



Innovation in Sustainable Consumption: Exploring the Popularity of Thrifting among College Students in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The growing popularity of thrifting among college students reflects a significant shift in consumer behavior toward more sustainable and innovative consumption practices. Once associated primarily with financial limitations, thrifting has evolved into a lifestyle that combines affordability, self-expression, environmental awareness, and digital engagement. This study aims to explore college students' perspectives on the thrifting phenomenon, identify the factors driving its increasing popularity, examine the main motivations underlying thrift shopping, and analyze the perceived quality and implications of using second-hand clothing. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed through a systematic literature review of scholarly articles, books, industry reports, and credible online sources related to sustainable fashion, circular economy, and consumer behavior. The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis involving data reduction, thematic categorization, and interpretation. The findings reveal that students perceive thrifting as an innovative form of sustainable consumption that enables smart financial management, promotes individuality through unique fashion choices, and supports environmental sustainability by extending the lifecycle of clothing. The rapid growth of digital platforms, social media marketing, and access to affordable branded and vintage products further accelerate the adoption of thrifting among young consumers. Although concerns regarding hygiene and product safety remain, these challenges can be minimized through appropriate cleaning and sterilization practices. This study concludes that thrifting represents more than an economical shopping alternative; it is an innovation in sustainable consumption that integrates economic value, social identity, environmental responsibility, and digital culture. The findings contribute to the growing literature on sustainable fashion and provide practical insights for policymakers, educational institutions, and fashion industry stakeholders in promoting responsible consumption among younger generations.

Keywords: Sustainable Consumption, Thrifting, Sustainable Fashion, College Students, Circular Economy

1. Introduction

The global fashion industry has experienced remarkable growth over the past two decades, becoming one of the world's largest and most influential industries. Alongside technological advancements, digital marketing, and the rapid expansion of social media platforms, fashion trends now spread almost instantaneously across countries and cultures, significantly influencing consumer lifestyles and purchasing behavior (Crane, 2012; Kawamura, 2018). Fashion is no longer viewed solely as a functional necessity but has evolved into a form of self-expression, social identity, and cultural communication. This transformation has contributed to increasing consumer demand for clothing, particularly among younger generations who actively engage with digital media and online fashion communities.

Despite its economic significance, the fashion industry has become one of the major contributors to global environmental degradation. The fast fashion business model encourages

frequent purchasing, short product life cycles, and excessive textile waste, leading to increased resource consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, and environmental pollution (Fletcher, 2010; Turker & Altuntas, 2014). These environmental challenges have stimulated growing interest in sustainable consumption practices and circular economy principles, which promote extending product lifecycles through reuse, repair, recycling, and redistribution rather than continuous production of new products (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018; Brydges, 2021).

In response to these challenges, the concept of sustainable fashion has emerged as an innovative approach that integrates environmental responsibility with consumer behavior. Sustainable fashion encourages consumers to make purchasing decisions that minimize environmental impacts while maximizing the useful life of fashion products (Henninger et al., 2016). Among the various sustainable fashion practices, thrifting, or purchasing second-hand clothing, has gained considerable attention as an innovative consumption model that supports resource efficiency and waste reduction. Rather than simply representing an economical shopping alternative, thrifting reflects a shift from linear consumption toward circular consumption, where products remain in use for longer periods before disposal (Iran & Schrader, 2017; Hellström & Olsson, 2024).

Innovation in sustainable consumption is increasingly recognized as an essential strategy for achieving circular economy objectives. Unlike technological innovation that focuses primarily on product development, sustainable consumption innovation emphasizes changes in consumer behavior, purchasing patterns, and business models that reduce environmental impacts while maintaining consumer value (Todeschini et al., 2017). Within the fashion industry, second-hand retailing represents an innovative business model that creates economic, social, and environmental value simultaneously by encouraging product reuse, reducing textile waste, and promoting responsible consumption (Lang et al., 2013; Machado et al., 2019). Consequently, thrifting has evolved beyond a traditional second-hand market into a modern retail phenomenon supported by digital platforms, social media marketing, and changing consumer preferences.

Young consumers, particularly college students, have become one of the primary drivers of this transformation. As digital natives, university students are highly exposed to fashion trends through social media while simultaneously facing financial limitations due to their relatively low purchasing power. These conditions encourage students to seek affordable alternatives that enable them to remain fashionable without compromising their economic circumstances. Previous studies indicate that second-hand shopping is motivated not only by financial considerations but also by the desire to obtain unique products, express individuality, and experience the enjoyment of discovering rare fashion items (Guiot & Roux, 2010; Cervellon et al., 2012; Ferraro et al., 2016). Moreover, growing environmental awareness has encouraged many young consumers to perceive thrifting as a responsible consumption practice that contributes to sustainable development (McNeill & Moore, 2015; Diddi et al., 2019).

In Indonesia, the popularity of thrifting has increased substantially over recent years. The expansion of online marketplaces, social commerce platforms, and digital payment systems has made second-hand fashion more accessible to university students throughout the country. Social media influencers and content creators have further accelerated this trend by promoting thrifted outfits as fashionable, affordable, and environmentally friendly alternatives to fast fashion. Consequently, thrifting has become part of youth lifestyle culture rather than merely an economic necessity. This phenomenon reflects broader changes in consumer values, where affordability, uniqueness, sustainability, and social recognition increasingly influence purchasing decisions.

Although numerous international studies have examined second-hand fashion, sustainable consumption, and circular fashion business models (Becker-Leifhold & Iran, 2018; Park & Lin, 2020; Yadav & Sijoria, 2024), relatively limited research has specifically investigated how thrifting functions as an innovation in sustainable consumption among Indonesian college students. Existing studies primarily focus on environmental sustainability, consumer motivations, or business perspectives, while empirical evidence concerning the integration of innovation, sustainable consumption behavior, and youth fashion culture within the Indonesian context remains scarce. Considering that Indonesia represents one of the largest youth populations in Southeast Asia with rapidly growing digital commerce adoption, understanding this phenomenon is increasingly important for both researchers and policymakers.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the growing popularity of thrifting among college students in Indonesia from the perspective of innovation in sustainable consumption. Specifically, the study seeks to examine the economic, social, psychological, and environmental factors influencing students' participation in thrifting activities, while highlighting the role of second-hand fashion as an innovative approach to promoting sustainable consumer behavior. The findings are expected to contribute to the literature on sustainable fashion, circular economy, and consumer innovation, while providing practical insights for policymakers, educational institutions, and fashion industry stakeholders in promoting more sustainable consumption patterns among young consumers.

2. Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a descriptive-analytical design to explore the phenomenon of thrifting as an innovation in sustainable consumption among college students in Indonesia. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of the social, economic, environmental, and cultural factors that influence students' perceptions and behaviors toward second-hand fashion rather than to test causal relationships or quantify variables (Moleong, 2017).

The primary data source consisted of secondary qualitative data obtained through a comprehensive literature review. Relevant literature was collected from peer-reviewed international journal articles, academic books, conference proceedings, government publications, industry reports, and credible online sources discussing sustainable fashion, circular economy, consumer behavior, collaborative consumption, and the growing trend of thrifting. The literature selection emphasized publications related to sustainable consumption, second-hand fashion, and consumer innovation to ensure the relevance and credibility of the reviewed evidence.

The literature review was conducted systematically through four stages. First, relevant publications were identified using academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Emerald Insight, and Wiley Online Library by employing keywords including *thrifting*, *second-hand fashion*, *sustainable consumption*, *circular economy*, *fashion innovation*, and *college students*. Second, the retrieved publications were screened based on their relevance to the research objectives, publication quality, and contribution to the topic. Third, the selected literature was critically examined to identify recurring themes, theoretical perspectives, and empirical findings related to the popularity of thrifting among young consumers. Finally, the synthesized evidence was organized to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon within the Indonesian context.

Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The analysis involved three stages: data reduction, in which relevant information was selected and categorized; data display, where the findings were organized into thematic patterns; and conclusion drawing and verification, through which relationships among economic, psychological, social, and environmental factors were interpreted to explain the increasing popularity of thrifting among college students (Miles et al., 2014). This analytical process enabled the researcher to identify how thrifting has evolved from a cost-saving practice into an innovative form of sustainable consumption supported by changing consumer values, digital technology, and circular economy principles.

By integrating evidence from previous studies and interpreting it through the perspective of sustainable consumption and consumer innovation, this research provides a comprehensive description of the factors driving the rapid growth of thrifting among Indonesian college students and its implications for promoting more sustainable fashion consumption.

3. Results and Discussions

Results

Based on a literature review and observations of trends in student consumption behavior, the results of this study can be summarized into several key points:

1. Students' Perspectives on the Thrifting Phenomenon

The research results indicate a paradigm shift (change in perspective) among students. Whereas secondhand goods were once associated with poverty or financial constraints, students today view thrifting as:

- a. Smart Consumption: Students view thrifting as a way to allocate their spending money efficiently. They take pride in being able to get “five-star” quality at “street-stall” prices.
 - b. A Form of Identity Expression: Students tend to want to stand out (*be anti-mainstream*). Thrifted clothing, which is usually available in only one piece per style, allows them to have a unique visual identity on campus.
 - c. Eco-Conscious Initiatives: Some students who are environmentally conscious view thrifting as a way to reduce textile waste generated by the fast fashion industry.
2. Factors Behind the Resurgence of Thrifting
- There are three main, interrelated factors driving the popularity of this trend:
- a. Affordability and Accessibility: Extremely low prices (often under Rp50,000) align perfectly with students’ budgets. Additionally, the proliferation of online thrift shops on Instagram and TikTok makes it easy to shop without having to visit physical secondhand markets (such as Pasar Senen or Gedebage).
 - b. The Role of Social Media and Digital Marketing: Content such as “Thrift Hauls,” “Thrift OOTDs,” and educational videos on how to wash secondhand clothes have helped eliminate the negative stigma. Influencers play a major role in validating that wearing secondhand clothes is “cool” and “aesthetic.”
 - c. Availability of Branded and Vintage Items: Students’ desire to own well-known brands (*such as Nike, Dickies, Levi’s, or Carhartt*) is often hindered by high retail prices. Thrifting has become the only shortcut to owning authentic branded items on a tight budget.
3. Main Appeal: Between Status and Self-Satisfaction
- One of the interesting findings in this study is the close link between a sense of status and the feeling of satisfaction.
- a. Status and Social Validation: In sociological theory, individuals often consume to gain recognition. Students want to be seen as fashionable among their peers. Thrifting facilitates this “status” without placing an extreme financial burden on them.
 - b. The Thrill of Treasure Hunting: There’s a unique adrenaline rush when searching through piles of clothes. Discovering rare items or pieces from renowned designers at extremely low prices triggers the release of dopamine, leading to a high sense of self-satisfaction. This is no longer just shopping; it’s an achievement or a victory.
4. Product Quality and Impact of Use
- An analysis of quality and health aspects yielded the following findings:
- a. Product Quality: Paradoxically, many thrifted clothes (especially those from the ’90s or early 2000s) are made of thicker materials and have sturdier stitching compared to modern fast fashion items, which are mass-produced with thin fabrics. This explains why thrifted items remain durable even after being used.
 - b. Health Impacts: The use of secondhand items carries biological risks. Secondhand clothing often contains bacteria, fungi, or mites due to prolonged storage in damp warehouses.
 - c. Mitigation Recommendations: Researchers have found that standard washing methods are insufficient. Sterilization is necessary by soaking the clothing in hot water (around 60°C–80°C) or using a fabric antiseptic before use to prevent skin diseases.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that thrifting has undergone a significant transformation from being perceived as an economic necessity into an innovative form of sustainable consumption among Indonesian college students. This shift reflects changing consumer values, where purchasing decisions are no longer driven solely by price but also by identity, environmental

awareness, and social recognition. These findings support the concept of collaborative fashion consumption proposed by Becker-Leifhold and Iran (2018), who argue that second-hand consumption has evolved into a socially accepted consumption practice influenced by economic, environmental, and psychological motivations. Likewise, Hellström and Olsson (2024) emphasize that modern thrift shopping represents an innovative circular business model that extends product lifecycles while simultaneously creating economic and environmental value. Therefore, the increasing popularity of thrifting among university students illustrates that innovation in sustainable consumption is driven not only by technological advancements but also by changing consumer behavior and social norms.

One of the most notable findings is that students perceive thrifting as an expression of smart consumption. Instead of viewing second-hand products as symbols of financial hardship, students regard thrifting as an intelligent financial strategy that enables them to maximize value while minimizing expenditure. This behavioral change reflects the emergence of conscious consumption, where consumers actively seek products offering high utility, affordability, and sustainability simultaneously. Camacho-Otero et al. (2018) argue that circular economy consumption encourages consumers to shift from ownership-oriented purchasing toward resource-efficient consumption practices. Similarly, Machado et al. (2019) explain that second-hand fashion markets empower consumers to participate directly in circular economy initiatives by extending clothing lifecycles and reducing unnecessary production. In this context, Indonesian college students demonstrate innovative consumption behavior by balancing economic considerations with environmental responsibility.

Beyond economic motivations, the study also reveals that thrifting serves as an important medium for identity construction and self-expression. Students intentionally seek unique and vintage clothing unavailable in conventional retail stores to differentiate themselves from their peers. This finding aligns with Crane (2012), who suggests that fashion functions as a form of symbolic communication through which individuals express personal identity and social belonging. Kawamura (2018) further explains that clothing represents cultural capital, enabling individuals to communicate their personalities and lifestyles within specific social contexts. Cervellon et al. (2012) similarly found that consumers often prefer vintage and second-hand fashion because these products offer exclusivity and authenticity unavailable in mass-produced fashion. Therefore, thrifting has evolved beyond an alternative shopping practice into a platform for personal creativity and identity innovation among young consumers.

The results further indicate that environmental awareness has become an increasingly influential factor encouraging students to engage in thrifting. Participants recognize that purchasing second-hand clothing contributes to reducing textile waste and minimizing environmental impacts associated with fast fashion. This finding supports Fletcher (2010), who emphasizes that sustainable fashion requires fundamental changes in consumer behavior rather than merely adopting environmentally friendly production methods. Henninger et al. (2016) also argue that sustainable fashion depends heavily on consumers' willingness to extend product lifecycles through reuse and responsible purchasing decisions. Moreover, Farrant et al. (2010) demonstrate that extending clothing use through reuse substantially reduces carbon emissions, water consumption, and waste generation throughout the product life cycle. Consequently, thrifting represents an innovative consumption practice that directly supports the principles of sustainability and resource efficiency.

The role of digital technology and social media also emerged as a significant driver of the growing popularity of thrifting among college students. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have transformed second-hand shopping into an attractive digital lifestyle by promoting thrift hauls, styling tutorials, and educational content regarding clothing care. This finding illustrates how digital innovation accelerates the diffusion of sustainable consumption practices among younger generations. Lang et al. (2013) argue that second-hand retailing has evolved into an innovative retail model through digital platforms that expand market accessibility and consumer participation. Similarly, Todeschini et al. (2017) emphasize that innovation in sustainable fashion extends beyond products to include business models, digital marketing strategies, and consumer engagement mechanisms. Therefore, digital platforms function not only as marketing channels but also as catalysts that normalize sustainable consumption within youth culture.

Another important finding concerns the relationship between social status and self-satisfaction in motivating thrifting behavior. Students reported that owning unique branded items acquired through thrift shopping enhances their social image while simultaneously providing emotional satisfaction through the experience of discovering rare products. This phenomenon is consistent with Guiot and Roux (2010), who identify recreational shopping, treasure hunting, and uniqueness seeking as major motivations for second-hand consumption. Ferraro et al. (2016) further demonstrate that fashionability significantly influences consumers' decisions to purchase second-hand clothing because such products allow individuals to appear fashionable while maintaining financial efficiency. Recent evidence by Yadav and Sijoria (2024) also suggests that consumers increasingly shift from fast fashion to thrift fashion because thrift shopping simultaneously satisfies economic, emotional, and sustainability goals. These findings indicate that innovation in sustainable consumption can successfully satisfy both functional and psychological consumer needs.

Despite these positive contributions, the study also identifies several challenges associated with increasing thrift consumption. Although many respondents perceived thrifted products as having superior material quality and durability compared with contemporary fast fashion products, concerns regarding hygiene and product safety remain significant. McNeill and Moore (2015) note that consumers often experience tension between sustainability values and concerns regarding product quality and cleanliness when purchasing second-hand clothing. Similarly, Park and Lin (2020) found that perceived risks related to hygiene and product condition frequently limit consumers' willingness to adopt second-hand fashion despite positive environmental attitudes. Therefore, proper sanitation practices, including high-temperature washing and fabric disinfection, become essential to ensure consumer safety while maintaining confidence in second-hand fashion products.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that thrifting represents more than an affordable shopping alternative; it constitutes an innovation in sustainable consumption that integrates economic efficiency, digital transformation, environmental responsibility, and identity construction within a single consumption practice. This finding reinforces the arguments of Brydges (2021), Moorhouse and Moorhouse (2017), and Claxton and Kent (2020), who emphasize that the future of sustainable fashion depends on innovative consumption models that extend product lifecycles rather than increasing production volumes. Unlike many previous studies that primarily examine thrifting from economic or environmental perspectives, this study highlights that among Indonesian college students, thrifting functions as a multidimensional innovation combining circular economy principles, social identity formation, digital culture, and sustainable consumer behavior. Consequently, the findings contribute to expanding the literature on sustainable fashion by demonstrating that behavioral innovation among young consumers plays an equally important role as technological innovation in achieving sustainable development goals.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that the growing popularity of thrifting among college students in Indonesia reflects a significant transformation in consumer behavior toward innovation in sustainable consumption. Thrifting is no longer perceived merely as an economical alternative for purchasing clothing but has evolved into an innovative consumption practice that combines economic efficiency, self-expression, environmental awareness, and digital lifestyle trends. The findings demonstrate that students increasingly view second-hand fashion as a smart purchasing strategy that enables them to obtain high-quality and unique products while managing limited financial resources. At the same time, thrifting has become a medium for expressing personal identity and participating in more environmentally responsible consumption practices.

The study further reveals that the resurgence of thrifting is driven by several interconnected factors, including affordability, accessibility through digital platforms, the influence of social media, and the availability of branded and vintage fashion items at

relatively low prices. These factors illustrate how technological development and digital marketing have accelerated the diffusion of sustainable consumption practices among young consumers. Moreover, students' motivations extend beyond financial considerations to include social recognition, emotional satisfaction, and the desire to contribute to reducing textile waste through product reuse. These findings indicate that innovation in sustainable consumption is strongly influenced by behavioral and social innovation rather than technological innovation alone.

Despite its positive contribution to circular fashion and environmental sustainability, the study also identifies challenges related to product hygiene and quality assurance. Therefore, increasing consumer awareness regarding appropriate cleaning and sterilization procedures for second-hand clothing remains essential to maximize the benefits of thrifting while minimizing potential health risks.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing literature on sustainable fashion, circular economy, and consumer innovation by demonstrating that thrifting represents a multidimensional innovation integrating economic, environmental, psychological, and social values within contemporary consumption behavior. Practically, the findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, educational institutions, digital marketplace providers, and fashion industry stakeholders in promoting responsible and sustainable consumption among young consumers. Future research is recommended to employ quantitative or mixed-method approaches involving larger and more diverse samples to examine the causal relationships among environmental awareness, digital engagement, consumer innovation, and sustainable purchasing behavior across different demographic groups and cultural contexts.

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