



SIGn Journal of Social Science

E-ISSN: 2745-374X

jurnal.penerbitsign.com/index.php/sjss/article/view/v6n2-01

Vol. 6 Issue 2: December 2025 – May 2026

Published Online: December 16, 2025

Article Title

Dynamics of Post-Defense Gift-Giving Among Students: Between Appreciation, Trends, and Financial Pressure

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How to cite:

Natalia, D., Idrus, I. I., Ahmad, M. R. S., & Najamuddin, N. (2025). Dynamics of Post-Defense Gift-Giving Among Students: Between Appreciation, Trends, and Financial Pressure. *SIGn Journal of Social Science*, 6(2), 187-202. <https://doi.org/10.37276/sjss.v6i2.561>



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ABSTRACT

Post-defense gift-giving practices in higher education have undergone a fundamental transformation. This practice has shifted from a mere emotional expression to a complex and dilemmatic sociological phenomenon. This study aims to critique the hegemony of digital trends and psychological pressure manifested as the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). Such pressure transforms the tradition of appreciation into a ritual of simulacra that obscures the essence of academic celebration. This research employs a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach. Its objective is to explore the intersubjective experiences of 11 students selected through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed in depth using a synthesis of critical theories by Baudrillard and Mauss. The research results successfully deconstruct three key findings. First, the fundamental motive for gift-giving has shifted from a drive of sincere affection to a strategic effort of self-construal under the control of social media algorithms. Second, the gift object is no longer valued for its utility but operates as a sign value. This reproduces social stratification and class hierarchy through the consumption of global brands. Third, the creation of a reciprocity paradox. The illusion of group solidarity is inherently mechanical and comes at a high cost: economic alienation and the pressure of a morally binding debt of gratitude. This study concludes that student social interaction has been co-opted by market logic. Therefore, there is an urgent need to strengthen symbolic and financial literacy to liberate students from the trap of consumerism disguised as social support. Additionally, a more substantial, inclusive, and humanizing redefinition of academic solidarity is required.

Keywords: Financial Pressure; Gift-Giving; Reciprocity; Sign Value; Simulacra.

INTRODUCTION

In the dynamics of human social interaction, the expression of appreciation serves as a fundamental mechanism. This mechanism functions to validate individual existence while simultaneously reinforcing emotional bonds within a community. Normatively, appreciation is viewed as a strategic instrument capable of unlocking human resource potential and enhancing individual performance. This principle applies to both organizational contexts and broader social environments (Febrianty et al., 2023; Firmana & Gunawan, 2025). This mechanism is frequently manifested through physical objects or gifts that act as symbols of recognition for specific achievements. In educational psychology, the provision of gifts or rewards is even considered an effective external catalyst. Its objective is to stimulate learning motivation and encourage higher academic achievement (Effendi, 2017; Ningsih & Fatmah, 2024; Wedanthi et al., 2025). Therefore, historically and theoretically, gift-giving practices have consistently been situated within a positive framework of meaning, specifically as a social virtue that strengthens cohesion among group members.

However, within the contemporary higher education landscape, this gift-giving practice has metamorphosed into a significantly more complex and structured phenomenon. This is particularly evident during the post-defense period. The tradition of offering congratulations, once simple, has shifted into a celebratory ritual involving massive material exchange. These materials vary from flower bouquets and acrylic plaques to money bouquets (Cahyani et al., 2024). This phenomenon is no longer merely a spontaneous expression of affection; it has become an institutionalized

trend within student culture. Recent studies indicate that the transformation of gift-giving during these special academic moments is often framed as emotional support and solidarity, inseparable from the modern student lifestyle (Masnawati & Ewanan, 2024). The escalation of gift forms—from mere symbols to high-economic-value items—signifies a shift in meaning. Gifts are evaluated not only by their use value but also by their capacity for visual consumption in the campus public sphere.

This shift cannot be separated from the potent influence of social media and the characteristics of Generation Z, who are highly concerned with self-image and social connectedness. The Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) plays a central role in driving students to continuously follow current trends, including graduation celebration styles (Sanjaya, 2022; Aulia et al., 2025). The fear of falling behind on information or social moments compels individuals to engage in uniform consumption rituals. Gift-giving behavior is influenced by what is observed on platforms such as Instagram or TikTok (Widiyanti et al., 2024). In this context, gift-giving is often triggered by the need to validate self-construal. This action aims to project a romanticized image or an ideal friendship within the digital realm (Chinchanachokchai & Pusaksrikit, 2021). Consequently, the motivation for gift-giving becomes biased: hovering between the sincerity of offering appreciation and mere compliance with lifestyle standards constructed by social media.

Furthermore, this practice carries profound sociological implications related to the concept of reciprocity. Mauss (1966), a classical anthropologist, asserted in his monumental work *The Gift* that no gift is truly “free.” Every gift carries three unwritten obligations that are socially and customarily binding: the obligation to give, to receive, and to reciprocate (Codrea, 2014). In the student context, these obligations create an endless cycle of exchange. When students receive gifts during their exams, they are automatically burdened by a “debt of gratitude.” They are compelled to return a gift of equivalent value in the future (Thomas & Gupta, 2021). This creates a paradox. On the one hand, the gift is intended to strengthen relationships; on the other, it entraps individuals in an exchange economy that is difficult to avoid or abandon (escaping the gift economy) without risking social sanctions, such as ostracization or shame (Marcoux, 2009).

Beyond reciprocity, gifts in the post-defense ecosystem also serve as markers of identity and social status. The objects exchanged are not neutral but are laden with symbolic meaning. These meanings reflect the giver’s assessment of the receiver and their positions within the social hierarchy (Ashworth et al., 2025). From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, branded bouquets or gifts are not merely inanimate objects. They serve as a medium of nonverbal communication that asserts social class and individual prestige within society (Rosyidah & Prasetyo, 2025). The selection of gift type, price tag, and aesthetic presentation serves as a measure of the magnitude of a student’s social and economic capital (Carlson & Paul, 2022). Even

in the context of new mobilities, gifts become artifacts that record the trajectory of relationships and power negotiations between individuals (Rodriguez et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2024).

Existing literature has extensively discussed gifts in terms of academic motivation and social cohesion. However, a significant analytical gap remains. Previous studies have predominantly positioned gift-giving practices within a positive frame as instruments of motivation and solidarity reinforcement (Zhu et al., 2021; Gill & Thomas, 2023; Masnawati & Ewanan, 2024). Conversely, some scholars have begun to highlight the symbolic aspects and social burdens within local cultural contexts, such as traditions of reciprocity mutating into social debt burdens (Syukur, 2020). Nevertheless, no study has comprehensively dissected how FoMO in the digital era drives this practice to become a simulacrum. A simulacrum is a simulated reality where signs and images replace substance, ultimately creating economic alienation for students (Baudrillard, 1994). The absence of a critical analysis connecting Baudrillard's simulacra theory to the financial pressures faced by post-defense students constitutes the primary urgency of this research.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this void by formulating three objectives that go beyond mere trend description. *First*, this research aims to deconstruct the fundamental motives behind post-defense gift-giving practices, moving beyond surface-level reasons toward structural motives such as social media simulation pressure. *Second*, it seeks to interpret the symbolic meaning of gifts as objects of sign value that reproduce student social status and peer hierarchy. *Third*, it aims to analyze the paradoxical impacts that arise, specifically the tension between the illusion of group solidarity and the reality of financial pressure students face. Through this analysis, the research is expected to provide a theoretical contribution to the development of the Sociology of Education in understanding academic culture shifts in the digital era. Additionally, this study aims to offer practical insights into the dynamics of student financial well-being amid the demands of daily life.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative design employing a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013). The objective is to examine the structure of consciousness and students' subjective experiences regarding post-defense gift-giving practices. The selection of this approach is grounded in the urgency to go beyond merely capturing surface-level behavioral patterns. The researcher seeks to understand (*verstehen*) the intersubjective meanings constructed by students within their social interactions. Through the lens of phenomenology, the phenomenon of gift-giving is not viewed as a static entity. Instead, it is seen as a dynamic social reality in which latent motives—such as conformity pressure or the need for self-validation—underlie academic celebration rituals. The research locus was situated at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, Universitas Negeri Makassar. This location was selected for its high social interaction

dynamics and the heterogeneity of students' economic backgrounds. These conditions are relevant for observing the contestation between solidarity and financial pressure.

The selection of research subjects was conducted using a purposive sampling technique. This technique enabled the researcher to deliberately select informants based on specific criteria relevant to the gift-exchange cycle. The process involved informants with intense experience in giving and receiving gifts and continued until data saturation was reached at the 11th informant. At this point, no significant new thematic variations were found. The criteria for determining informants focused on final-year students who had passed the defense phase and were directly involved in gift reciprocity mechanisms. They participated both as initiators (givers) and target objects (recipients). The heterogeneity of informants in terms of financial capability was also a strategic consideration. This was essential to capture a diverse spectrum of impacts, ranging from emotional satisfaction to economic alienation.

To collect data, this study employed methodological triangulation ([Miles et al., 2014](#)). This technique encompassed passive participant observation, in-depth interviews, and digital documentation. Observation focused on the performative aspects of post-defense celebrations within the campus environment. The researcher noted visual symbols, the scale of gift opulence, and social expressions displayed in public spaces. Meanwhile, in-depth interviews served as the primary instrument for excavating unseen layers of motive. This instrument explored ambivalent feelings between pride and the burden of gratitude debt, as well as deconstructing the informants' interpretation of the gifts they received. Furthermore, documentation techniques targeted not only physical archives but also digital footprints on informants' social media (such as Instagram Stories or TikTok). This was conducted considering the study also highlights the role of FoMO and image simulation in perpetuating the gift-giving trend.

The data analysis technique in this study transcends standard codification stages. This study applies an interactive analysis model integrating data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing with critical theoretical interpretation. In the condensation phase, raw field data were sorted to identify dominant patterns regarding motives and economic impacts. Subsequently, the displayed data were analyzed dialogically using the analytical lens of simulacra theory from [Baudrillard \(1994\)](#). This analysis aimed to uncover aspects of artificiality or hyperreality in the celebrations. Additionally, the Gift theory from [Mauss \(1966\)](#) was utilized to dissect the structure of reciprocity obligations. This process was designed to comprehensively address the research objectives: deconstructing the fundamental motives behind the trend, interpreting the sign value of gift objects, and analyzing the paradoxical impacts incurred. The validity of the findings was maintained through source triangulation to ensure consistency in informant acknowledgments. Researcher reflexivity was also applied to minimize subjective bias during interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Deconstructing Motives: From Emotional Appreciation to the Hegemony of Simulacra and Digital Trends

Axiologically, the practice of gift-giving within the educational ecosystem was originally constructed upon a positive philosophical foundation. This practice is interpreted as an instrument of appreciation to validate individual achievement. From the perspectives of behavioral psychology and human resource management, gifts serve as favorable reinforcement. They serve as effective catalysts to stimulate intrinsic motivation and enhance both academic and professional performance (Effendi, 2017; Febrianty et al., 2023; Ningsih & Fatmah, 2024). Previous literature consistently positions this appreciation as a vital mechanism for creating a sense of worthiness. This sense ultimately leads to increased productivity and individual psychological satisfaction within a group (Firmana & Gunawan, 2025; Wedanthi et al., 2025). Therefore, the dominant narrative emerging on campus views the tradition of giving post-defense bouquets or gifts as a sincere expression of emotional support and friendship, free of materialistic pretenses.

This normative view is strongly internalized within student consciousness. They interpret gift-giving as a moral imperative to celebrate peers who have navigated a crucial phase in their studies. Gifts are viewed as a symbol of pride and empathy for the arduous academic struggle. This is confirmed by the admission of Informant KP, who emphasized that the initiative to give gifts stems from a pure desire for affection and a desire to reward the hard work of close friends. This is elaborated in the following interview excerpt:

“My rationale for giving a gift after the exam was purely an initiative for appreciation or to congratulate my friend for passing one of the exam stages. It demonstrates pride in my friend, as I mostly give gifts only to my closest circle. I also consider gift-giving a form of reward because reaching that point is not easy; a lot of effort has been expended, especially since my friend often confided in us about the struggle of writing the thesis. So, besides being a form of appreciation, it is also a form of reward. As for the message I write on the gift, it usually consists of motivational words so they can be further motivated to step into the next stage.” (Interview on September 23, 2025).

Although KP’s narrative reflects the ideal of appreciation, field reality indicates that this “pure” motive is undergoing a structural transformation under pressure from popular culture. A study by Masnawati and Ewanan (2024) notes that the trend of giving bouquets on special academic occasions has developed into a massive communal tradition. However, this phenomenon can no longer be read simply as an expression of affection. It has mutated in the shadow of digital hegemony. In an era where social life is mediated by screens, internal motives for offering appreciation are increasingly eroded by external motives. These external

motives manifest as fear of social exclusion or of falling behind trends. This phenomenon is known as FoMO, a psychological condition in which individuals feel anxious when they do not participate in experiences or trends currently popular within their group (Sanjaya, 2022).

In the context of Generation Z, FoMO is not merely personal anxiety but a mechanism of social control. This control is driven by cultural influence and visually constructed lifestyle standards (Aulia et al., 2025). Students feel compelled to buy and give gifts not solely because of the depth of their emotional connection to the recipient, but also because of the pressure to conform to “celebration protocols” repeatedly displayed on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Constant exposure to others’ celebratory content creates an imaginary standard. This standard dictates that a thesis defense is neither valid nor festive without material attributes, such as piles of gifts (Widiyanti et al., 2024). Empirical validation regarding the potency of this digital gaze is explicitly revealed in the admission of Informant NRM, who felt moved to act on being exposed to the visual content of peers:

“I learned of this activity from social media and by observing others; seeing many friends doing it pushed me to do the same. Regarding social media influence, like Instagram, I view it from my friends’ stories and posts from peers at other universities. I also felt inspired to follow the trend, for instance, when I saw a nice flower bouquet on TikTok or Instagram, I decided to buy a gift there and give it to a friend after the exam.” (Interview on September 29, 2025).

NRM’s admission serves as irrefutable evidence that post-defense gift-giving practices have entered the realm of simulacra as theorized by Baudrillard (1994). Within the order of simulacra, the reality of the graduation celebration (the academic fact that one has passed) becomes secondary to the simulation of the celebration itself (the image of gift piles on an Instagram Story). Students no longer celebrate “graduation” as an end state, but rather celebrate the “style of celebration” itself. The gift object loses its original reference as a sign of affection and transforms into a simulacrum. A simulacrum is a copy without originality, mass-produced to satisfy visual desire. When students purchase bouquets because they are “TikTok inspired,” they are reproducing signs of happiness that have been codified by social media algorithms. Consequently, the boundary between sincere appreciation and social performance becomes blurred.

Furthermore, this phenomenon suggests that the act of giving and posting gifts on social media serves as a tool for self-construction. Chinchanchokchai and Pusaksrikit (2021) explain that in a hyper-connected culture, individuals post gifts to define themselves within social networks. By giving “Instagrammable” gifts, the giver constructs a digital identity as a supportive, trendy friend possessing sufficient social capital. Therefore, the fundamental motive for post-defense gift-

giving has shifted. It moves from merely reinforcing interpersonal relationships to a strategic effort to validate self-existence on the stage of campus hyperreality. On this stage, the value of a relationship is often reduced to the magnitude of the sign value that can be exchanged and exhibited.

B. Gift Objects as Sign Value: Social Stratification and the Reproduction of Campus Hierarchy

In the landscape of post-defense social interaction, gift objects have lost their neutrality as inanimate items. They have transformed into media for nonverbal communication laden with political and symbolic content. If the previous analysis viewed gifts as instruments of digital simulation, this dimension observes gifts operating as markers of social stratification. Contemporary studies indicate that within the new mobilities paradigm, gift-giving practices have undergone a functional shift. This shift moves from mere material exchange to a mechanism for establishing influence and negotiating positions within relational networks (Rodriguez et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2024). Objects such as aesthetically decorated flower bouquets or branded goods are no longer evaluated based on their use value—whether a bag can hold items. Instead, they are assessed based on their aesthetics, which have been commodified by the creative market for social exhibition (Cahyani et al., 2024).

This phenomenon underscores the relevance of the theory from Baudrillard (1994) regarding sign value. Within the logic of campus community consumption, a gift functions as a sign that distinguishes the status of the giver and receiver within the social hierarchy structure or social distinction. Students do not consume the object; rather, they consume the signs attached to the object (brand, price, and exclusivity). This aligns with the findings of Rosyidah and Prasetyo (2025), who analyzed that in symbolic interaction, bouquets and luxury gifts become cultural artifacts. These artifacts are utilized to communicate prestige and social class. Brand selection becomes crucial because it conveys an implicit message about the giver's economic capability and cultural capital. This reality is starkly revealed in the testimony of Informant AP, who specifically associates certain retail brands with the social status of “rich people” or a “high lifestyle”:

“Gift-giving definitely shows a student's social status. As I observed during my friend's exam, some were given Miniso products. Miniso is quite expensive, and when looking at her lifestyle, it indicates that she is rich or holds a high social status. So, I can conclude that gift-giving is also influenced by social status because it is unlikely that cheap items would be given to a friend with high social status; at a minimum, the gifts must be Jims Honey, Uniqlo, Urban & Co, or Miniso.” (Interview on October 6, 2025).

AP's narrative explicitly deconstructs the myth that a gift is “merely the thought that counts.” The mention of specific brands such as Uniqlo, Jim's Honey,

or Miniso indicates that students have a rigid value taxonomy when assessing the propriety of a gift. In a consumer psychology review, the price range and brand choice of a gift directly influence the recipient's perception of the giver. Furthermore, these choices reflect an appraisal of the recipient's value in the eyes of the giver (Carlson & Paul, 2022; Ashworth et al., 2025). Giving unbranded items to a friend perceived as having high social status is considered a violation of the social code or a face threat (Zhu et al., 2021). Consequently, this practice reproduces class inequality. Economically capable students can continuously validate their high status through the exchange of branded goods (high sign value). Meanwhile, students with limited capital are forced to conform to these standards or face exclusion from the elite social arena.

Beyond its role in stratification, gift-giving also serves as a test of symbolic competence. Givers are required to prove their understanding of the recipient's personal identity. The "right" gift is not merely expensive but one that successfully represents the recipient's personality and unique needs. Failure to select a gift that aligns with the recipient's preferences can be interpreted as unfamiliarity. It is also viewed as a failure to read identity signals in interpersonal relationships. Chinchanchokchai and Pusaksrikit (2021) state that gift appropriateness becomes an indicator of relationship depth in a culture that prioritizes self-image. This is reflected in the strategy of Informant JC, who conducts in-depth research on her friend's personal preferences before deciding on the type of gift to purchase, as described below:

"My main consideration in giving a gift is usually adjusting it to my friend's needs, likes, and personality. I have a friend who is feminine, so I gave her a bag that suited her needs. Then, I have a friend who loves writing or journaling, so I gave her a book or notebook. Thus, this gift-giving adapts to the needs, preferences, and personality of the recipient. So, before buying a gift, I check beforehand what items my friend likes and what her personality is like. That way, when she finishes her exam, I already have a picture of the right gift, and I just need to buy it while adjusting to my budget." (Interview on September 26, 2025).

JC's excerpt indicates that behind the act of giving lies complex cognitive and emotional labor. The goal is to ensure the gift "resonates" symbolically. Although it appears as a form of sincere care, this act of "adjusting to personality" is essentially a strategy to mitigate social risk. The objective is to ensure the gift is well-received and causes no dissonance in the relationship. In sociological analysis, this is a form of impression management. Students attempt to present themselves as understanding and sensitive friends. Ironically, however, this interpersonal understanding is ultimately mediated by market commodities. Care for a friend who "likes writing" is translated as purchasing a "notebook," and for a "feminine" friend, as purchasing a "bag."

Overall, the dynamics of post-defense gift-giving in the academic environment cannot be disentangled from the web of social stratification. Gift objects have become material yardsticks for assessing the quality of relationships and an individual's social position. Through the mechanism of sign value, campus hierarchy is subtly yet coercively reproduced. Those possessing economic capital dominate symbolic exchange with global brands. They establish standards of "worthiness" that subsequently become burdens for other students. Thus, the academic celebration that should be egalitarian has been co-opted by market logic. This logic fragments students into consumer classes, where solidarity is measured by the price labels affixed to the gifts provided.

C. The Paradox of Reciprocity: Between the Illusion of Solidarity and Economic Alienation

The dynamics of post-defense gift-giving cannot be understood solely as altruistic acts. This practice operates under the binding iron law of reciprocity. [Mauss \(1966\)](#), in his fundamental analysis of *The Gift*, asserted that the structure of social exchange is sustained by three unwritten obligations equivalent to formal law: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and—most crucially—the obligation to reciprocate. In the context of legal anthropology, these obligations create an imaginary framework of legality. Failure to reciprocate a gift violates the social contract and can lead to a loss of moral authority or ostracization from the community ([Codrea, 2014](#)). Therefore, what appears on the surface as a celebration of academic solidarity is, in essence, a binding mechanism. This mechanism compels students to continuously revolve within an endless cycle of material exchange, creating a dialectical tension between social cohesion and individual burden.

On one end of the spectrum, this practice indeed generates "social capital" in the form of group solidarity. Collective gift-giving or joint funding systems are often interpreted as strategies of dynamic efficiency. These strategies aim to strengthen signals of trust and emotional bonds among group members ([Gill & Thomas, 2023](#)). From this perspective, students rationalize their expenditures as social investments that tighten friendships or relational connections (*guanxi*). The narrative regarding solidarity formed through this ritual of shared consumption is confirmed through the admission of Informant KP, who felt an improvement in the quality of interpersonal relationships due to such collective activity:

"The impact of gift-giving on friendships definitely makes them tighter, closer, and more intimate. When a close friend is about to take an exam, my other friends and I are excited to chip in to buy a gift, such as a flower bouquet or an acrylic plaque. Consequently, the bond among us becomes more solid due to this chipping-in activity, and the relationship after the exam also becomes tighter." (Interview on September 23, 2025).

However, the solidarity described by KP requires critical scrutiny as a form of fragile or mechanical solidarity. Syukur (2020), in his ethnographic study on local reciprocity traditions, found that such solidarity often contains hidden social burdens. Individual participation is driven not only by empathy but also by pressure to conform to the group. When a gift becomes a prerequisite for “closeness,” friendship undergoes reification—transforming into an object that must be constantly “paid for” with material goods. Here lies the paradox: the more “solid” a group is, the higher the economic cost its members must bear to maintain membership. Social relationships are no longer fluid but are rigidly calculated like an accounting balance sheet. Every gift received is recorded as a “debt” that must be repaid in the future.

The transformation of friendship into a calculative transaction is starkly revealed in the phenomenon of “Academic Debt.” Students no longer view gifts as surprises but as social loans with a maturity date (their own future defense). Economic rationality dominates emotional rationality. The value of the gift to be given must be equivalent to the value received to maintain social balance. This is evidenced by the administrative recording practice performed by Informant JC to ensure no debt is overlooked, as admitted below:

“Initially, I learned about this habit from my friend. For the first time, when I had my proposal seminar, I was immediately given a gift by my friend, so I considered this an academic debt that must be repaid. I even recorded it on my phone; friends who gave me gifts during my exam will automatically receive gifts from me when they take theirs. On social media, I also saw that there is indeed a gift-giving activity after exams. Regarding repaying or feedback, a friend gave me a gift during my proposal seminar, so I returned the favor when she had her final defense. So, there is a motivation like fulfilling feedback because of the mutual exchange of gift-giving.” (Interview on September 26, 2025).

JC’s admission of a “recording on the phone” is a manifestation of what Marcoux (2009) terms the gift-economy trap. Instead of strengthening emotional bonds, this obligation to reciprocate triggers a fear of being unable to reciprocate. Students are trapped in a cycle of gratitude debt that forces them to spend beyond their means solely to avoid social sanctions, such as shame or the label of “ungrateful.” In this context, student financial literacy and well-being are disrupted because their economic decisions are driven by external pressures rather than real needs or personal budgetary rationality (Thomas & Gupta, 2021).

The pinnacle of this paradox is the creation of economic alienation. Students, particularly those from lower-middle economic backgrounds, experience a double bind. They must appear “capable” and “loyal” on the campus social stage, while behind the scenes, they must sacrifice basic needs to finance these rituals. The reciprocity system, which should foster welfare (mutual aid), mutates into an instrument of structural impoverishment. The pressure to give gifts with a

specific nominal value (e.g., a minimum of IDR 200,000) distorts student resource allocation. This pressure forces them to postpone vital needs to meet communal lifestyle demands. The bitter reality regarding this financial burden is critically voiced by Informant JA, who feels squeezed by these social obligations:

“The activity of giving and receiving gifts definitely causes financial pressure because I have to reciprocate according to the price of the gift my friend gave. If the gift she gave was worth 200 thousand, then I also have to give a gift worth 200 thousand or above. Besides that, it definitely burdens the economy, especially since seven people gave me gifts. So, I think I have to return gifts to this many people; I need to think again about what gifts to give and how much they cost. That certainly is a burden, especially since I am a student who doesn’t work, doesn’t have a fixed income, and only relies on monthly allowances from parents. So, it definitely creates its own economic burden. In my personal opinion, the activity of giving and receiving gifts burdens students, especially those who give gifts to their friends every time there is an exam. If there are three exams, then they give gifts three times. Where do they get the money? Especially if they use their monthly allowance, there will surely be some needs that are forced to be postponed, and that is definitely burdensome.” (Interview on October 2, 2025).

JA’s narrative provides empirical evidence that the gift system fails to foster authentic well-being. What JA experiences is a form of symbolic violence where social norms force individuals to participate in consumption detrimental to themselves, resulting in a deadweight loss. Students sacrifice “monthly allowances from parents”—essentially life-safety nets—to buy bouquets or plaques with minimal use value. This phenomenon holds that in a campus ecosystem dominated by simulacra, the reality of student poverty or economic constraints is masked by the opulent celebration (Baudrillard, 1994). They are “rich” in image and friendship, yet “poor” in the reality of their wallets and mental well-being.

Ultimately, the dynamics of post-defense gift-giving leave an unavoidable paradoxical residue. On one hand, it functions as the adhesive glue of social solidarity, providing emotional security. On the other hand, it operates as an extractive mechanism that drains students’ economic resources. This practice creates an expensive illusion of togetherness. Students are forced to choose between maintaining social capital and risking financial bankruptcy or saving their economic condition and risking social isolation.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that post-defense gift-giving practices in the academic environment have undergone a fundamental shift. This practice has drifted away from its original meaning as a form of pure emotional appreciation. Through the deconstruction of motives, it is found that this tradition has metamorphosed into a ritual of simulacra. This ritual is driven by the hegemony of digital trends and FoMO

pressure. Students no longer give gifts solely out of affection or a sincere desire to celebrate a peer's academic achievement. Instead, they give in to external pressure to validate their self-existence and adhere to celebration standards set by social media algorithms. Consequently, the graduation celebration is no longer about the substance of academic success, but rather about the simulation of festive imagery produced for visual consumption in the digital public sphere.

Symbolically, the exchanged gift objects operate as markers of social stratification (sign value). These markers reproduce class hierarchies among students. Brand choices, bouquet aesthetics, and gift price points are not evaluated based on their utility. Rather, they serve as nonverbal communication tools to assert the social positions of the giver and the receiver. Students are entrapped in a symbolic competition in which the ability to provide branded goods serves as the yardstick for social capital and eligibility within social circles. This confirms that social interaction on campus has been co-opted by market logic. The quality of interpersonal relationships is measured by material consumption capacity, thereby excluding those lacking sufficient economic capital from participating in this exchange of signs.

The most critical implication of this phenomenon is the creation of a reciprocity paradox that entraps students in economic alienation. Although this practice creates an illusion of tight group solidarity through collective funding and gift-exchange mechanisms, this solidarity is mechanical and costly. The moral obligation to reciprocate with equivalent value has transformed friendship into a calculative transaction of academic debt. As a result, students—particularly those from limited economic backgrounds—experience structural financial pressure. This pressure forces them to sacrifice basic well-being to maintain face-saving within the community. This phenomenon proves that behind the festivity of post-defense celebrations lies a reality of hidden poverty and mental burden borne by students due to the inability to escape the snare of the gift economy.

Based on these conclusions, this study recommends strengthening students' symbolic and financial literacy. The objective is to build critical consciousness regarding consumerism disguised as solidarity. Students need to be encouraged to redefine social support in more substantial, non-transactional ways. In doing so, they can liberate themselves from the pressure of an economically detrimental lifestyle simulation. For higher education institutions, these findings serve as a crucial signal to create academic appreciation spaces that are more inclusive and not material-based. Furthermore, for future research, it is advised to expand this study using a quantitative approach. The aim is to statistically assess the correlation between social media usage intensity and the degree of distortion in students' consumption expenditure. Thus, a more measurable overview regarding the economic impact of simulacra culture in the higher education environment can be obtained.

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