medium for communicating cultural competence rather than economic status. Participants consistently explained that they invested considerable effort in selecting, combining, and styling thrifted clothing to create an appearance that differed from mainstream fashion. Such practices suggest that identity is constructed not only through ownership of fashion products but also through the ability to curate distinctive visual expressions. This finding extends previous studies on youth thrift culture by demonstrating that symbolic differentiation is actively negotiated through everyday fashion practices rather than being determined solely by purchasing power (Knowles & Melo Lopes, 2026).

Digital Visibility and the Sustainability Paradox

The findings also highlight the increasingly important role of digital media in reshaping the meaning of second-hand fashion. According to (Santer et al., 2023), social media has become a central arena for visual identity construction among Generation Z, while (Qi et al., 2024) emphasizes its function as a space for symbolic interaction and recognition. These perspectives are consistent with the present study, in which participants described Instagram and TikTok not merely as communication platforms but as environments where thrifted fashion was displayed, interpreted, and socially validated. Digital documentation further confirmed that participants carefully curated photographs, outfit combinations, and lifestyle content to project identities associated with creativity, environmental awareness, and contemporary fashion.

Despite these positive narratives, the findings simultaneously reveal a contradiction between sustainability discourse and actual consumption practices. Although participants frequently described thrifting as an environmentally responsible alternative to fast fashion, many also acknowledged purchasing second-hand clothing beyond their functional needs because of its affordability and the excitement of discovering unique products. This paradox is consistent with recent discussions on sustainable fashion, where environmentally conscious consumption may coexist with excessive purchasing behaviour (Kumar et al., 2023). As (Gemar, 2026) further argue, alternative consumption practices do not automatically challenge consumer culture but may instead reproduce it through different symbolic values and consumption patterns. The present findings reinforce this argument by showing that symbolic satisfaction can become a powerful motivation for repeated consumption even when sustainability remains an important personal narrative.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing literature on youth consumption by integrating (Guillory, 2023) concept of cultural capital with (Wang, 2024) perspective on sign value and consumer society. While Bourdieu explains how participants accumulated symbolic recognition through taste, knowledge, and aesthetic competence, Baudrillard's perspective helps explain why second-hand clothing increasingly functions as a sign through which social meanings are communicated and recognized. Rather than representing a simple economic alternative, thrifting emerges as a multidimensional socio-cultural practice in which identity construction, symbolic consumption, digital visibility, and sustainability narratives continuously intersect within contemporary student life.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that thrifting among university students has evolved beyond an economically motivated activity into a multidimensional socio-cultural practice through which identity is constructed and social meanings are negotiated. Rather than prioritizing affordability, participants associated thrift shopping with emotional satisfaction, visual uniqueness, and opportunities to express individuality. The findings further reveal that second-hand clothing functions as a symbolic medium through which students communicate personal taste and differentiate themselves from mainstream fashion practices, while social media reinforces this process by providing spaces where identities are continuously displayed and socially recognized.

The findings indicate that contemporary thrifting cannot be understood solely through economic or environmental perspectives. Instead, it reflects the intersection of symbolic consumption, identity construction, and digital self-presentation. At the same time, the study identifies a paradox in which

sustainability narratives coexist with repetitive purchasing behaviour, suggesting that environmental awareness alone does not necessarily lead to more responsible consumption. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how second-hand fashion has acquired new social and cultural meanings within contemporary student life.

The study implies that efforts to promote sustainable consumption among young people should be accompanied by initiatives that strengthen critical consumption literacy and encourage greater reflection on the symbolic dimensions of everyday consumption. Future research is recommended to explore thrifting practices across different educational settings, cultural contexts, and digital communities in order to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between symbolic consumption, social identity, and sustainable lifestyles.

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