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The role of social media in popularizing the thrifting trend among university students

Vera Wijayanti Sutjipto[1], Marisa Puspita Sary[2], Maulina Larasati[3], Sazra Haqinsa Dhata[4], Silva Zaharani[5]

Study Program of Communication Science, Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, Universitas Negeri Jakarta, INDONESIA[1,2,3,4,5]
[1]Email: verawijayanti@unj.ac.id
[2]Email: marisa.puspita@unj.ac.id
[3]Email: maulinalarasati@unj.ac.id
[4]Email: sazra.haqinsa@mhs.unj.ac.id
[5]Email: silva.zaharani@mhs.unj.ac.id

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Abstract - This study examines the role of social media in the thrifting trend among university students. As the practice of purchasing affordable, still-wearable second-hand clothing, thrifting has become one solution for meeting fashion needs. However, this trend is not driven by economic factors alone; social media plays an important role in spreading it. Intensive visual promotion across digital platforms has been shown to shape students' preferences and consumption patterns toward second-hand products. Through in-depth interviews with four university students, this study found that the decision to shop for thrifted items is not based solely on economic considerations. Exposure to social media, through styling content, aesthetically appealing visuals, user-generated content (UGC), and influencer recommendations, emerges as the main trigger, reinforced by affordable prices, product uniqueness, and peer influence. Beyond offering an economical shopping option, thrifting also fosters students' self-confidence and lifestyle identity. These findings reinforce previous literature indicating that social media plays a significant role in increasing the popularity of thrifting, shaping selective consumption patterns, and supporting sustainable fashion among the younger generation.

Keywords: Thrifting; Social Media; University Students; Lifestyle

1. Introduction

Students' interest in clothing that is unique, affordable, and rich in self-expression value has driven the popularity of thrifting, both through offline purchases in traditional markets and through online shopping platforms (Ibrahim et al., 2024). This trend demonstrates that social media has shifted from being merely a source of entertainment to becoming a primary vehicle for shaping trends, identity, and consumption behavior. On a broader scale, this dynamic reflects how the development of digital technology is changing the way young people discover, evaluate, and ultimately consume fashion products (Syafitri, 2025).

The role of social media is evident in the accounts of four informants: Cs, Fr, Lv, and Kn. They first became acquainted with thrifting through social media platforms such as TikTok, X, and Instagram. Their interest was reinforced by aesthetically appealing styling content, product uniqueness, and affordable prices. Cs was encouraged to try thrifting after seeing outfit-mixing

inspiration on TikTok; Lv was influenced by exploratory thrifting content set in the Pasar Senen area; while Kn was inspired to become more involved after repeatedly encountering thrifting vlogs. This indicates that social media does not merely distribute
information but also functions as a persuasive medium that shapes young consumers' perceptions and lifestyles.

In a communication context, thrifting is an interesting phenomenon because its appeal does not depend solely on product quality, but also on how the product is communicated (Kusindriyanti et al., 2023). Thrifting content on social media is often packaged as vlogs, hauls, styling tips, bargaining processes, and shopping-experience stories that feel close to young people's everyday lives. This mode of communication makes thrifting appear more attractive, more accessible, and more closely identified with creativity and freedom of expression. Consequently, thrifting is not merely an economical shopping choice, but also a lifestyle symbol that emphasizes uniqueness, novelty in appearance, and the ability to build a personal identity through clothing.

Beyond social media, social environmental factors also play a substantial role in strengthening interest in thrifting (Syafitri, 2025). Interview results show that peers, particularly campus friends and communities, are an important factor encouraging informants to try thrifting directly. Invitations from friends often serve as the entry point that makes the thrifting experience feel more exciting and enjoyable. This indicates that students' consumption decisions do not stand alone, but are shaped by social interaction that continues to develop through both digital media and face-to-face contact.

The reviewed studies show that thrifting has become an increasingly popular consumption practice among Generation Z, particularly because of affordable prices, fashion preferences, and changing perceptions of secondhand clothing. Price is identified as an important factor influencing fashion consumption and purchasing decisions, while thrifting also provides opportunities for consumers to express lifestyle and fashion preferences (Putri et al., 2026; Dirwan et al., 2025).
Several studies emphasize that thrifting is not merely an economic activity but has developed into a lifestyle and cultural practice. Phenomenological research indicates that secondhand consumption among young consumers is influenced by personal motivations and social meanings attached to the practice (Musa et al., 2025). Similarly, the growth of thrifting has contributed to the emergence of a new consumer culture and sustainable lifestyle, particularly among young people (Syafa'ati & Khusyairi, 2024; Oscario, 2023).

Suciwati et al. (2026) examine TikTok use among children by highlighting both its potential benefits and risks. The study indicates that TikTok can support cognitive and social-emotional development through digital interaction and access to content, but excessive or inappropriate use may negatively affect children's digital well-being. Therefore, responsible use and appropriate supervision are important to maximize the educational and social benefits of TikTok (Suciwati et al., 2026).

Social media also has an important role in mobilizing women for community development. Digital platforms can facilitate communication, information sharing, networking, participation, and collective action, enabling women to become more actively involved in community initiatives. This demonstrates that social media is not only a medium for personal communication but can also function as a tool for social empowerment and community development (Ahmad & Joseph, 2023).

Social media plays a significant role in promoting and shaping thrifting behavior. Instagram and other digital platforms facilitate information dissemination, product promotion, brand communication, and consumer engagement, thereby increasing interest in secondhand fashion (Ifadah et al., 2023; Sariwaty et al., 2021). Digital communication also contributes to the normalization and popularization of thrift culture in Indonesia (Kusindriyanti et al., 2023; Agatha et al., 2023).

Social media has become an important marketing tool for improving business performance, particularly among small and medium enterprises. Its use enables businesses to reach wider audiences, communicate directly with customers, promote products, and strengthen marketing outcomes. Evidence shows that effective social media utilization can positively influence SME marketing performance and entrepreneurial activities (Adeyemo, 2025; Sharma, 2024). Social media platforms are also effective in building brand awareness by providing businesses with

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opportunities to share promotional content, engage audiences, and establish stronger customer relationships (Pastini & Lilasari, 2023; Paramita & Zulfan, 2024).

In the tourism and hospitality sector, social media and digital promotion contribute significantly to competitiveness and customer decision-making. Attractive social media content and positive online reviews can influence hotel customers when selecting accommodation, while digital promotion helps tourism businesses strengthen their market position (Adinata et al., 2026; Kencanawati et al., 2025). Social media is likewise useful for promoting tourist attractions, increasing public awareness, and encouraging tourist visits (Susanto et al., 2023). Digital transformation further supports tourism competitiveness by improving sustainability, service delivery, and visitor experiences (Hakim et al., 2026).

The effectiveness of specific platforms is also demonstrated in business promotion. Facebook-based digital marketing, for example, can support increased sales through product promotion and customer interaction, while broader digital marketing strategies can enhance brand awareness among MSMEs (Azmir & Purnomo, 2025; Dewi et al., 2026). Instagram is similarly valuable for strategic communication because its visual content and interactive features can strengthen engagement, branding, and connections with digital audiences (Ratih et al., 2025). Beyond commercial purposes, social media also influences communication, public relations, journalism, education, and socio-cultural interaction, demonstrating its broad role in contemporary society (Adams, 2024; Obukoadata & Offiong, 2025; Acheampong, 2024; Hassan et al., 2024; Ali, 2023; Sia et al., 2023).

The literature further demonstrates that purchasing decisions in thrifting are influenced by several interconnected factors, including social media marketing, fashion trends, lifestyle, brand image, green consumerism, and style engagement (Putri & Fietroh, 2025; Sila et al., 2025). Social media communication and lifestyle can also influence purchase intention, with brand trust functioning as an intervening factor (Febrianti et al., 2025). Research on Gen Z consumers similarly indicates that perceptions of secondhand clothing and digital exposure contribute to their willingness to purchase thrift fashion (Julia et al., 2024; Anisa & Afif, 2025).

From a sustainability perspective, consumers are increasingly shifting from fast fashion toward thrift fashion because of environmental considerations and changing consumption values. Goal-framing perspectives suggest that consumers may adopt thrift fashion when economic, environmental, and social motivations become relevant to their purchasing behavior (Yadav & Sijoria, 2024). Green value and sustainable consumption orientations likewise contribute to Gen Z's interest in thrifting (Ifadah et al., 2023).

However, the literature also identifies emerging issues surrounding the development of thrifting culture. The practice has increasingly become a social and public space for Indonesian youth, while its growing popularity may also produce new forms of consumerism and gentrification (Hubbah et al., 2026; Kamran et al., 2024). Health-related concerns, including discussions of potential infection risks associated with secondhand clothing, have also emerged in social media discourse (Shiba, 2025). Overall, previous studies indicate that thrifting among Gen Z is shaped by economic considerations, lifestyle, fashion trends, sustainability, social media, and cultural transformation, although further research is needed to integrate these factors into a comprehensive explanation of Gen Z's thrift-fashion consumption behavior. (Rahayuningtyas et al., 2025; Lujan & Iqbal, 2025).

The role of thrifting is also closely tied to economic conditions and shifting fashion preferences among young people. Informants considered thrifting more advantageous because lower prices allow them to obtain more items for the same budget compared to buying new clothes. Thrifting is not only an economical solution, but also a way to explore personal style without excessive financial concern. Several informants even described thrifting as part of their lifestyle, as it has become a routine habit that shapes how they express themselves.

Based on this background, the present study is important for understanding how social media influences the popularity of thrifting and how this role develops into part of university students' lifestyle. Although prior research has explained the relationship between social media, consumption behavior, and the thrifting trend, most studies have focused on the factors influencing purchase decisions or the general role of thrifting, while few have examined how social

media simultaneously drives the popularity of thrifting and the process of lifestyle formation through users' lived experiences. This study seeks to fill this gap by describing how social media becomes the primary channel for spreading the thrifting trend and how this process shapes students' lifestyles.

This study is important because university students are a group with high intensity of social media use and are also among the fastest adopters of digital trends, including fashion trends. Understanding the influence of social media on the popularity and lifestyle of thrifting among students contributes to the development of digital communication studies and enriches research on consumption behavior, social identity, and popular culture among students.

Several prior studies illustrate how thrifting has changed amid shifting consumption behavior and the massive growth of social media among university students. Ananto and Pramono (2023; Mala et al., 2024) found that platforms such as TikTok and Instagram play a vital role in reconstructing the image of second-hand clothing into a valuable, aesthetic, and useful fashion product through the dissemination of visual content, digital promotion, and user interaction.

1.1 Literature Review

In line with this finding, Ibrahim et al. (2024) affirmed that students' decisions to shop for thrifted items are not driven by economic calculation alone, but are also the result of a compromise between the need for uniqueness, peer influence, and exposure to social media, which ultimately positions thrifting as a means of articulating personal identity and lifestyle.

Complementing this perspective, a Systematic Literature Review by Syafitri (2025) confirms the strategic role of social media through user-generated content, influencer engagement, and sustainable-fashion campaigns. This study underlines that, alongside financial factors, ecological awareness and the desire to stand out are key factors driving students to adopt thrifting culture.

2. Method

2.1 Research Hypothesis

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how social media influences the popularity of thrifting and the formation of lifestyle among university students. A descriptive research approach examines a problem based on current facts within a population, including attitudes and opinions regarding individuals, organizations, situations, and procedures (Ibrahim et al., 2024). A qualitative approach was chosen because the role of thrifting is not limited to the activity of purchasing second-hand clothing, but also involves meaning, perception, personal experience, and the process of adopting consumption behavior that develops through social interaction and digital media.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with four informants: Cs, Fr, Lv, and Kn. All four are university students with direct experience in thrifting and active social media use, making them relevant for observing how this trend spreads among students. The interviews focused on the initial source of knowledge about thrifting, the most influential social media platform, the type of content that most encouraged interest, the influence of friends and influencers, changes in consumption patterns, self-confidence, and predictions about the future of thrifting in Indonesia.

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Informants

Informant	Sex	Status	Dominant Social Media
Cs	Female	University Student	TikTok, X
Fr	Male	University Student	TikTok
Lv	Female	University Student	TikTok, Instagram
Kn	Female	University Student	TikTok, Instagram

Source: Processed by the researchers based on interview results (2026)

In analyzing the data, this study used thematic analysis techniques, grouping informants' responses into themes relevant to the research focus, including the role of social media as an information channel, the role of visual content in attracting attention, the influence of the social environment, economic reasons, product uniqueness, and the impact of thrifting on lifestyle and

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self-identity. This process helped the researchers identify recurring patterns across responses, such as the finding that nearly all informants became acquainted with thrifting through TikTok or friends, and that most cited low prices and product uniqueness as their main reasons for choosing thrifting. This study also employed Diffusion of Innovation theory, developed by Everett M. Rogers, as an analytical framework to explain how thrifting spreads as a social innovation among university students. Rogers explains that diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system; innovation need not always be new technology; it may also take the form of ideas, behaviors, or social practices considered new by society (Rogers, 2003). In this study, thrifting is positioned as a consumption practice that spreads from one group to another through social media, influencers, communities, and peers. Social media functions as a diffusion channel that accelerates the process of introduction, evaluation, and adoption of thrifting, while content creators and peers act as agents that reinforce the decision to try it.

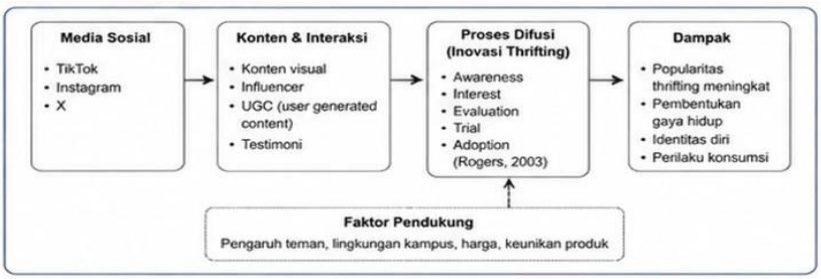


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Source: Processed by the researchers based on the research findings (2026), adapted from Rogers (2003)

When linked to the elements of innovation diffusion, thrifting possesses several characteristics that encourage adoption: relative advantage, because it is cheaper and offers more choices; compatibility, because it suits the needs of students who want to appear stylish while remaining budget-conscious; trialability, because it can be tried gradually; observability, because its results can easily be seen through styling content on social media; and relatively low complexity, because the process is easy to understand through tips-and-tricks videos and thrifting vlogs. Diffusion of Innovation theory therefore helps explain why thrifting is quickly accepted by students: this innovation appears advantageous, is easily observed, and is supported by a social environment that accelerates its spread.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Data analysis and results

Interview results show that thrifting has evolved from merely an activity of purchasing second-hand clothing into a consumption practice carrying social, aesthetic, and identity-related meaning among university students. Nearly all informants became acquainted with thrifting through social media, particularly TikTok, X/Twitter, and Instagram, and subsequently became interested due to content displaying attractively styled thrifted clothing, low prices, and a unique impression not found in new clothing.

Table 2. Summary of Research Findings

Theme	Main Finding
Initial medium of introduction to thrifting	All informants first learned about thrifting through social media, primarily TikTok; Instagram and X were also cited as introducing them to thrifting culture.

Factors of interest	Interest was influenced by more affordable prices, unique and uncommon clothing models, styling content (mix and match), and appealing visual content on social media.
Influence of the social environment	Influencers, content creators, and peers strongly influenced informants to try and continue thrifting; shopping experiences with friends reinforced interest.
Impact on the individual	Thrifting increased self-confidence, as informants felt they had a more unique style, more freedom to experiment, and stood out from others.
Thrifting as a lifestyle	Most informants stated that thrifting has become part of their lifestyle, carried out routinely as a primary choice for meeting fashion needs.
Impact on consumption patterns	Thrifting was seen as reducing expenses due to lower prices; however, some informants acknowledged it can encourage consumptive behavior when done excessively.
Views on future development	Informants believed thrifting will continue to grow, supported by social media and economic considerations, though its sustainability also depends on used-clothing import regulation.

Source: Processed by the researchers based on the research findings (2026)

Regarding the future of thrifting, views diverged among informants. Cs, Lv, and Kn were generally optimistic that thrifting will continue to grow, particularly among young people and across various cities such as Depok and Bekasi, with Kn projecting that the trend will persist over the next ten years, subject to government regulation. Fr, by contrast, predicted that interest in thrifting would decline as local brands become increasingly creative and able to rival thrifting's appeal.

3.2 Discussion

Social media plays a critical role in introducing thrifting to university students, as platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X function not only as information-sharing tools but also as media through which trends spread rapidly. Nearly all informants stated that they first became acquainted with thrifting through social media before developing interest after viewing content in the form of vlogs, hauls, location recommendations, and attractively styled outfit videos.

> *"At first, I knew about thrifting from Twitter... but eventually I became more interested through the TikTok app. It was pushing thrifting content heavily, so I became more and more drawn to it."* (Informant Cs, translated from Indonesian)

This condition shows that social media does not merely convey messages, but also builds attention, curiosity, and initial interest in thrifting as a consumption practice. Within the perspective of Diffusion of Innovation theory, this situation can be understood as the awareness stage, the stage at which individuals begin to recognize the existence of an innovation worth paying attention to.

In terms of communication, the content that most influenced informants was not mere product promotion, but the manner of presentation showcasing styling results, mix-and-match combinations, and exploration of self-identity.

> *"I originally got to know thrifting from a friend... but mainly from social media, TikTok."* (Informant Fr, translated from Indonesian)
> *"There's one content creator who likes to share how to go thrifting, like around Senen. So I got curious and decided to try it."* (Informant Lv, translated from Indonesian)

This indicates that the appeal of thrifting on social media lies not only in the product itself,

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but also in the visual narrative depicting the possibility of self-transformation through fashion. Results show that thrifting was chosen not merely for its low price, but also for the added value of uniqueness and freedom of expression it offers.

The role of influencers, content creators, and peers is also highly dominant. Fr admitted being invited by a friend to try thrifting, an experience that convinced him because the items he found were unique and unavailable in malls. Cs stated that invitations from friends made the thrifting experience more enjoyable, while Kn affirmed that her campus peer circle was the strongest factor motivating her to go thrifting together with friends.

> *"I caught the thrifting bug when someone was making a vlog about it... now I never buy new clothes anymore."* (Informant Kn, translated from Indonesian)

These findings reinforce the view that social media does not operate alone, but is reinforced by offline social networks that shape consumption decisions collectively. In Diffusion of Innovation theory, trialability, the ease of trying an innovation, is an important factor, as individuals tend to be more willing to adopt something if the initial risk is relatively low. Thrifting satisfies this aspect because students can try it with a limited budget, selecting one or two items before assessing for themselves whether the practice suits their needs.

Regarding popularity, nearly all informants agreed that social media strongly influences the rising trend of thrifting in Indonesia. Cs observed that in the digital, post-pandemic era, young people tend to prefer thrifting because it is easily found on social media and feels relevant to their needs. Lv added that online thrift sellers package their products aesthetically, generating curiosity. Thrifting is also understood by most informants as part of their lifestyle. Cs stated that thrifting has influenced her lifestyle because it is beneficial and affordable. Lv noted that thrifting offers a "nothing to lose" principle, particularly when experimenting with new styles:

> *"Sometimes I get bored of wearing the same clothes. With thrifting, I buy something cheap, and if I only wear it once and then get rid of it, I don't feel like I've lost anything, nothing to lose."* (Informant Lv, translated from Indonesian)

Kn regards thrifting as a routine carried out more than once a month, while Fr noted that thrifting used to be part of his lifestyle but has diminished as prices rise and local brands become more appealing:

> *"That was in the past, it used to be part of my lifestyle. But now, because sellers understand the goods and the pricing better, I can no longer say it's part of my lifestyle."* (Informant Fr, translated from Indonesian)

This indicates that thrifting's status as a lifestyle is not always permanent; it can strengthen or weaken depending on market conditions, prices, and alternative fashion options. Beyond economic factors, thrifting also carries a broader meaning as a means of identity formation and self-expression, as informants felt more confident wearing thrifted clothing because of its unique, uncommon models reflecting their individual style.

From a consumption standpoint, the impact of thrifting is fairly complex. Cs felt that thrifting made her more selective, as she buys items that truly suit her despite low prices still encouraging purchases. Lv considered thrifting more economical, as the same amount of money can buy more clothing compared to purchasing new items. Conversely, Kn felt that thrifting made her more consumptive because, although inexpensive, her shopping frequency increased:

> *"Thrifting actually makes me more consumptive. Even though it's cheap, if I do it often, I still end up spending a lot. But I've also been able to turn thrifting into a business."* (Informant Kn, translated from Indonesian)

These results align with studies finding that thrifting can shift young people's consumption

patterns toward being more economical, trend-oriented, and selective, while at the same time potentially triggering consumptive behavior.

Concerning the future, several differing views emerged. Cs and Lv tended to be optimistic, foreseeing that thrifting will continue to grow, particularly among young people and in various cities such as Depok and Bekasi. Kn also predicted that thrifting will remain trendy over the next decade, although this depends on government regulation. Fr, however, predicted that interest in thrifting will decline as local brands become increasingly creative and capable of overshadowing thrifting's appeal.

This difference of opinion suggests that innovation diffusion is dynamic and does not always move linearly. The sustainability of thrifting will depend heavily on its ability to adapt to shifting consumer preferences, economic conditions, and policies related to the import of used clothing.

Table 3. Relationship between Research Findings and Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Element	Theoretical Explanation	Research Findings
Relative Advantage	Adopted more quickly if perceived to offer greater benefit than existing alternatives.	Informants perceived thrifting as offering lower prices, unique choices, and quality products at lower cost.
Compatibility	More easily accepted if it aligns with individuals' needs, values, and lifestyle.	Thrifting suited students who want to look attractive on a limited budget, aligned with identity exploration.
Complexity	The easier to understand and perform, the greater the likelihood of adoption.	Informants found it easy to learn how to thrift through social media tutorials and styling tips.
Trialability	More easily accepted if it can be tried on a small scale before full adoption.	Informants generally tried a few thrifted items before making thrifting a habit or lifestyle.
Observability	Results or benefits can be observed by others, encouraging broader adoption.	Outfit content, hauls, and reviews on social media made the benefits of thrifting easily observable.

Source: Processed by the researchers based on the research findings (2026), adapted from Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory (2003)

4. Conclusion

Based on the interview results and analysis using Diffusion of Innovation theory, it can be concluded that thrifting spreads among university students not merely as a fashion trend, but as a consumption innovation diffused through social media, communities, and peer relationships. TikTok, Instagram, and X/Twitter serve as the primary communication channels accelerating the spread of information about thrifting, particularly through visual content, styling, vlogs, user-generated content, and influencer promotion. Social media does not merely introduce products, but also shapes the perception that thrifting is an attractive, economical, and unique choice suited to young people's lifestyle needs.

Viewed through Diffusion of Innovation theory, thrifting satisfies several key elements that facilitate its acceptance: relative advantage in the form of lower prices and a wider variety of choices; high compatibility with the character of students who wish to appear stylish while remaining budget-conscious; trialability, as it can be tried without major commitment; and observability, as the results of using thrifted items can be directly seen through appearance and others' reactions. The complexity of thrifting is relatively low, as the process is easy to understand through digital content demonstrating how to select, bargain, and style items.

Field findings also indicate that the adoption of thrifting does not occur individually, but is strongly influenced by opinion leaders and the social environment. Influencers, content creators,

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and campus friends act as change agents who accelerate the stages of awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, and adoption. On the other hand, this study also shows that thrifting does not always result in fully economical behavior; for some informants, thrifting instead encouraged more frequent consumption, as low prices made purchasing easier.

Nevertheless, in terms of identity and lifestyle, thrifting continues to provide important benefits, as it enables students to build a more personal, confident, and creative self-image through clothing. Overall, this study affirms that thrifting is a consumption innovation that spreads through mechanisms of social diffusion in the digital media era, driven by price advantage, compatibility with students' needs, ease of trial, and the strong influence of social media and peer environments.

This study is limited by its small number of informants (four university students), which restricts the generalizability of its findings. Future research is recommended to employ a larger and more diverse sample, and to further examine the long-term impact of the thrifting trend on young people's consumption patterns as well as regulatory developments concerning the import of used clothing in Indonesia.

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