

THRIFT CLOTHING SHOPPING TRENDS AMONG GEN Z IN PURWOKERTO: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The increasing popularity of thrift fashion among Generation Z reflects a shift in consumer values toward sustainability, identity expression, and resistance to fast fashion. This study aims to explore the factors that influence Gen Z consumers in Purwokerto to choose thrift clothing over new apparel and to understand the symbolic meanings and social dynamics behind their shopping behavior. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with young consumers and local business owners, social media observations, and documentation analysis. The findings reveal that Gen Z sees thrift clothing not only as an affordable fashion choice but also as a means of expressing individuality, environmental consciousness, and anti-mainstream identity. Social media plays a significant role in shaping their preferences through visual content and peer influence. Furthermore, local thrift stores in Purwokerto have developed unique branding and adaptive marketing strategies to meet the expectations of youth consumers. Meanwhile, new clothing retailers face increasing pressure to innovate in response to this trend. This study contributes to the understanding of youth consumer behavior in developing urban contexts and provides practical insights for businesses seeking to remain relevant in a changing fashion landscape.

Keywords: Thrift fashion, Generation Z, symbolic consumption, consumer behavior, social media influence

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the trend of thrift fashion consumption has significantly grown in Indonesia, especially among Generation Z. This generation, born between 1997 and 2012, exhibits unique consumption characteristics: they are socially and environmentally conscious, value uniqueness in fashion, and are active social media users who express identity and lifestyle through digital platforms.

In the face of rising concerns about the environmental and ethical issues of fast fashion—such as pollution, textile waste, and labor exploitation—thrift fashion emerges as a more responsible and sustainable alternative. Thrift items are no longer associated with negative stigma; instead, they represent a new lifestyle that emphasizes sustainability, historical value, design originality, and affordability (Sulissya Nur Syafa'ati & Khusyairi, 2024; Gabriella et al., 2021).

Social media plays a major role in popularizing the thrift culture among Gen Z. Through platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, young people actively share their experiences in thrift shopping via content such as “thrift hauls,” “outfit of the day (OOTD),” and styling tips. This activity not only reflects personal preference but also shapes new visual trends and eco-friendly fashion narratives.

This growing trend is not only a fashion choice but also a form of resistance to the instant consumerism offered by fast fashion. Thrift fashion aligns with slow fashion principles that promote longevity, non-mass production, and environmental responsibility (Gabriella et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the rise of thrift fashion impacts the local creative economy, especially for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Many thrift stores, both offline and online, are emerging in mid-sized cities like Purwokerto, targeting youth consumers such as students.

A survey by Katadata Insight Center (2023) reports that 57.3% of young Indonesian consumers aged 18–24 have bought thrift clothes in the past six months. Local observations show that Purwokerto has seen the emergence of over 20 active thrift shops since 2022, catering mainly to young people. Events like the Banyumas Thrift Market further illustrate the city's active thrift ecosystem (KemenkopUKM, 2022; Hariyadi, 2023).

Despite the popularity of thrift fashion, limited academic studies have examined its influence on conventional clothing retailers in cities like Purwokerto. Most studies focus on consumer behavior, with little attention to how traditional businesses adapt to these changes.

This study therefore aims to explore not only the motivations of Gen Z thrift consumers but also the strategic responses of local fashion retailers. The findings are expected to provide both theoretical insights into symbolic and sustainable consumption, and practical recommendations for creative industries in transitioning economies.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS FORMULATION

This study is based on several key theories that explain the phenomenon of thrift fashion consumption among Generation Z, particularly in Purwokerto. These theories include consumer behavior theory, impulsive buying, symbolic consumption, and the role of social media in digital marketing. These frameworks complement each other in explaining how purchasing decisions are formed and how social media influences young consumers' perceptions and behaviors.

Consumer behavior theory highlights that purchasing decisions are influenced by internal factors such as motivation, perception, and attitudes, as well as external factors like social and cultural environments (Solomon, 2017). For Generation Z, the preference for thrift fashion reflects a search for identity and alignment with sustainability values. Meanwhile, impulsive buying theory explains how purchases can occur spontaneously, driven by visually engaging social media content such as thrift hauls and outfits of the day (Dholakia, 2001; Rook, 1987).

Symbolic consumption theory argues that consumption has symbolic dimensions, where products do not only serve functional purposes but also reflect personal and social values (Featherstone, 1991). Thrift clothing is seen as a symbol of environmental awareness and resistance to fast fashion, serving as a form of self-expression for youth (Dong & Li, 2025; Borusiak et al., 2021). Social media plays a pivotal role in disseminating trends and shaping consumer lifestyles. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok serve as spaces where young consumers build narratives around sustainability and connect through lifestyle-based communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Gabriella et al., 2021). Such content also stimulates emotional purchasing decisions.

Based on a review of previous studies, it is evident that thrift shopping behavior is closely related to symbolic value, sustainability concerns, and digital social influences (Sulissya Nur Syafa'ati & Khusyairi, 2024; Gabriella et al., 2021; Widia et al., 2021; Arisandy, 2024). However, there is still a gap regarding how local fashion retailers respond to these changing consumer preferences. Since this study adopts a qualitative approach, formal hypotheses are not formulated.

Theoretical assumptions are proposed to guide exploration:

1. Generation Z selects thrift fashion not merely due to price, but also as a means of identity expression and commitment to sustainability.
2. Social media constructs a consumption culture that strengthens thrift fashion trends through visual content and online communities.

3. Local fashion retailers must adopt adaptive strategies to remain relevant amidst the growth of the thrift trend.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative method is used to gain in-depth understanding of meanings, perceptions, and subjective experiences of individuals involved in the thrift fashion trend in Purwokerto. The case study approach enables an exploration of the phenomenon within its real-life context.

Purwokerto is selected as the research site due to its rapid development of thrift stores and its significant student population. The city reflects the growing interest in sustainable and alternative fashion consumption, particularly among Generation Z.

Informants include Generation Z individuals (aged 18–27) who actively shop for thrift fashion, as well as owners of thrift shops and conventional clothing stores affected by the trend. The informants are selected using purposive sampling, based on criteria such as age, residency in Purwokerto, regular thrift shopping habits, and active social media engagement.

Data collection techniques include in-depth interviews, online and offline observations, and documentation. Interviews are conducted in a semi-structured format to allow informants to share their experiences freely, while remaining guided by key themes. Observations are made through social media content analysis and visits to thrift and fashion stores. Documentation includes photos, promotional materials, and online testimonials.

To ensure data validity, this study applies triangulation techniques—source triangulation (comparing data from various informants), methodological triangulation (interview, observation, documentation), and time triangulation (data collection at different times). These techniques aim to minimize bias and enhance credibility (Creswell, 2016).

Data is analyzed using the model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which includes three main stages: data condensation (selecting relevant information), data display (organizing data into themes and tables), and conclusion drawing/verification (deriving insights and cross-checking data consistency). This iterative process ensures contextual and reliable findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the research, organized into several sub-topics aligned with the research questions. The data were obtained through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. The discussion is intended to answer the research problems, interpret findings, and connect them with existing theories and literature.

1. Motivations Behind Gen Z's Thrift Shopping Behavior

Most informants cited affordability as a primary reason for choosing thrift clothing. However, affordability alone was not sufficient. Many respondents emphasized uniqueness and sustainability as part of the lifestyle they seek to portray. For Gen Z, thrift fashion is not merely a budget-friendly option, but an act of self-expression that differentiates them from mainstream consumption patterns.

This finding aligns with the theory of symbolic consumption, which explains that products carry symbolic meaning and function as identity markers (Featherstone, 1991). The choice to engage in thrift shopping becomes a form of resistance to fast fashion and a statement of environmental awareness.

2. The Role of Social Media in Shaping Consumption Behavior

Social media—especially TikTok and Instagram—plays a crucial role in influencing preferences and purchasing decisions. Informants admitted to being inspired by thrift haul content, outfit-of-the-day (OOTD) posts, and micro-influencer recommendations. These platforms serve as cultural arenas that normalize and elevate thrift fashion as trendy and desirable.

This supports Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) assertion that social media has redefined consumer-product relationships and becomes a driving force in shaping new consumption cultures, especially among digital-native youth.

3. Symbolic Value and Identity Through Thrift Fashion

Thrifted clothing is perceived to carry strong symbolic values—such as sustainability, vintage aesthetics, and exclusivity. Many informants felt “more authentic” and “different” when wearing thrifted fashion compared to mass-produced items. Thrifting, in this case, is seen as part of identity formation and a rejection of conformity.

Symbolic value reinforces the postmodern view that consumption is not just functional, but reflects one's beliefs and lifestyle (Dong & Li, 2025). The exclusivity of thrifted items also creates emotional attachment, as they often exist in limited quantities and unique styles.

4. Impulse Buying and Visual Exposure

Several respondents admitted to making spontaneous thrift purchases after being exposed to engaging visual content. Factors such as visual appeal, discount offers, product scarcity, and fear of missing out (FOMO) often trigger impulsive purchases. However, these acts are still viewed as meaningful rather than wasteful.

This confirms Rook's (1987) and Dholakia's (2001) propositions that emotional stimuli and compelling narratives—particularly through digital media—can lead to unplanned, yet symbolically charged, purchasing behavior.

5. Business Strategies: Local Thrift Shops and Implications for New Clothing Stores

From the business perspective, local thrift shops in Purwokerto employ community-based marketing and creative content strategies. They actively build their brand on social media, emphasize sustainability, and carefully curate unique items. Events like Banyumas Thrift Market have further helped strengthen their market visibility and community presence.

Meanwhile, new clothing stores that fail to adapt report a decline in sales. Some have begun rebranding efforts, introducing vintage-inspired collections, or collaborating with thrift businesses. These adaptive strategies have helped them reconnect with Gen Z consumers who prioritize values such as authenticity and sustainability.

Interpretation and Contribution of Findings

The findings suggest that the thrift shopping trend among Gen Z is driven not only by economic reasons but also by deep social and symbolic meaning. This behavioral shift creates both challenges and opportunities for local fashion businesses. This research confirms the relevance of symbolic consumption theory, digital media influence, and changing youth values in shaping market behavior.

Furthermore, the study contributes to expanding the theoretical discourse on consumer behavior in the digital era, and enriches the literature on alternative consumption practices that promote sustainability and personal identity expression.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that thrift shopping among Generation Z in Purwokerto is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced not only by economic considerations but also by symbolic meanings, social media influence, and identity construction. The qualitative case study found that Gen Z views thrift fashion as an affordable, sustainable, and expressive form of consumption that aligns with their values and lifestyle.

Research Conclusions:

The findings show that:

1. Price, uniqueness, and sustainability are the main drivers behind Gen Z's preference for thrift fashion.

2. Social media acts as a powerful stimulus that shapes behavior through visual content, peer influence, and community engagement.
3. Thrift shops in Purwokerto use social media branding, curated storytelling, and offline events to build strong consumer loyalty.
4. The symbolic dimension of thrift fashion provides a sense of authenticity and differentiation from mainstream consumer culture.
5. New clothing stores must adapt by integrating sustainability narratives, aesthetic uniqueness, and digital engagement to stay relevant.

Practical Implications:

The results offer practical guidance for local businesses. Thrift shop owners can enhance their appeal to Gen Z by emphasizing storytelling, vintage curation, and eco-conscious branding. New fashion retailers should explore hybrid strategies such as launching retro-inspired product lines or collaborating with local thrift communities to align with current youth preferences.

Research Limitations:

This study is limited in its geographic scope (Purwokerto) and is based on a small number of informants, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The use of qualitative methods means the study is exploratory in nature and does not measure the strength or significance of relationships among variables.

Suggestions for Future Research:

Further studies could expand the sample to multiple cities and apply quantitative or mixed methods to validate findings. Additionally, future research may explore the long-term impact of social media-based thrift culture on brand loyalty, or examine the role of digital influencers in shaping sustainable consumption trends among youth.

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