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Thrift Markets and Local Development: The Socio-Economic Impact of Campus-Based Textile Reuse in Kerala, with a Case Design for the Department of Economics, Mar Thoma College, Thiruvalla

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Abstract

Purpose. Student-run thrift markets, in which donated clothing is collected and resold at low prices, are spreading across Kerala's colleges, yet no peer-reviewed work measures what they deliver. This paper develops a measurement framework for the socio-economic impact of campus thrift markets and applies it to the thrift market run by students of the Department of Economics, Mar Thoma College, Thiruvalla (Pathanamthitta district), where students collect and sell textile items to finance departmental needs.

Design. The paper (i) assembles verified secondary evidence on Kerala's consumption, migration-driven income and textile-waste context; (ii) reviews the second-hand consumption literature and comparable Kerala campus initiatives; (iii) specifies five impact channels (buyer savings, institutional finance, equity, environment, student learning) with explicit formulas; and (iv) sets out a mixed-methods protocol (transaction ledger, buyer and donor surveys, volunteer interviews) with testable hypotheses.

Findings. Secondary evidence shows a favourable environment for thrift markets: Kerala's high remittance-driven spending power coexists with national textile waste of about 7.07 million tonnes a year, and Indian evidence identifies hygiene and garment condition as the main barriers to second-hand purchase. Department sales records for 315 donated items show gross sales of ₹17,441 and an overall sell-through of 41.2% (95% CI 35.8-46.8%) on the 306 items whose sales were counted. Sell-through differs significantly across categories (permutation $p < 0.001$): sarees sold at 56% against 25% for children's clothing, and sarees alone produced 41.5% of revenue. Women's clothing was 42% of stock but 66% of revenue. Costs, buyer-survey and donor data are still to be collected, so net proceeds and household-level effects are reported as pending.

Originality. To our knowledge this is the first framework to value a Kerala college thrift market simultaneously as a revenue source for the institution, a price-relief channel for households, a waste-diversion mechanism and an experiential-learning tool for economics students.

Keywords: thrift market; second-hand clothing; Kerala; Pathanamthitta; circular economy; social return on investment; student enterprise

1. Introduction

Kerala is often described through its human-development record and its dependence on emigrant income. Both features bear on how its households buy clothing. High average spending and a large diaspora raise demand for new apparel, and a fast-fashion cycle shortens garment life; at the same time, rural and urban households still budget carefully for non-food items, and the state has a dense network of colleges that can serve as trusted intermediaries between donors and buyers.

A thrift market, in the sense used here, is a periodic sale of donated, gently used goods at prices well below new-goods prices, organised for a social purpose rather than for owner profit. In Kerala such markets have appeared in several forms: a Class XI student's two-day thrift market in Thrissur whose proceeds went to charity (Onmanorama, 2025); the Re'store initiative at Sacred Heart College, Thevara, which held six thrift sales (Sacred Heart College, n.d.); and ReThreads at Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, which redistributes cleaned clothing at Kochi Metro stations (Onmanorama, 2023). The thrift market of the Department of Economics at Mar Thoma College, Thiruvalla, follows an enterprise-for-institution model: students collect textile items and sell them, and the money meets departmental needs.

These initiatives are documented almost entirely in press and institutional notices that report activity (items collected, sales held) but not outcomes (who benefited, by how much, at what cost). The research question of this paper is therefore: **what are the socio-economic effects of a campus thrift market in Kerala, and how can they be measured credibly at the scale of a single college department?**

The paper makes three contributions. It consolidates verified secondary evidence on the Kerala setting. It provides a transparent set of impact formulas that a department can compute from a simple ledger and short surveys. And it states hypotheses linked to the existing literature so that results from this and other campuses can be compared.

2. The Kerala Setting

Household spending. According to the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2023-24, average monthly per capita consumption expenditure in Kerala was ₹6,611 in rural areas and ₹7,834 in urban areas (South First, 2025). A Kerala-specific clothing share was not available in the source consulted; the national rural figure for clothing, bedding and footwear was 6.63% of household spending in 2023-24, so clothing is a modest but non-trivial budget line.

Migration and remittances. The Kerala Migration Survey 2023, conducted by the Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation with technical support from the International Institute of Migration and Development under the leadership of S. Irudaya Rajan, counts about 2.2 million emigrants, and reports remittances of ₹216,893 crore in 2023 against ₹85,092 crore in 2018, a rise of 154.9%. Students are 11.3% of migrants, up from about 129,763 in 2018 to about 250,000 in 2023 (Deccan Herald, 2024). Remittance income supports demand for branded and new clothing, which in turn increases the stock of usable garments that households later discard, a plausible supply source for thrift markets.

Pathanamthitta. A district indicator profile (Y-POWER; secondary source, data year not stated) reports that 28.5% of workers aged 15 and above work in agriculture, forestry or fishing, against 47.7% in the typical Indian district; that the district has 36,007 registered MSMEs, 78% of them in services; and that bank deposits are about ₹5.6 lakh per person against ₹59,112 in the typical district (Y-POWER, n.d.). These figures indicate a service-oriented, savings-rich district; they should be replaced by Kerala Economic Review or Census-based district figures before submission.

Textile waste. The Ministry of Textiles' *Mapping of Textile Waste Value Chain in India*, as reported in March 2026, puts India's annual textile waste at about 70.73 lakh tonnes (7.07 million tonnes), of which roughly 42% is pre-consumer and 58% post-consumer, with about 55% of post-consumer waste diverted from landfill (Apparel Resources, 2026). Reuse at the household and community level sits at the top of the waste hierarchy, ahead of recycling.

3. Literature and Comparable Initiatives

Why people buy second-hand. Roux and Guiot (2008) and Guiot and Roux (2010) show that second-hand shoppers differ in motive: economic motives (price), critical motives (opposition to the conventional market), recreational motives (treasure hunting) and others, so that a single "thrift consumer" does not exist. Brooks (2015) documents how global second-hand clothing flows also shape livelihoods and waste burdens elsewhere, a reminder that reuse is a market with winners and losers.

Evidence from India. A World Resources Institute practice note surveying Indian consumers finds that buyers of second-hand clothing tend to be young (under 35) and female, that hygiene and garment condition are the two top barriers, that low price and lower environmental impact motivate purchase, and that environmentally conscious respondents did not report buying more overall when they bought second-hand (Gajjar & Shah, 2021). The page consulted did not state sample size or method, so the full note should be checked before the findings are relied on.

Circular economy and fast fashion. Reuse is a central strategy in circular-economy thinking (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017), and the environmental cost of fast fashion is well documented (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Campus thrift markets are small-scale, organizationally simple instances of this strategy.

Kerala campus initiatives. Table 1 summarises what public sources report. All are descriptive; none reports buyer outcomes, financial results or waste weights.

Table 1. Comparable thrift initiatives in Kerala.

Initiative	Host	Reported model	Reported scale
Re'store	SacredHeartCollege, Thevara	Campus clothing collection and thrift sales; unsold dresses given to the Cloth Bank, Thripunithura	About 300 dresses; six sales
ReThreads	Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, with Kochi Metro	Students collect, wash, iron and distribute clothes at metro stations on third Saturdays	Not reported
Second Chance thrift market	Individual student, Thrissur	Donated clothes, books, footwear sold in a two-day market; proceeds to charity	Example price: shoes costing ₹3,000 sold for ₹400-500

Sources: Sacred Heart College; Onmanorama, 2023; Onmanorama, 2025.

4. The Case: Department of Economics, Mar Thoma College, Thiruvalla

Mar Thoma College, Thiruvalla, is an institution in Pathanamthitta district whose Department of Economics runs an active programme of lectures, seminars, a student association and a department magazine, as recorded in the college's annual reports (Mar Thoma College, 2024a; 2024b). The

college's Department of Commerce separately runs a student-driven "Friday Market" for home-made goods (Mar Thoma College, 2025), which shows an established campus culture of student trading.
According to the department, its thrift market operates as follows: students collect textile items from donors, sell them, and use the proceeds for departmental needs. The annual reports consulted do not describe the thrift market, so **start date, frequency and the specific departmental needs funded must be taken from department records and cited as such.** Item-level sales records supplied by the department (category, items collected, items sold, revenue) are analysed in Section 7. The market has three structural features that matter for analysis:

1. **Zero purchase cost.** Goods are donated, so cost of goods sold is nil; the cost base is labour, cleaning, transport and space.
2. **Student labour.** Students collect, sort, price and sell, so the market is also a learning environment for an economics department.
3. **Institutional beneficiary.** Net proceeds accrue to the department, not to an external charity, which makes the market a self-financing mechanism for academic activity.

5. Conceptual Framework

We distinguish five impact channels and define each so that it can be computed from data a department can collect.

Table 2. Impact channels and indicators.

Channel	*Who gains*	*Indicator*	*Formula or measure*
Institutional finance	Department	Net proceeds	$N = R - C$, where $R = \Sigma(p_i \cdot q_i)$ over items sold and C = cash costs (cleaning, transport, stationery, stall)
Household savings	Buyers	Price relief	$S = \Sigma(r_i - p_i) \cdot q_i$, where r_i is the buyer's stated price for a comparable new item
Equity	Low-income buyers, donors	Share of buyers below a cut-off	Share of buyers in the lowest two consumption quintiles (self-reported proxy)
Environment	Community	Textile diverted	$D = \Sigma m_i$, total kilograms of garments reused, from weighing at intake
Learning	Students	Skills gained	Pre-post score on a short scale (pricing, accounting, communication)

To place the channels on one scale, a **social return on investment** ratio can be computed:

SROI = (N + S + V_D + V_L) / (C + w·h)

where V_D is a monetised value of waste diverted (use a stated, sourced price per kilogram and test sensitivity), V_L is a monetised value of student learning (use a conservative proxy and report results with and without it), w is a shadow wage for volunteer time and h is volunteer hours. The ratio is transparent but assumption-dependent, so we recommend reporting the components separately and the SROI only as a summary.

Hypotheses.

- **H1 (barriers).** Buyers' willingness to purchase rises with perceived hygiene and condition assurance (washed, ironed, inspected items), consistent with Gajjar and Shah (2021).

- **H2 (equity).** Buyers are disproportionately students, young adults and lower-income households relative to the general college population.
- **H3 (institutional finance).** Net proceeds cover a measurable and recurring share of the department's discretionary expenditure.
- **H4 (no displacement).** Buyers do not report increased total clothing purchases because of the thrift market, consistent with the WRI finding on conscious consumers.
- **H5 (learning).** Participating students report larger gains in pricing, bookkeeping and communication skills than non-participating peers.

6. Research Design and Methods

Design. Convergent mixed methods with a single embedded case. Quantitative data come from a transaction ledger and surveys; qualitative data come from interviews. The design follows the departmental thrift market over a defined period (to be confirmed from department records; the ledger analysed in Section 7 appears to cover one sale).

Data sources. Section 7 uses the department's category-level sales ledger (items collected, items sold and revenue per category). The buyer survey, donor survey, cost record and volunteer-hour log described below are still to be collected.

1. ***Transaction ledger***. For each sale event: date, items collected (count and kilograms), items sold, price per item or lot, cash costs, volunteer hours.
2. ***Buyer intercept survey.*** A short structured questionnaire at the point of sale: demographics, residence (Pathanamthitta or elsewhere), monthly household spending band, reason for buying, stated reference price of a comparable new item, perceived hygiene and condition, frequency of purchase, and whether the purchase replaced or added to new-clothing purchases. For a proportion estimated within ±5 percentage points at 95% confidence, the sample size is $n = 1.96^2 \times 0.25 / 0.05^2 \approx 385$; use a finite-population correction if buyers over the study period are fewer than about 2,000.
3. ***Donor survey***. Who donates, what and why, and how donors use the proceeds information.
4. ***Volunteer interviews and focus group***. Student experiences, skills and difficulties.
5. ***Key informant interviews***. Head of department and college authorities on how net proceeds were spent.

Measures and analysis. Descriptive statistics for the five channels; chi-square and Mann-Whitney tests for group comparisons; an ordered logit for willingness to buy with hygiene assurance, price and demographics as predictors (H1); reliability of multi-item scales by Cronbach's alpha (target at least 0.70); thematic coding of interviews by two coders with agreement reported. SROI components are reported separately with sensitivity analysis on V_D, V_L and w.

Ethics. Institutional ethics approval, written informed consent, anonymized data, no collection of data from minors without guardian consent, and no payment linked to survey participation. Anonymized data and instruments should be deposited in a public repository on publication.

7. Results

Results below are computed from the department's category-level sales ledger. Where the ledger is silent, the cell is marked pending rather than estimated.

7.1 Data and conventions

Fifteen categories were recorded. For bedsheets the ledger gives 9 items collected and ₹605 revenue but

no count of items sold; bedsheets are therefore included in total stock and revenue but excluded from sell-through and price calculations (sensitivity: if 3, 6 or 9 were sold, overall sell-through would be 41.0%, 41.9% or 42.9%). Sell-through is items sold divided by items collected. Average realised price is revenue divided by items sold. Confidence intervals for proportions are Wilson intervals. The ledger appears to cover one sale; **the number of sale events and the period covered should be confirmed from department records.**

7.2 Operating results of the thrift market

Table 3. Operating results

Operational metric	*Value*
Items collected	315
Items sold (bedsheets excluded)	126 of 306
Overall sell-through	41.2% (95% CI 35.8-46.8)
Gross sales (R), ₹	17,441
Average realised price per item sold, ₹ (bedsheets excluded)	133.6
Items unsold (bedsheets excluded)	180
Cash costs (C), ₹	pending
Net proceeds (N), ₹	pending
Kilograms diverted (D)	pending
Volunteer hours (h)	pending

Results by category

Table 4. Sales by category, sorted by revenue.

Category	*Collected*	*Sold*	*Sell-through*	*95% CI*	*Revenue (₹)*	*Share of revenue*	*Avg price (₹)*
Sarees	78	44	56.4%	45.4-66.9	7,237	41.5%	164
Churidar	12	9	75.0%	46.8-91.1	2,184	12.5%	243
Kids wear	93	23	24.7%	17.1-34.4	1,928	11.1%	84
Books	14	9	64.3%	38.8-83.7	1,440	8.3%	160
Kurtis	26	7	26.9%	13.7-46.1	1,325	7.6%	189
Men shirts	39	13	33.3%	20.6-49.0	804	4.6%	62
Bedsheets	9	n/a	n/a	n/a	605	3.5%	n/a
Western dresses	9	4	44.4%	18.9-73.3	450	2.6%	113
Baskets	4	2	50.0%	15.0-85.0	449	2.6%	225
Lehengas and	7	2	28.6%	8.2-	349	2.0%	175

Category	*Collected*	*Sold*	*Sell-through*	*95% CI*	*Revenue (₹)*	*Share of revenue*	*Avg price (₹)*
gowns				64.1			
Bags	4	3	75.0%	30.1-95.4	300	1.7%	100
Necklaces and chains	5	3	60.0%	23.1-88.2	195	1.1%	65
Toys	4	4	100.0%	51.0-100	100	0.6%	25
Accessories	9	3	33.3%	12.1-64.6	75	0.4%	25
Earrings	2	0	0.0%	0-65.8	0	0.0%	n/a
Total	315	126 (excl. bedsheets)	41.2%	35.8-46.8	17,441	100%	133.6

Table 5. Tests across categories

Test	*Result*	*Reading*
Chi-square, equal sell-through across 14 categories	$\chi^2 = 40.4$, df = 13, p = 0.0001; permutation p < 0.001 (20,000 shuffles)	Sell-through differs by category (permutation test used because 15 of 28 expected cell counts are below 5)
Fisher exact, sarees vs kids wear (56.4% vs 24.7%)	p < 0.0001	Clear difference
Fisher exact, sarees vs kurtis (56.4% vs 26.9%)	p = 0.012	Borderline at Bonferroni threshold 0.0125
Fisher exact, sarees vs men shirts (56.4% vs 33.3%)	p = 0.020	Not significant after Bonferroni adjustment
Fisher exact, kids wear vs men shirts (24.7% vs 33.3%)	p = 0.39	No difference
Spearman, items collected vs items sold	$\rho = 0.89$, p < 0.001	More stock produces more sales in count
Pearson, items sold vs revenue	r = 0.94, p < 0.001	Revenue follows items sold
Regression of revenue on items sold, through origin	₹144.4 per item sold, $R^2 = 0.92$	Close to the average realised price

Concentration of revenue. Revenue is highly skewed across categories (mean ₹1,163, median ₹450, standard deviation ₹1,814, coefficient of variation 1.56). The Gini coefficient is 0.62 and the Herfindahl-Hirschman index is about 2,180. Sarees alone produced 41.5% of revenue; the top five categories

(sarees, churidar, kids wear, books, kurtis) produced 80.9%. Clothing overall was 82% of revenue. Women's clothing (sarees, churidar, kurtis, western dresses, lehengas and gowns) was 132 of 315 items (42%) and ₹11,545 (66%) of revenue, with a sell-through of 50% (66 of 132).

Buyer characteristics. Pending the buyer survey (Section 6); the buyer-profile table will be added when data are collected.

8. Discussion of the result

What the sales records show. Three patterns stand out. First, demand is category-specific: sarees, churidar and books sold well, while children's clothing, the largest block of stock (93 items, 30% of collection), had the lowest sell-through (25%) and the most unsold items (70). Second, revenue depends on a few categories, so the market is exposed to the supply of donated sarees and women's ethnic wear. Third, price level matters as much as volume: churidar (about ₹243 per item sold) and kurtis (about ₹189) earned far more per item than children's clothing (about ₹84) or men's shirts (about ₹62). These patterns are consistent with the second-hand literature's finding that buyers are heterogeneous, and with the Indian evidence that young, female buyers dominate second-hand clothing demand, which would favour women's wear; the survey is needed to test this directly.

Operational implications. The records point to practical adjustments that can be tested at the next sale: bundle or discount children's clothing; prioritise collection of sarees, churidar and books; and drop or bundle low-value accessories and earrings. Whether low children's-wear sales reflect price, condition or demand cannot be decided without asking buyers.

Interpretation guide. If H3 holds, the market is best understood as a low-cost, self-financing source of discretionary funds for an academic department, and the key policy question becomes whether college authorities allow the funds to be used flexibly. If H2 holds, the market also functions as an informal price-relief channel for students and nearby households, a use that is especially relevant in a district where bank deposits per person are high on average but household budgets are heterogeneous. If H4 holds, reuse is displacing, not adding to, clothing purchases, which is the condition under which the environmental benefit is real. If H1 holds, operating procedures (washing, ironing, inspection, honest condition labels) are the main lever for expanding reach, which matches the practice at ReThreads.

Kerala-specific implications. Three features make Kerala a suitable setting. Remittance-driven spending increases the supply of usable donated garments; a dense network of colleges provides trusted venues and student labour; and active local-government and community institutions can offer collection points or recurring venues. These are hypotheses about scalability, not findings, and the case results should be used to test them.

Risks. Thrift markets can also crowd out very small local tailors and used-clothing traders; can create hygiene or quality complaints that damage the college's reputation; and can burden students with unrecognised unpaid work. The ledger and interviews should therefore record volunteer hours and any trader complaints.

9. Limitations

- **Single event, aggregate records.** The ledger gives category totals for what appears to be one sale; it does not show prices per item, dates, buyers or costs, so net proceeds, price effects and repeat-sale trends cannot be estimated yet.

- **Incomplete bedsheet record.** Items sold is missing for bedsheets, so they are excluded from sell-through and price results.
- **Single case.** Findings from one department do not generalise to all thrift markets in Kerala.
- **Self-reported savings.** Reference prices rely on buyers' recall and may be biased upward.
- **Selection.** Intercept surveys miss people who looked and did not buy.
- **Valuation assumptions.** SROI depends on monetizing waste and learning, which is contestable; components are reported separately for that reason.
- **Secondary sources.** Several context figures (Pathanamthitta indicators, textile-waste report, press coverage) come from secondary reports and should be replaced by primary documents where possible.

Conclusion

Campus thrift markets are a visible but unmeasured part of Kerala's local economy. They turn donated textiles with no purchase cost into institutional funds, price relief for buyers, avoided waste and practical training for students. This paper sets out the evidence base, a five-channel measurement framework, testable hypotheses and an ethical mixed-methods protocol for evaluating such a market, using the Mar Thoma College Department of Economics thrift market as the case. Department sales records for 315 donated items show gross sales of ₹17,441, a 41% sell-through and strong category differences, with sarees and women's clothing carrying the market. Once costs and survey data are entered, the framework gives a department-sized, replicable way to say not only that a thrift market exists but what it achieves and for whom.

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