
THE PRACTICES OF SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE ON FASHION AND COSMETIC BRANDS

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the practice of symbolic violence implied in the symbols of fashion and cosmetic brands among college students. This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to reveal the experiences and views of the subjects in depth. Data were obtained from five students at various universities in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, who were selected as research subjects. Primary data sources were in the form of interviews, observations, and documentation of participants, while secondary data sources were obtained from relevant literature reviews. Data analysis techniques were carried out thematically by reducing data, presenting data, and drawing conclusions. The results of the study indicate that symbolic violence occurs when students from lower-middle socioeconomic groups feel compelled to follow the exclusive brand taste standards set by upper socioeconomic groups. This causes the desire to own certain products even though they are economically unaffordable. Symbolic violence also appears through negative labeling of individuals who do not follow dominant fashion standards, such as the use of the term "jamet". It is evident that symbolic violence in fashion and cosmetic brands occurs subtly through symbolic representation mechanisms that are reproduced in everyday life, creating social inequality and psychological pressure on students.

Keywords

Cosmetic Brand; Fashion Brand; Symbolic Violence.



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INTRODUCTION

In an era of ever-increasing consumerism, fashion and cosmetics brands have become symbols of social status and personal identity, which reflect lifestyle choices and represent a hierarchy of power in society. This phenomenon is in line with the concept of symbolic violence put forward by Bourdieu (2001), which is a form of domination that occurs subtly and unconsciously, even by the victim. Symbolic violence arises through the imposition of values, tastes, and social norms from the dominant group (superordinate) to the weaker group (subordinate), thus creating a deep internalization of the social hierarchy. In the context of fashion and cosmetics brands, this dominance is reflected through the exclusivity of specific brands, which become benchmarks of taste, style, and self-esteem (Wang, 2022). Students, as a social group that is searching for identity, become an entity that is very vulnerable to the penetration of these symbolic values.

Problems arise when students from lower-middle-class economic backgrounds feel compelled to conform to the upper class's lifestyle standards, even though these standards are often not economically accessible. This drive is not solely based on functional needs, but rather due to social pressures from the symbols attached to certain brands. The symbolic standardization of goods, both fashion and cosmetics, reinforces symbolic hegemony that creates a dichotomy between "high taste" and "low taste", which not only stigmatizes certain groups but also reinforces structural inequalities (Bishop et al., 2018). Ironically, this process is often considered natural and not seen as a form of violence, as it occurs latently and is internalized through daily habits or social habitus.

Previous research on symbolic violence can be classified into three broad groups. First, research focusing on media and symbolic representation, such as the study of (Mahfud, 2025; Pemberton & Takhar, 2021; Saifuddin & Mappe, 2023; Siregar & Hardana, 2022; Thompson, 2019) examines how fashion rubrics in women's magazines reproduce dominant aesthetic symbols that override the reality of women from the lower class. Second, research groups focusing on symbolic violence in education, such as Firmanyah et al. (2024), Hart (2019), Sharp et al. (2017), and Siswadi (2024), Expose how educational institutions unconsciously reproduce social class values through curriculum, language, and social interaction. Third, research (Haque et al., 2024; Jarness, 2017; Torelli et al., 2017; Wahid, 2020) that discusses consumerism and social identity, as researched, shows that social boundaries are determined and reinforced by consumption preferences, including choosing exclusive brands as symbols of cultural capital.

While previous studies have contributed important insights to understanding symbolic violence, few studies have focused on how fashion and cosmetics brand symbols operate as tools of symbolic power among college students. This group experiences simultaneous identity dynamics, social mobility, and economic pressures. Therefore, this research offers novelty by exploring how symbolic violence is reproduced through formal media or institutions and daily social interactions and consumption preferences between students. This study expands the scope of understanding symbolic violence from the macro to the micro realm by showing that symbolic dominance can occur even in peer relationships. This study aims to identify symbolic violence in fashion and cosmetic brand consumption and map the dynamics between superordinate and subordinate groups based on brand preference and economic accessibility. This study also uses a descriptive qualitative approach to explore how the symbols attached to particular brands can affect self-perception, social relationships, and student identity formation. The results of this study are expected to make a theoretical contribution to the study of consumer culture and sociology, as well as a practical contribution in efforts to build critical awareness of the impact of symbolic hegemony among the younger generation.

The urgency of this research lies in strengthening the penetration of consumerist values, which are packaged in symbolic form and targeting young age groups, including students. In an increasingly visual and digital society, social identity is often built through what is worn, owned, and displayed in public spaces and social media. This not only creates symbolic inequality, but also widens the psychological and social gap between groups that are able and cannot afford to follow the symbolic current. Without a critical understanding of the mechanisms of this symbolic violence, students will continue to be exposed to social pressures that lead to a sense of inferiority, marginalization, and even compulsive acts of consumption. More than that, this research is important to strengthen students' social literacy in reading symbols, understanding the powerful constructs behind brand representation, and developing reflective attitudes towards consumption choices. Amid the strong current of cultural capitalism, academics need to raise issues that seem trivial but have a systemic impact. By understanding how symbolic violence works in the everyday realm, especially in fashion and cosmetics, students can develop critical power and not just become objects of symbolic domination. In addition, this research can be a reference for campuses, educators, and policymakers in forming a campus environment that is more inclusive and sensitive to social diversity.

Finally, by exploring the symbolic relationship between identity, social class, and consumption, this study seeks to unravel the invisible forces that control student preferences. By showing that symbolic violence is not just an abstract sociological theory but is present in brand and lifestyle choices, this research drives social transformation towards equality, acceptance, and appreciation of the diversity of lifestyles and economic backgrounds. Therefore, this study is important in academia and in practicing a more equitable and empowered social life.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive type of research. This approach was chosen to delve deeply into students' subjective experiences related to the practice of symbolic violence in the consumption of fashion and cosmetic brands (Siregar & Hardana, 2022). This research was conducted from November 2024 to January 2025, with the research location centered in the Yogyakarta area, Indonesia, especially in the student environment from several public and private universities. This approach aims to understand the phenomenon contextually by observing the social realities in students' daily lives. The primary focus is on constructing meaning, perception, and social dynamics that arise from different access to brand symbols and how they shape hierarchical social relations.

The main data in this study were sourced from primary data, obtained directly from participants through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentation of their consumption activities and social interactions. The research subjects comprised five students from various economic and social backgrounds selected through purposive sampling techniques by considering variations in experience and social representation. In addition, secondary data were obtained from literature, journals, articles, and documentation related to symbolic violence, cultural consumption, and brand symbol representation. The data collection technique was carried out with semi-structured interviews to allow for greater flexibility and exploration of the participants' answers. The data analysis process is carried out thematically, through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion concerning Bourdieu's theoretical framework regarding habitus, symbolic capital, and cultural dominance. This analysis aims to uncover how social structures work through consumption symbols and how students respond to and reproduce these structures daily (Miles & Huberman, 2019).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The study results show that symbolic violence in the consumption of fashion and cosmetic brands among students occurs subtly through unwritten but strongly internalized social norms. Informants from lower-middle economic backgrounds stated that there was an urge to conform to dominant styles or tastes seen from peers, social media, and the campus environment. They revealed that although there was no explicit compulsion, there was a kind of social pressure that made them feel the need to have or at least mimic the appearance of college students who could afford to wear branded products such as Nike, Adidas, Supreme, iPhone, Dior, or L'Oreal Paris. Symbolic violence arises when individuals feel "lacking" or "inappropriate" simply because they do not have access to products that are considered to be of high status.

Specifically, the interviews showed that most students from the subordinate group felt they had experienced negative labeling because of fashion or cosmetic choices not considered by the dominant taste. For example, wearing Vans Checkerboard shoes or more affordable local Android brands is often associated with the term "jamet" (a negative connotation for low taste). Superordinate students give this label indirectly through comments, facial expressions, and attitudes that create social distance. Although it appears to be an ordinary interaction, the symbolization has a fairly profound psychological impact, such as decreased self-confidence, a desire to conform to specific standards, and compulsive consumption to gain social recognition.

Other findings suggest that social media such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are becoming the primary medium in shaping symbolic perceptions of brands. The informant admitted that he got many style references from influencers and celebrities, most of whom used expensive and exclusive products. This representation assumes that a person's self-worth is directly proportional to the brand they wear. As a result, some college students stated that they had allocated larger funds to buy cosmetic or branded fashion products even though they had to sacrifice other, more important needs. This shows that symbolic violence has a social impact and impacts students' economic management.

On the other hand, students from the superordinate group tend to be unaware that they are actors in the reproduction of symbolic violence. For them, appearances with expensive products are a form of self-expression and personal achievement. However, indirectly, their actions—whether in how they dress, speak, or show products on social media—create a non-inclusive lifestyle

benchmark. Informants from this group also admitted that they tended to be more comfortable getting along with "like-minded" friends, which implicitly suggests symbolically based social segregation. In this context, brand symbols serve as determinants of social boundaries, reinforcing invisible hierarchies in the campus environment.

From all the findings, it appears that symbolic violence in the consumption of fashion and cosmetics among students does not stand alone. However, it is the result of an interaction between social habitus, economic capital, and symbolic capital that reinforce each other. Students from subordinate groups are victims of the dominance of symbols created by the superordinate group, both directly and indirectly. These dynamics form a pattern that is repetitive and pervasive in campus culture. Therefore, these findings are important to open up space for reflection and critical awareness so that educational institutions can create a more equal social environment and respect diversity in the economy and self-expression.

Table 1. Patterns of Symbolic Violence by Student Category

Categories Students	Access to Branded Products	Social Reaction	Psychological & Social Impact
Superordinate	Tall	Become a benchmark of dominant tastes	Unconsciously doing social exclusion
Subordinate	Limited	Getting stigmatized, such as "jamet", "tacky"	Minder, consumptive, pressure to adjust

Table 1 shows the inequality of access to branded products among students, divided into two categories: superordinate and subordinate. Superordinate students have high access to branded products and are the benchmark of dominant tastes, although they unconsciously tend to exclude others socially. In contrast, subordinate students with limited access often receive negative stigmas such as "jamet" or "tacky", which impacts psychological pressures such as mindfulness, consumptive behavior, and the urge to conform to be accepted socially.

Discussion

The framework of thought on symbolic violence in consuming fashion and cosmetics brands among students refers to Pierre Bourdieu's theory, which explains how dominant aesthetic norms are internalized through the media, social environment, and popular culture. This standard creates a standardization of taste for specific brands, which are considered to have higher aesthetic value and social status. Students are divided into superordinate groups that have greater access to branded products and dominant tastes, as well as subordinate groups that are economically limited. The tension between these two groups creates a domineering symbolic terrain, resulting in symbolic

violence that affects students' identities, social interactions, and consumption behaviors. As shown in Diagram 1 below:

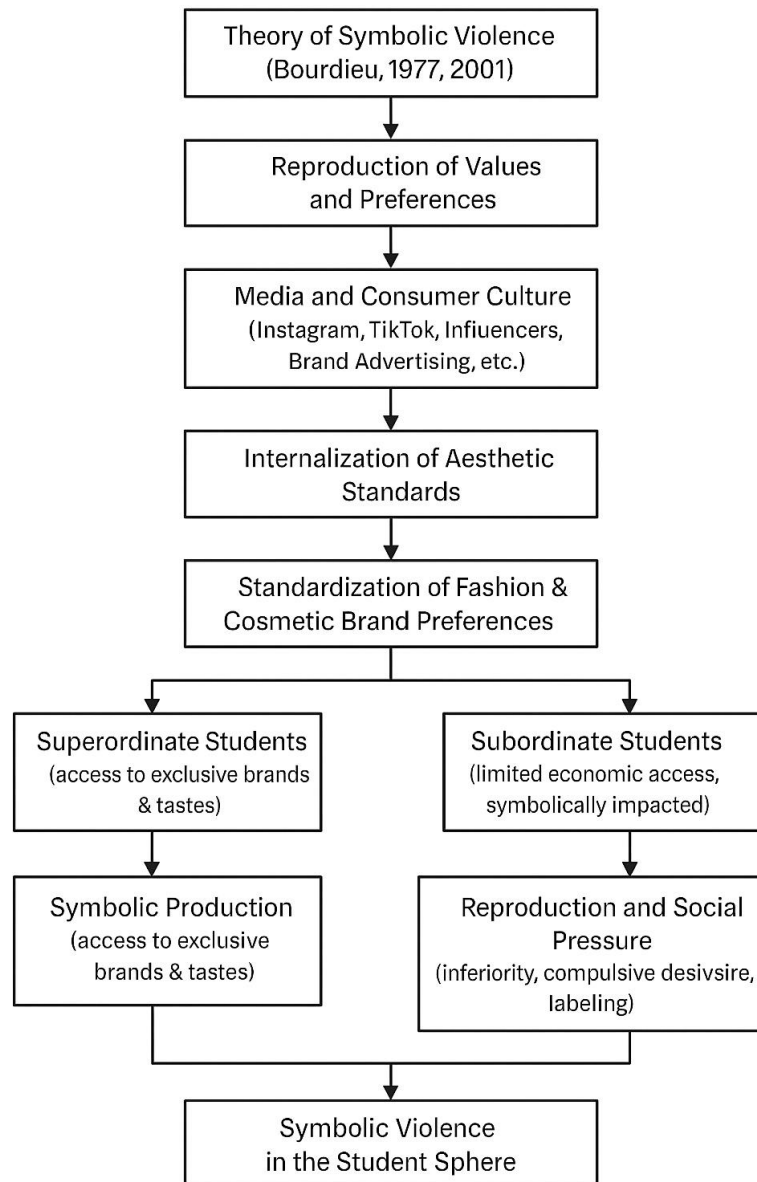


Diagram 2. Research Framework

Explanation of Framework Components (Bourdieu, 2001):

1. The theory of Symbolic Violence is the basis of the analysis: the unseen dominance through symbols.
2. Social media and consumer culture are the primary channels for reproducing dominant symbols.
3. The standardization of brand tastes creates a social dichotomy between students.
4. Superordinate and subordinate students represent actors in symbolic relationships—one produces, the other reproduces symbols.

5. Symbolic violence occurs when pressure, stigma, and exclusion arise in students' social interactions.
6. Finally, there is a need for critical awareness, as a step towards symbolic liberation.

The results of this study reveal that symbolic violence in the consumption of fashion and cosmetic brands among students does not take place overtly, but works subtly and systematically. This concept aligns with the thinking of Pierre Bourdieu, who explained that symbolic violence is a hidden form of social domination and takes place through the internalization mechanism of dominant values by weaker groups. Students from lower-middle economic backgrounds are vulnerable, as they face social pressure to conform to the lifestyle standards of upper economic or superordinate groups (Kallschmidt & Eaton, 2019). This pressure not only comes from outside the self but has also integrated into the thinking structure and perception of the students, forming a habitus that makes them feel that fitting in is an obligation, not to be socially excluded. When they fail to meet these symbolic standards—for example, because they cannot afford to buy branded products that are considered 'standard'—feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, and social marginalization arise that are latent (Violita & Sos, 2023).

This social pressure does not come from direct coercion but through symbols and representations of status attached to certain products. Brands such as Nike, Adidas, Supreme, Dior, and L'Oreal are not only seen as ordinary consumer products, but have transformed meaning into symbols of exclusivity, prestige, and high social status. In the campus environment, students from the superordinate group who have access to these products unknowingly establish dominant tastes that become a standard reference in appearance, sociation, and even in assessing a person's personal qualities. They became a style reference secretly used as a benchmark by other students, although they never explicitly stated that their style was the best. This process shows how symbolic power is reproduced not through ideological coercion, but through repeated social recognition and symbolic reinforcement through media, social interaction, and popular culture. As a result, students from subordinate groups, although not consciously making mistakes, feel symbolically failing because they cannot meet these visual and symbolic standards (Charmaz et al., 2019; Matsuda, 2018).

One of the apparent manifestations of symbolic violence in this context is the emergence of social labeling phenomena such as the term "jemet" or "tacky". These terms have strong negative connotations, often used to demean the appearance of students who use non-branded or local products that are considered incompatible with the prevailing "high taste." Students from the subordinate group in this study admitted that they often received negative responses, either directly

or indirectly, from their social environment simply because of their choice in dressing or using cosmetic products that were considered "not contemporary". This labeling does not always occur in an explicit verbal form; Often, it comes in the form of body gestures, facial expressions, or tone of speech that subtly but effectively build social distance (Lisnawati & Warini, 2024; Rakhmaniar, 2023). This symbolization reinforces social exclusion and clarifies the symbolic boundaries between the "accepted" and the "rejected" within the campus community. In Bourdieu's perspective, this results from an embedded social habitus that has been and continues to be reproduced, so that symbolic discrimination becomes a practice considered normal, even though it is loaded with latent power that oppresses subordinate groups.

Social media strategically reinforces and reproduces dominant symbols in consuming fashion and cosmetic brands among college students. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have served as spaces for personal expression and evolved into a significant arena in the construction of social identity (Trisakti, 2025). Students actively access style references from content produced by influencers and celebrities, which almost always feature a luxurious lifestyle loaded with branded products. This visual representation creates aesthetic and lifestyle standards that become momentary trends and indirectly serve as a benchmark of self-worth. When the aesthetics on display are considered ideal and worthy of emulation, students feel compelled to conform, even if it means setting aside expenses for basic needs. In this context, forming visual identity through consumer products is a new form of social capital contested in the digital space (Chin, 2018; Dobson et al., 2018).

Within the framework of Bourdieu's theory, symbolic capital plays an important role in explaining the mechanism of symbolic violence. The ownership and use of branded products provide added material and symbolic value in recognition, honor, and social prestige (Chiesa & Dekker, 2024). Students from the superordinate group gain social legitimacy through their outward appearance, which is considered representative of success, establishment, and high taste. However, what is often overlooked is how this act unconsciously forms a symbolic domination structure that burdens students from subordinate groups. Unknowingly, the consumption preferences of superordinate students create unbalanced and uninclusive social expectations. In this context, symbolic capital becomes a tool of power that works not through coercion, but through perceptions, recognition, and values internalized in campus social interactions (Gordon & Zainuddin, 2020).

The exclusivity attitude of superordinate students in choosing social circles based on shared tastes shows the reproduction of symbolic power that is subtle but real. They tend to feel more comfortable interacting with colleagues with similar lifestyles and consumption preferences, without realizing that these actions reinforce social segregation. Subordinate students unable or unwilling to follow these symbolic standards become socially marginalized, even though they have other capabilities beyond consumption (Morrissey, 2018). This creates invisible social boundaries that group students based on access to capital symbols. Ironically, campuses, which are ideally democratic and inclusive spaces, have instead become fertile ground for the reproduction of symbolic hierarchies that exclude the lowest economic groups. As a result, the social structure in the academic space reflects the inequality in the wider society, where access to symbols is the leading indicator of social acceptance (Nuresa, 2025; Tasane, 2023).

The interaction between habitus, economic capital, and symbolic capital creates complex and often invisible social dynamics in campus life. Subordinate students, whose habitus is formed from economic limitations and life experiences that differ from the dominant group, face very high symbolic expectations (Li, 2017). They must navigate a social space filled with representations of dominant values, such as exclusive dress styles, expensive gadgets, and preferences for international brands. In this context, the superordinate group consistently reproduces these dominant values through daily actions, either directly through social interaction or indirectly through social media posts. When the habitus possessed by subordinate students cannot accommodate these symbolic demands, internal conflicts will arise that create psychological pressure. This pressure then impacts the emergence of feelings of inferiority, social inferiority, and the adoption of consumptive behaviors driven by the need to conform, rather than because of real needs (Chen et al., 2018; Dubois, 2020).

Symbolic violence experienced by subordinate students has a broad impact not only in the social sphere but also psychologically and economically. The pressure to "look appropriate" in a social space inhabited by exclusive symbols encourages students to buy branded products even if they have to sacrifice other, more basic needs. Few feel that social recognition is more important (Noh, 2018) than short-term financial stability. Even in some cases, there is a feeling of worthlessness if you cannot keep up with the dominant consumption trends. This proves that symbolic violence is not just symbolic pressure, but also forms a mindset that equates self-worth with the value of the goods owned. As a result, college students are potentially trapped in a cycle of compulsive consumption that adversely affects their finances and mental health (Firnando et al., n.d.).

These findings indicate that symbolic violence works subtly through social perception and recognition, making symbols a tool of power in student-to-student relationships. In this context, campuses as social and intellectual institutions should ideally be able to play a role as a space for the dismantling of symbolic power (Fatmawati & Sholikin, 2020). Higher education institutions must not ignore this dynamic, because uncritical symbolic standards will continue to be reproduced and deepen social exclusion. Therefore, initiatives are needed to create dialogue spaces that facilitate students' critical reflection on the social realities they experience. Students must understand that self-worth is not solely determined by the brand they wear, but by their personal qualities, ideas, and social contributions (Purwosautro & Maryanto, 2022). Liberating education is an education that invites individuals to think critically about oppressive social constructions.

Finally, this study confirms that symbolic violence in the consumption of fashion and cosmetics brands is not a trivial or individual issue but a structural issue that requires a collective response. For this reason, concrete steps are needed to build critical awareness of brand symbols and the social structures that support them. Consumption literacy must be strengthened, not only as the ability to choose products rationally, but also as the ability to read the meanings behind the symbols. Campuses as spaces for social transformation should open more spaces for expression that are fair, equal, and respect the diversity of lifestyles (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017; Rahajeng, 2013; Siregar & Hardana, 2022). Higher education has a moral responsibility to produce not only academically competent graduates but also citizens who are socially aware, reflective, and able to dismantle the symbolic dominance that oppresses vulnerable groups. Only in this way can academic spaces become a mirror of an inclusive and just society.

CONCLUSION

The symbolism of violence in the fashion and cosmetics industry, especially among students, is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. The mechanism of this violence occurs subtly through various discourses that shape self-perception, so that victims do not look like victims of physical violence. The fashion and cosmetics industry often enforces unrealistic beauty standards, encouraging students to meet these expectations. The impact is enormous, not only on their self-confidence and mental health, but also on social and economic well-being. Therefore, it is important to criticize the beauty standards formed by this industry and build awareness that self-esteem should not be determined by physical appearance or the products used. Necessary steps include

education and awareness about the impact of unrealistic beauty standards, encouraging inclusivity in fashion and cosmetics campaigns, and providing psychological support for students. By creating a more inclusive space and valuing diversity, individuals can express themselves without pressure or discrimination, which can help build a healthier society mentally and socially.

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