

CONSUMER CULTURE AMONG SOCIOLOGY STUDENTS OF GORONTALO STATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores consumer culture among Sociology students at Gorontalo State University, focusing on the forms, driving factors, meanings, symbolic interactions, and social impacts of consumer behavior. The research approach used was qualitative, with data collected through in-depth interviews with eight students from various semesters and classes from October 27 to November 30, 2025. The findings indicate that consumer behavior primarily occurs in the purchase of non-essential goods, such as clothing, gadgets, and lifestyle products, influenced by peer pressure, social media trends, and family background. Internal factors such as personal financial awareness and family values, as well as external factors such as social media exposure and peer influence, collectively shape student consumption patterns. Consumption serves not only to fulfill needs but also as a symbol of self-expression, identity construction, and social integration. Symbolic interactions influence students' perceptions of needs and wants, guiding consumption decision-making in a social context. The socio-impacts of consumer culture include status competition, financial pressure, and social inequality, while fostering creativity and social bonds.

Keywords: consumer culture, symbolic interaction, student behavior, social impact, Indonesia

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of consumer culture among today's college students is an interesting social phenomenon to study. Consumption is no longer simply about fulfilling basic needs such as clothing, gadgets, or basic necessities but has shifted to become a symbol of status, identity, and lifestyle. Among college students, especially those living in campus and urban environments, consumption styles are often influenced by social pressures, media, and the need for collective identity. This phenomenon is relevant to study in the campus context of Gorontalo State University (UNG), particularly in the Sociology Department. Because sociology students possess a "critical lens" regarding social dynamics, this study is expected to uncover how consumer culture is formed, understood, and impacts their group.

Conceptually, consumer culture can be defined as a pattern of consumption that goes beyond basic needs and is characterized by the desire for non-essential goods or services to fulfill aesthetic aspects, status, prestige, or social identity. This concept aligns with the understanding that in modern society, consumption also functions as a symbol: the goods consumed are not only utilitarian but also symbolic. Contemporary studies show how students, as the younger generation,

are often the dominant subjects of consumer culture. For example, recent research by Arika Nur Azizah (2025) found that digital lifestyle, e-commerce, and brand engagement significantly influence consumer culture among college students.

Several studies in Indonesia have demonstrated consumerist tendencies among college students. A study by Siti Saharia et al. (2025) on students at the Muhammadiyah University of Maumere showed that the influence of social media, impulsivity, and the FOMO phenomenon are the main factors driving consumerism. Other research, such as the case at the University of Mataram by Nuril Hafiza et al., found that easy access through e-commerce increasingly opens up opportunities for consumer behavior among students, especially for fashion and beauty products. Furthermore, quantitative research by Fitri Nurfatimah & Surya Jatmika (2024) showed that influencer marketing, brand awareness, and the FOMO phenomenon contribute significantly to student consumer behavior.

However, although several studies have examined consumerism among college students, not many have specifically examined consumer culture among Sociology students, especially in the context of UNG. Furthermore, most research examines consumption in online contexts (e-commerce, social media) or within the general context of students in large cities; few consider the local context, campus identity, and interactions of sociology students as a group with a theoretical awareness of social structures. Therefore, this study urgently seeks to fill this gap.

Based on these phenomena and the shortcomings of previous research, this study is formulated with several main questions: (1) What are the concrete forms of consumer culture among Sociology students at UNG? (2) What factors drive the emergence of this consumer culture? (3) How do students interpret consumption in their campus life? (4) How do social interactions on campus influence consumption practices? (5) What are the social impacts of consumer culture on students and the campus social environment? These questions are expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of consumption among sociology students.

The objectives of this study are: first, to describe the forms of consumer culture among Sociology students at UNG; second, to analyze the factors driving excessive consumption; third, to understand the meaning of consumption from the students' perspective; and fourth, to explore the role of social interaction in shaping consumer culture. and fifth, identifying the social impacts that arise as a result of consumer culture in the campus environment.

This research has advantages over previous studies in that it: (a) focuses on Sociology students at UNG, a local context with its own characteristics; (b) uses qualitative data from in-depth interviews, allowing students' subjective perspectives to emerge directly; (c) incorporates aspects of social structure, identity, and symbolic interaction rather than simply measuring consumption frequency. However, this study has limitations: the scope of informants is limited (only sociology students, not across departments), and the research period is relatively short, so the results cannot be generalized to all students at UNG or other universities.

The urgency of this research lies in the need to understand how consumer culture develops and impacts students, particularly sociology students who academically study society and social structure. This understanding is crucial for providing a picture of how students respond to consumer pressures and for developing recommendations for campus policies or consumer and financial literacy programs. Furthermore, the research findings can serve as a reference for further research in the sociology of consumption and student culture in Indonesia.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with data collection techniques through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation (Putri & Murhayati, 2025). The research informants consisted of eight students enrolled in the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Gorontalo State University (UNG), namely four female students and four male students. The details are: Anisa (19 years old, Semester 1, class of 2025), Caca (21 years old, Semester 3, class of 2024), Aisyah (21 years old, Semester 5, class of 2023), Dian (22 years old, Semester 7, class of 2022) as female informants; and Firman (19 years old, Semester 1, Class of 2025), Ikram (20 years old, Semester 3, Class of 2024), Alvin (23 years old, Semester 5, Class of 2023), and Rival (22 years old, Semester 7, Class of 2022) as male informants. Data were collected from October 27 to November 30, 2025. Informants were selected purposively to capture a variety of classes and semesters, thus capturing variations in consumption practices across different stages of campus life.

After data collection, analysis was applied using data reduction procedures, theme categorization, and interpretation of the meaning of consumption based on the informants' perspectives. This approach aligns with the characteristics of qualitative research, which allows for in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences and perceptions within their natural social contexts. Triangulation techniques, through a combination of interviews, observation, and documentation, were used to enhance data credibility and minimize interpretive bias (Rahmawati et al., 2025).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Forms of Consumer Culture

Consumer culture can be understood as a pattern of consumption that goes beyond basic individual needs. Consumption here is not only intended to meet primary needs, but also as a means of creating identity, social status, or fulfilling desires based on aesthetic and symbolic value. From a sociological perspective, this type of consumption often reflects the transformation of goods from mere utility to social "signs" or symbols with broader meanings within the context of social and cultural interactions. This understanding aligns with the definition in contemporary studies that consumerism is not merely an economic activity but also a social and cultural practice (Harahap et al. 2023). A female informant stated:



Figure 1. One of the research informants

"I think social media is very influential because we are often tempted to buy things because they look good or are cute. Fashion or gadget trends often lead students to buy items they don't really need." Anisa, 19, Semester 1

This is further supported by the statement of a male informant.

"If this continues, peer pressure or trends can trigger wasteful behavior. There must be awareness to buy according to needs, not just following the crowd." Firman, 19, Semester 1

From interviews with Anisa and Firman, it appears that for new students in the Sociology Department at UNG, consumption of goods, especially clothing and gadgets, is often driven by visual appeal or trends on social media, rather than by immediate needs. For Anisa, the allure of an item being "nice or cute" is enough to drive a purchase decision, even if the item is not actually a basic need. This suggests that symbolic and aesthetic values play a strong role in shaping students' consumption patterns.

Meanwhile, Firman's statement emphasized social pressure and peer conformity as internal factors that reinforce excessive consumption. This statement is relevant to new students who may seek to adjust their appearance or social status to be accepted within campus friendships.

The combination of these two perspectives suggests that consumer culture among UNG Sociology students emerges as a result of the interaction between internal drives (the desire for image, identity, or aesthetics) and external influences (social environment, social media, trends) (Harahap, Marpaung, & Asengbaramae, 2023). This pattern demonstrates how goods are not simply purchased for use but also used as symbolic communication tools in campus social interactions.

Research by Arimbi & Sari (2022) shows that social media use and lifestyle have a significant positive influence on student consumer behavior. This means that the more frequent exposure to

social media and a consumer lifestyle, the greater the student's consumer tendencies. Furthermore, a study by Acopen & Prasetyo (2021) adds that social media and individual lifestyle contribute significantly to student purchasing patterns, reinforcing the notion that consumption in the digital age is often based on social values and identity, rather than simply needs. These findings support our field data, which suggests that UNG students' consumption is influenced by social media, trends, and the desire for social identity.

Viewed through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism, student consumer behavior can be understood as a form of symbolic interaction in which goods/products have specific social meanings, not just their function as objects of consumption. In the campus context, when students choose to purchase certain clothes or gadgets, they are not only fulfilling material needs but also participating in a social symbolic system that expresses identity, status, and social membership. Interactions with peers, the influence of social media, and campus norms create shared definitions of "appropriate" or "desirable" goods, which then guide individual consumption behavior. Thus, consumer culture is not simply individual behavior but rather a social construct through symbolic interaction within the student community.

Driving Factors of Consumer Culture

Driving factors in the context of consumer culture refer to various conditions, both internal and external, that encourage individuals to consume beyond basic needs. Internal factors can include lifestyle, identity needs, psychological drives such as the desire for acceptance, or impulse buying. External factors can include the social environment, peer influence, social media, promotions and easy access to shopping, and social norms in the surrounding environment that make consumption a symbol of status or belonging (Purtina, 2023). A female informant stated:



Figure 2. One of the research informants

"Parents have a huge influence on how their children use money. Some instill the value of frugality, while others feel they can fulfill all their children's desires, which can lead to wasteful behavior." Caca, 21, Semester 3

This is further supported by the statement of a male informant.

"Trends and social media are influential, but students can learn to discern between needs and wants." Ikram, 20, Semester 3

Caca's statement demonstrates how family influence, particularly parenting styles, on financial management can be a driving factor or a suppressor of consumer culture. If parents tend to "fulfill all their children's desires," students are more likely to purchase items beyond basic necessities. Conversely, if parents instill the value of frugality, this can suppress consumer behavior. This demonstrates that family factors and the family's economic background play a significant role in shaping students' consumption attitudes.

Ikram's statement demonstrates that social media and trends also act as external factors that stimulate consumer desires. Easy access to information and promotions on social media allows students to be exposed to lifestyles and items presented as "social necessities" or "cool items." These factors drive purchasing behavior, even though students realize that the item may simply be a "want" rather than a "need."

Overall, field data indicates that the consumer culture among UNG Sociology students does not emerge from a single factor, but rather from a combination of internal factors (family values, lifestyle, self-control) and external factors (social media, trends, and the campus social

environment). This situation demonstrates the complexity of the drivers that shape consumption practices, not just needs, but also desires, identity, and social pressures.

Research at the University of Mataram shows that the presence of e-commerce, discounts, and ease of payment significantly increase student consumer behavior, particularly for fashion and beauty products (Rahmawati & Santoso, 2022). Furthermore, research at PGRI Wiranegara University found that social media, FOMO behavior, and the ease of digital transactions with e-money are significant drivers of student consumer behavior (Purtina, 2023). Both studies support field findings that ease of access, external stimuli, and social influence play a significant role in driving consumer culture among students.

Based on the theoretical framework of Symbolic Interactionism, the driving factors of consumerism can be understood as part of a social process in which individuals and their environments interact to shape the meaning of consumption objects. Social media, peer groups, and family practices provide "symbols," such as certain clothing items, the latest gadgets, or fashionable lifestyles, which are then internalized by students as part of their social identity. When students purchase items because they see them as symbols of status or social acceptance, they are performing symbolic actions that reflect shared definitions within their social groups. This process also explains why the ease of access and influence of digital media or promotions are so effective in driving consumption, as they activate symbolic definitions and social norms in student interactions.

The Meaning of Consumption

The meaning of consumption refers to the meaning individuals attach to the act of purchasing and using goods or services, not merely in terms of function or material needs, but also as a representation of identity, status, aesthetics, or social values. In the study of the sociology of consumption, objects of consumption often shift from utility to social symbols representing certain values (Dafa & Rasyid, 2025). Statements from Female Informants

"In my opinion, as a sociology student, simplicity means not forcing something beyond our capabilities, for example, passion, or desired objects/items. As long as it doesn't have a negative impact, it's not a big problem." Aisyah, 21, Semester 5

Further supporting statements from Male Informants

"New students tend to be less organized in terms of outfits, but as the semester progresses, they can mix and match their outfits according to their abilities and needs." Alvin, 23, Semester 5

From Aisyah's statement, it's clear that sociology students at UNG understand consumption not only as fulfilling material needs but also as a form of self-expression, provided that such consumption is not excessive and does not have negative impacts. This demonstrates the critical reflection efforts among students, namely distinguishing between needs and wants, and choosing a lifestyle based on financial capabilities and personal responsibility.

Meanwhile, Alvin's statement indicates that the meaning of consumption is also linked to the development of social identity in the campus context: as the semester progresses and students gain more confidence, they feel the need to adjust their appearance (fashion, outfits) to fit the campus environment and social norms as a form of adaptation and social integration. This means that consumption becomes a tool for building image, affirming identity, and demonstrating social status within their circle of friends or the campus community.

The combination of these two perspectives suggests that for UNG students, consumption is not simply about owning goods, but about how those goods are used to shape identity, demonstrate status, and fit in with the campus social environment. Consumption becomes a medium for self-expression and social interaction, not just utility.

Research on the culture of "thrift" among adolescents reveals that the consumption of secondhand or thrift goods is not solely about economics, but rather a means of expressing self-identity, lifestyle, and symbolic assertion of social or group status (Dafa & Rasyid, 2025). Furthermore, studies on college students' fashion consumption indicate that fashion products are consumed not solely for practical purposes, but also to construct image, identity, and social standing within the community (Vhonita & Purnama, 2023). These two studies support field

findings that college students view consumption as part of identity construction and social integration, not simply fulfilling material needs.

Using the Symbolic Interactionism framework, the meaning of consumption among college students can be understood as a result of social construction through interactions in which goods reflect symbols, status, and social identity. Consumer goods become markers (symbols) in campus social interactions; the act of selecting, purchasing, and wearing certain goods is a form of symbolic action that represents who a person is, how they want to be seen, and how they want to be accepted within the group. This social process reinforces that consumption is not simply a need, but part of the dynamics of identity and social relations.

The Influence of Symbolic Interaction

Symbolic interaction is a sociological theory that emphasizes that meaning is formed through social interactions between individuals. In the context of consumption, symbolic interaction explains how goods, lifestyles, or consumer behaviors are understood and evaluated based on the symbols and social meanings assigned to them by the environment or social group (Blumer, 1969; Sutrisno, 2022). This influence determines how students interpret and implement consumption as part of their identity and social status. A female informant stated:

"As long as it doesn't have a negative impact, it's not a big problem. But it's best to prioritize so you don't overdo it." Dian, 22, Semester 7

Next, a male informant stated:

"Trends and social media influence us, but we can still determine what's necessary and what's just following our friends." Rival, 22, Semester 7

From the interview with Dian, it's clear that students are aware of prioritizing consumption. However, purchasing decisions are still influenced by perceptions of social norms and peer group judgments. Items or trends that are considered "popular" among peers become symbols of status or social acceptance, driving consumer behavior even though students have personal control over their finances.

Meanwhile, Rival's statement demonstrates that students are able to filter social and media influences. He recognizes the role of social media and peer pressure in creating "desires" that are not actually urgent, demonstrating a process of critical reflection, yet symbolic influence remains, as social identity is partly constructed around the goods consumed.

Overall, symbolic interaction plays a crucial role in shaping student consumption patterns. The goods or lifestyles consumed are not merely physical objects, but social symbols that signify students' identity, status, and position within the campus environment. This symbolic value emerges through observation, imitation, and social interactions with peers, the media, and the educational environment.

A study by Fitriani & Prasetyo (2023) found that social interactions on social media and the campus environment influence student consumer behavior, where consumption is seen as a sign of social acceptance and group identity (Fitriani & Prasetyo, 2023). Furthermore, research by Amalia & Setiawan (2022) confirms that the social symbols attached to consumer goods encourage students to adapt their lifestyles to achieve acceptance within their social groups. These two studies align with field findings at UNG that symbolic interactions shape students' understanding of needs versus wants, while simultaneously driving consumer behavior.

Based on Blumer's framework, each individual assigns meaning to objects or actions through social experiences. The goods or trends consumed by students become symbols of social interaction: markers of status, identity, and group membership. Interactions with peers, the influence of social media, and campus norms shape collective perceptions of certain goods, so that consumption acts are not merely a matter of personal need but also a symbolic act that affirms social identity and acceptance within the student community (Fitriani & Prasetyo, 2023).

The Social Impact of Consumerist Culture

The social impact of consumerist culture refers to the influences that arise in social interactions, interpersonal relationships, and community structures resulting from certain consumption patterns. These impacts can be positive, such as increasing creativity, financial management skills, or motivation to achieve; but they can also be negative, such as creating social pressure, status

competition, feelings of financial insecurity, or social inequality (Kurniawan & Putri, 2022). The statement from a female informant.



Figure 3. One of the research informants

"As long as it doesn't have a negative impact, it's not a big problem. But you still have to be able to differentiate between needs and wants to avoid waste." Aisyah, 21, Semester 5

Next, a male informant stated: *"If this continues, peer pressure or trends can trigger wasteful behavior. There must be awareness to buy according to needs, not just following the crowd."* Ikram, 20, Semester 3

Aisyah's statement shows that students are aware of the potential negative impacts of excessive consumption, even though consumer behavior still occurs. This awareness serves as a form of internal social control that plays a role in suppressing harmful effects.

Meanwhile, Ikram's statement suggests that peer pressure and social trends can trigger excessive consumer behavior. This phenomenon demonstrates how consumer culture impacts campus social dynamics, such as competition for status, appearance expectations, and comparisons between individuals. Social interactions and perceptions of the social symbols of consumer goods influence student behavior, which in turn shapes social norms regarding lifestyle and consumption on campus.

Overall, consumer culture has complex social impacts: in addition to fostering social motivation or creativity, uncontrolled consumption patterns can increase social tension, status competition, and economic inequality among students. This emphasizes the importance of critical awareness and financial literacy education among students to mitigate negative social impacts.

Research by Rahma & Utami (2023) shows that excessive consumption among students can trigger psychological stress and social competition that impact interpersonal relationships, aligning with field findings at UNG. Furthermore, a study at Semarang State University found that consumer culture has implications for social inequality and feelings of "lagging behind" among students, reinforcing that the social effects of consumption are not only individual but also collective (Nugroho & Sari, 2022). Both studies confirm that consumer culture influences campus social structures and student social interactions.

The socio-impact of consumer culture can be understood through the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism, where goods and lifestyles serve as symbols in social interactions. The act of purchasing certain items or following trends becomes a symbolic act that influences the perceptions of others, shapes social identity, and creates social norms. Social impacts arise when these symbolic meanings influence peer pressure, status competition, and collective behavior in the campus environment, so that consumption is not only individual but also has implications for group social dynamics (Kurniawan & Putri, 2022).

4. CONCLUSION

The consumer culture among Sociology students at Gorontalo State University is reflected in their purchasing behavior, driven more by desire than need, for items such as clothing, gadgets, and accessories, influenced by social trends, social media, and peer pressure. This consumption pattern shapes how students adapt and are accepted within the campus social environment. The driving factors include internal factors, such as family values, personal financial management, and self-awareness, as well as external factors, including the influence of social media, trends, and peer

interactions. The combination of these internal and external factors shapes students' consumer behavior in a complex manner.

Consumption for students extends beyond fulfilling material needs to a means of expressing identity, self-image, and social integration. Consumed goods serve as social symbols that demonstrate status and acceptance within a group, while also affirming individual identity within the campus environment. Social interactions with peers and social media further reinforce students' perceptions of goods and trends, where consumption becomes a symbolic act reflecting status, identity, and social acceptance.

This consumer culture has diverse social impacts. On the one hand, consumption can stimulate creativity, foster social integration, and shape collective identity. On the other hand, excessive consumption has the potential to lead to peer pressure, status competition, feelings of financial insecurity, and social inequality among students. Therefore, critical awareness and financial literacy are crucial for managing consumption wisely. Overall, the consumer culture of UNG Sociology students emerged as a result of the interaction of internal, external, and symbolic factors; consumption is not only about fulfilling material needs, but also a social construct that shapes identity, social relationships, and norms within the campus environment. These findings underscore the importance of financial literacy education and the development of critical awareness so that students can manage consumption responsibly.

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