

The Cultural Meaning of *Mottainai* in Mercari Product Description: A Qualitative Content Analysis

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ABSTRACT

In the digital era, buying and selling activities have become increasingly convenient due to the presence of e-commerce platforms. In Japan, Mercari is one of the marketplaces widely used for second-hand transactions. On this platform, sellers not only display product photos but also write descriptions that often include the reasons for selling the items. These reasons can reflect cultural values embedded in Japanese society, one of which is the concept of *mottainai*. This study aims to analyze the meaning of *mottainai* reflected in the descriptions of reasons for selling products on Mercari. This research employs a qualitative descriptive–interpretative method with a cultural studies approach using content analysis. The research data consist of ten product descriptions containing the expression patterns “~*tame shuppin shimasu*.” and “~*node shuppin shimasu*.”. The results show that the sellers reasons for selling items reflect values aligned with the concept of *mottainai*, namely appreciation for the utility of objects, the circulation of use (reuse), and the optimization of ownership. These findings indicate that the practice of buying and selling second-hand goods on digital platforms can represent a modern form of the cultural value of *mottainai*.

Keywords: *mottainai*, product descriptions, mercari, content analysis

INTRODUCTION

The development of e-commerce platforms has transformed the way people conduct transactions, including the practice of buying and selling second-hand goods online. The growth of e-commerce has encouraged the emergence of various online platforms for second-hand trading, one of which is Mercari, a marketplace that is widely popular in Japan. The expansion of digital marketplaces has not only changed patterns of economic transactions but has also created new spaces for the expression of cultural values in the buying and selling of second-hand goods. Like physical stores in general, Mercari provides a variety of items that can be purchased by consumers.

Although it has a similar function to physical stores, Mercari as an online platform offers a different experience in terms of product verification. In direct transactions, consumers can examine the physical condition of an item firsthand. In contrast, Mercari users cannot inspect the product directly and therefore rely entirely on the photos and descriptions provided by the seller. Mercari facilitates sellers by allowing

them to upload photos and provide detailed product descriptions that can be read by potential buyers before making a purchase. The product descriptions provided on Mercari help buyers assess the condition of the item in advance, whether it is still usable or already damaged thereby reducing information asymmetry (Sun et al., 2024). This feature also influences buyers trust in purchasing items on the platform (Jin & Tsujimoto, 2025).

In some cases, product descriptions include explanations of the reasons why sellers decide to sell their items. For example, a seller may write in the product description “*tsukawanakunattanode shuppin shimasu*” (I sell it because I no longer use it). This reason indicates that the seller intends for the item to be used by someone else since it is no longer being used. Such reasoning aligns with the concept of reuse, which refers to the practice of using second-hand items again as a way to extend their lifespan (Cooper & Gutowski, 2017).

The behavior of sellers who seek to extend the lifespan of items reflects a concept that aligns with a Japanese cultural value known as *mottainai*. This concept represents a sense of regret and appreciation when an object that still has functional value is wasted (Suzuki, 2017). More broadly, *mottainai* also encompasses a spirit of environmental conservation and respect for the surrounding environment (Deanahara et al., 2023). Thus, product descriptions on Mercari can be seen as reflecting an awareness of valuing the usefulness of items so that they do not become waste.

Previous research by Turistati (2019) highlights that the value of *mottainai* is more prominently reflected in the practice of *osagari*, a tradition of giving items freely to others. From this perspective, the activity of selling second-hand goods tends to be categorized as a profit seeking transaction or merely an alternative to directly discarding items. However, the phenomenon observed on the Mercari platform suggests that selling items can also represent a form of care or attachment toward possessions. The writers found similarities between the motivations of giving and selling as reflected in product description narratives. The personal reasons stated by sellers often contain a spirit similar to *osagari*, namely the desire to prevent items from being wasted.

Based on this phenomenon, this study aims to analyze how the value of *mottainai* is reflected in the reasons sellers provide for selling their items in product descriptions on the Mercari platform. The author argues that transactions on Mercari are not merely efforts to seek economic profit, but can also be interpreted as a form of modern *mottainai* practice. Through content analysis of product descriptions, this study seeks to reveal how digital platforms and buying selling activities can serve as new spaces for sustaining cultural values, as well as a form of environmental preservation through the prevention of waste generation in Japanese society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

***Mottainai* as a Form of Appreciating the Utility Value of Objects**

Mottainai is a Japanese term written with the kanji *mottai* (勿体), meaning essence or something valuable, and *nai* (無い), meaning absence or lack. Taken together, the term is often interpreted as referring to wastefulness or squandering (Nurdinawati, 2021). However, *mottainai* carries a deeper meaning, referring to a sense of regret or reluctance when an object that still has value is not used properly (Suzuki, 2017). This concept is closely related to the teachings of Shinto, in which it is believed that every element in the world possesses a spirit or deity, leading people to respect nature in all its aspects (Juita & Amanda, 2023).

Historically, the concept of *mottainai* emerged during the Edo period, when Japan isolated itself from outside influences. In this period, Japanese society was forced to use natural resources as minimal as possible for the sake of collective sustainability. Even then, waste was considered a valuable resource that farmers used to fertilize their soil (Haryanti, 2013). This awareness and appreciation of waste

encouraged people to adopt frugal practices and to respect natural resources for the continuation of their livelihoods, which eventually popularized the use of the term *mottainai*.

Although the concept has existed for a long time, the practice of *mottainai* can still be observed in various contemporary activities, such as *osagari* (Turistiati, 2019). *Osagari* refers to the practice of giving items to others free of charge. The items given are usually second-hand goods that are no longer used by their owners. By maximizing the lifespan of an item, individuals not only demonstrate respect for natural resources and the principle of simple living, but also directly contribute to reducing waste production (Deanahara et al., 2023). In everyday life, the cultural value of *mottainai* can also be observed in the behavior of Japanese people. For example, in eating practices in Japan, many individuals show appreciation for food ingredients by paying attention to their expiration dates and by reusing leftover food that can be cooked again at a later time (Sirola et al., 2019).

Second-Hand Transactions as a Space for Appreciating the Value of Goods

Second-hand goods refer to items that are no longer desired or used by their owners. In this context, second-hand goods are closely related to the concept of reuse within the 3R framework, which refers to using items again. Reuse is considered a more efficient way to reduce waste production compared to recycling, as it requires less energy and material resources (Brooks, 2025). Cooper & Gutowski (2017) explain that by applying reuse practices, the lifespan of goods can be extended. Although many people generally prefer new items over second-hand ones, some other recognizes that purchasing second-hand goods can also be considered an environmentally friendly practice (Moon et al., 2023). The sale of second-hand goods is commonly found in physical stores or online platforms that specialize in selling used items. Such stores or platforms often become places where people search for treasures as many second-hand goods discovered there are rare items that may have high value (Frahm et al., 2025).

In Japan, one of the spaces where individuals can find second-hand goods is a digital platform called Mercari. Mercari is an online marketplace for buying and selling second-hand goods that was established in Japan in 2013. The application provides various trusted features for both sellers and buyers to conduct transactions online (Jin & Tsujimoto, 2025). Although it is widely known as a space where people seek profit and purchase goods, the official Mercari website states that Mercari Inc. created the platform as a means of circulating resources in the form of items that are no longer used by their owners. Instead of being discarded, these items can gain new value in the hands of others who need them. This idea aligns with Deanahara et al. (2023), who emphasize the importance of reusing goods by maximizing their use

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive–interpretative method with a cultural studies approach using content analysis. As explained by Sugiyono (2017), qualitative research seeks to uncover meaning through observable data. This approach is consistent with the aim of this study, which attempts to reveal meanings through product descriptions on Mercari. In addition, the cultural studies content analysis approach is used as the research design to analyze the content found in product descriptions on the Mercari platform. The analysis follows four stages: determining the sample and unit of analysis, categorizing the data, reducing the data, and drawing conclusions (Endraswara, 2003). In determining the sample, purposive sampling was employed by selecting descriptions that share similar expression patterns, namely “~*tame shuppin shimasu*” (I sell it because~) or “~*node shuppin shimasu*” (I sell it because These expression patterns provide an explanation of the seller’s reason for selling the item, which therefore requires further analysis to interpret their meanings. Among the many products available on Mercari, the researcher selected ten product descriptions that met the predetermined criteria.

DISCUSSION

During the sample collection stage, the author found that many product descriptions contained similar expression patterns. The expression patterns identified in this study frequently appeared as the reasons sellers provided for selling their items. Each expression indicates that the item is no longer being used, which motivates the seller to sell it. However, some of them contain deeper meanings that can be interpreted through the words used in the descriptions. From the ten product descriptions analyzed, the sellers reasons were categorized into three groups: appreciation of the value of goods, circulation of use (reuse), and ownership optimization, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Category of Product Description in Mercari

Category	Product Description	Translation
Appreciation of The Value of Goods	もったいなくて使えないので、出品しました。 <i>Mottainakute tsukaenai node, shuppin shimasu</i>	I sell it because it would be a waste if it is not used.
	捨てるのもったいないので出品します。 <i>Suteru no mottainai node shuppin shimasu.</i>	I sell it because it would be a waste to throw it away.
	使うのがもったいないので思い切って出品いたします。 <i>Tsukau no ga mottainai node omoikitte shuppin shimasu.</i>	I sell it wholeheartedly because it would be a waste to use it.
Circulation of Use (reuse)	ゲームクリアしたため出品いたします。 <i>Gemu kuria shita tame shuppin shimasu.</i>	I sell it because I have already finished the game.
	使わなくなったので出品します。 <i>Tsukawakunattanode shuppin shimasu.</i>	I sell it because I no longer use it.
Ownership Optimizarian	着る機械がない為出品致します。 <i>Kiru kikai ga nai tame shuppin shimasu.</i>	I sell it because I no longer have the opportunity to use it.
	推しじゃないため出品致します。 <i>Oshi janai tame shuppin shimasu.</i>	I sell it because the person is not my idol.
	サイズが合わなかったため出品します。 <i>Saizu ga niawanakatta tame shuppin shimasu.</i>	I sell it because the size does not fit me.
	どうしても似合わない為出品します。 <i>Doushitemo niawanai tame shuppin shimasu.</i>	I sell it because it does not suit me anyway.
	被った為に出品しました。 <i>Kabutta tame ni shuppin shimasu.</i>	I sell it because I already have another one. (duplicate item)

The categories of meaning in Table 1 indicate that the activity of selling used goods on digital platforms is not driven solely by economic motives. These three categories can be understood as expressions of the cultural value of *mottainai* in the context of modern Japanese society. The concept of *mottainai* highlights the value of appreciating an item's utility and avoiding the waste of resources (Deanahara et al., 2023; Suzuki, 2017).

In the category of appreciation of the value of goods, sellers' reasons expressing that they feel it would be a shame to discard or stop using an item indicate an awareness of the value of an object. This

reflects the ethics of *mottainai*, which views an item to be something more valuable than just an economic commodity. In the product descriptions shown in Table 1, the expressions, “*Mottainakute tsukaenai node, shuppin shimasu.*” (I sell it because it would be a waste if it is not used.) and “*Suteru no mottainai node shuppin shimasu.*” (I sell it because it would be a waste to throw it away.) both of these sellers’ reasons are evident in how they use the word “*mottainai*,” indicating a sense of appreciation for the item because it is no longer used and they have chosen to sell it. Then, in the second description, it is written that the seller feels it would be a shame to throw the item away. This demonstrates an appreciation for the item’s utility, a sentiment consistent with *mottainai*.



Figure 1: Mercari Product 1

Source: <https://jp.mercari.com/>

On the other hand, the product description in Table 1, “*Tsukau no ga mottainai node omoikitte shuppin shimasu.*” (I sell it wholeheartedly because it would be a waste to use it.) shown in Figure 1, a unique reason is found for the seller’s decision to sell the item, they feel it’s a waste to use it. From Figure 1, it can be seen that the item being sold is a cute character folder that can be used to store papers. The seller’s description indicates a reluctance to use the item, suggesting the possibility that the seller does not want the item to simply be stored away and instead wants it to be put to good use by someone else. This reason can be understood as a form of appreciation for the item’s utility, as the seller recognizes that the item is usable and has practical value.

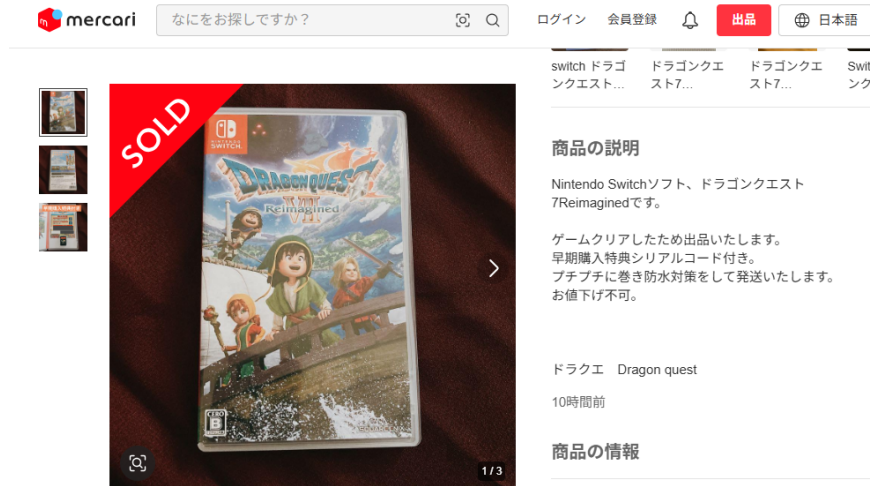


Figure 2: Mercari Product 2

Source: <https://jp.mercari.com/>

Meanwhile, the category of circulation of use is closely related to the concept of reuse, which forms part of sustainable practices. Sellers sell items because they have finished using them or no longer need them. This action allows the items to enter a new cycle of use by others. This aligns with the view of Cooper & Gutowski (2017), who state that reuse can extend the lifespan of an item while maintaining its original condition without alteration. This category is evident in the product descriptions “*Gemu kuria shita tame shuppin shimasu.*” (I sell it because I have already finished the game.) and “*Tsukawakunattanode shuppin shimasu.*” (I sell it because I no longer use it.) as shown in Table 1. In the description “*Gemu kuria shita tame shuppin shimasu.*” (I sell it because I have already finished the game.) presented in Figure 2, the item being sold is a console game that the seller has already completed. As a result, the seller decides to sell it on Mercari. This reason indicates the seller’s intention for the game to be played again by someone else. Furthermore, the description “*Tsukawakunattanode shuppin shimasu.*” (I sell it because I no longer use it.) differs slightly from the previous description. While both indicate that the item is no longer used, this expression employs the past negative form of the verb *tsukau* (to use), namely *tsukawanakunatta* (used), which suggests that the item had been used previously but is no longer being used. Similar to the description “*Gemu kuria shita tame shuppin shimasu.*” (I sell it because I have already finished the game.), the seller’s intention is to allow the item to be used again by others. Both descriptions therefore reflect the concept of reuse, in which items are used again in order to extend their lifespan, as intended by the sellers.



Figure 3: Mercari Product 3

Source: <https://jp.mercari.com/>

The ownership optimization category illustrates how sellers transfer items that no longer meet their needs or preferences to others who need them more. This practice aligns with Mercari's vision that the value of an item can vary depending on its owner. In the description "*Oshi janai tame shuppin shimasu.*" (I sell it because the person is not my idol.) shown in Figure 3, the seller is selling an idol pin, explaining that the idol in question isn't their *oshi* or favorite, which is why they're selling the item. The sale of unwanted items is common on Mercari for the same reason: the items received do not feature their favorite idol. In Japan, idol merchandise is often sold randomly, so buyers may not receive the idol they desire. This phenomenon encourages buyers to become sellers on Mercari, items that aren't their idols are sold so they can be purchased by people who idolize the character or person featured on the item. This demonstrates an optimization of ownership to ensure items end up in the right hands, aligning with Mercari's mission to give items new value in the eyes of their new owners (buyers). Furthermore, it is consistent with the idea of maximizing the use of goods, where items that are no longer desired by one person can be used more effectively by others who acquire them (Deanahara et al., 2023).

Consistent with the description in Figure 3, four product descriptions listed in Table 1 also reflect ownership optimization through expressions of personal preference or incompatibility with the items. For instance, the description "*Kabutta tame ni shuppin shimasu.*" (I sell it because I already have another one.) indicates that the seller owns a duplicate item and therefore decides to sell it, suggesting a reluctance to possess more than one of the same item. Similarly, the description "*Saizu ga niawanakatta tame shuppin shimasu.*" (I sell it because the size does not fit me) indicates that the item does not match the seller's size. As a result, the seller chooses to sell it on Mercari so that it can be used more effectively by someone for whom the size is suitable.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study shows that the buying and selling of secondhand goods on digital platforms such as Mercari not only serves as an economic transaction but can also be interpreted as a cultural practice that reflects the value of *mottainai* in the context of modern Japanese society. Although there is a profit motive in conducting transactions on Mercari, the reasons provided by sellers indicate a sense of attachment to the items, a reluctance to simply discard them—and selling them as an alternative to giving them away. Previous research has explained that giving away items better reflects the value of *mottainai*. However,

based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that selling unwanted or used items can also be a reflection of *mottainai* behavior, particularly through the reasons given for selling the items.

Based on this study, it is hoped that further research can explore the reasons given by sellers in greater depth through interviews or observation. Additionally, a deeper understanding of sellers' perceptions of *mottainai* could serve as a strong foundation for future research.

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