

The Origin, Development, and Future of Emotional Consumption The Origin, Development, and Future of Emotional Consumption among Generation Z in the Digital Age

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Abstract:

This study aims to systematically trace the complete lineage of emotional consumption from its theoretical origins to its development in the digital age, focusing on Generation Z (born 1995-2009) as the core group for in-depth analysis of their emotional consumption practices. The research builds upon the theories of “emotional consumption” and “emotional modernity” proposed by Professor Wang Ning, integrating studies by scholars such as Cao Ziyang and Zhou Xuanchen on digital phenomena to construct an integrated analytical framework of “modernity dilemma - emotional needs - consumption practices” that combines macro-structural, meso-mechanistic, and micro-practical perspectives. Through textual analysis of typical cases such as “temple tourism” and “spending money on virtual idols” (kejin), this study reveals the new forms and characteristics of emotional consumption in the digital age and the underlying psychological needs and social mentality of Generation Z. The research further analyzes how the collusion mechanism of “capital-technology-media” promotes the alienation path of emotional consumption from “need satisfaction” to “desire manufacturing,” and attempts to offer constructive thoughts on the future healthy development of emotional consumption.

Keywords: Emotional Consumption, Generation Z, Modernity, Qualitative Research

1. Introduction

We are living in an era where consumption is deeply

emotionalized. From young people flocking to temples to pray for bracelets and stamp seals, to fervent fans spending large sums of money on virtual idols;

from consuming domestic trends (guochao) for “nostalgia,” to meticulously curated “performative” sharing on social media, consumption behaviors have long transcended the realm of satisfying basic material needs. Instead, they carry the complex and profound emotional appeals of modern people, especially the younger generation. This consumption model, centered on obtaining emotional experiences and satisfying psychological needs, was accurately summarized by sociologist Wang Ning (2000) as “emotional consumption.”

Emotional consumption is not a new phenomenon born in the digital age, but its scale, forms, and influence have undergone a qualitative leap catalyzed by digital technology. Algorithmic recommendations, social media, and virtual interactions constitute the new arena for emotional consumption, not only reshaping the forms of consumption but also profoundly changing the ways emotional experiences are produced, circulated, and consumed. As the first generation of “digital natives,” Generation Z’s growth is highly synchronized with the popularization of the internet. Their consumption concepts, behavioral patterns, and even identity are closely intertwined with the digital world, making them the best sample for observing and understanding emotional consumption in the digital age.

In this context, this study aims to answer three core questions: First, what new forms and characteristics has emotional consumption developed in the digital age compared to its theoretical origins? Second, what deep psychological needs and contemporary social mentality of Generation Z do these new emotional consumption models reflect? Third, given the potential risks of alienation associated with emotional consumption, what is the path for its future healthy development? By exploring these questions, this study hopes to deepen the theoretical understanding of local consumption sociology and provide practical references for understanding and guiding the consumption practices of Generation Z.

2. The Theoretical Origin and Literature Review of Emotional Consumption & Research Design

2.1 Theoretical Foundation: Wang Ning and the Macro Perspective of “Emotional Modernity”

The theoretical discussion on emotional consumption finds groundbreaking significance in the analytical framework proposed by Professor Wang Ning in 2000. His core argument is that the process of modernity involves not only the expansion of “Logos modernity” (i.e., the modernity of rationality, calculation, efficiency) but also

the structural differentiation of “Eros modernity” (i.e., the modernity of emotion, experience, desire). In modern society, especially urban life, traditional interpersonal emotional support networks (such as intimate neighborhood relations, stable community connections) tend to weaken or become “desertified.” The emotional loneliness, stress, and anxiety faced by individuals are difficult to fully alleviate within traditional relationships, leading them to turn to the market—seeking alternative, virtual emotional comfort and satisfaction through the purchase of goods, services, or experiences. Emotional consumption thus becomes an important way for modern people to cope with the dilemma of “emotional modernity.” This macro argument reveals the inevitability of the rise of emotional consumption from a sociological level, providing the meta-theoretical framework for this study.

2.2 Phenomenological Description: Typological Expansion of Emotional Consumption in the Digital Age

With the popularization of digital technology, phenomenological studies on emotional consumption have become increasingly rich. The research by Cao Ziyang (2025) is an outstanding recent representative, which systematically proposes five major trends of youth emotional consumption in the digital age, greatly enriching the typological map of emotional consumption:

- (1) Healing Consumption: Consumption aimed at alleviating anxiety and seeking inner peace, such as “temple tourism,” buying sleep-aid aromatherapy, participating in meditation workshops, etc.
- (2) Compensatory Consumption: Consumption that compensates for certain lacks or regrets in real life, such as “spending money on virtual idols” (obtaining emotional companionship and a sense of identity through monetary investment), buying childhood nostalgic snacks, etc.
- (3) Novelty-Seeking Consumption: Consumption pursuing novel and unique experiences, such as experiencing various themed immersive scripted murder games (jubensha), buying blind boxes, etc.
- (4) Sentimental/Nostalgic Consumption: Consumption for the sake of certain memories, cultural symbols, or collective sentiments, such as supporting domestic trend brands (guochao), buying classic IP co-branded products, etc.
- (5) Performative Consumption: Consumption where the main purpose is not private experience but display on social media to shape a personal image, such as checking in at 网红 stores (internet-famous stores), buying exquisite meals for “sharing pics,” etc.

These classifications provide direct and effective analytical tools for accurately capturing and analyzing the di-

verse consumption practices of Generation Z.

2.3 Risk Critique: Profound Insights into the Alienation of Emotional Consumption

Scholars have not stopped at describing phenomena but have further turned to critical analysis, revealing the risks of alienation behind emotional consumption. Zhou Xuanchen's (2025) research on "new mysticism" sharply points out that its essence is youth's participation in "pseudo-ritualistic feeling" and "temporary mental escape" under "liquid modernity." While it can provide temporary comfort, it may mask real problems, leading to spiritual emptiness and loss of value. Yang Rongjun and Xie Zhiyao (2025), from the perspective of political economy of communication, critique "virtual 'her' consumption" (such as virtual lovers, AI companions), analyzing how capital uses technology to manufacture emotional needs and conduct precise exploitation, revealing the cold capital logic behind emotional consumption. These studies provide critical perspectives for this project to identify the dark side of emotional consumption.

2.4 Research Review: Existing Foundation and the Entry Point of This Study

In summary, existing domestic research has provided quite profound insights into the theoretical origins, phenomenological types, and potential risks of emotional consumption. However, from a macro perspective, there is still room for deepening and integration: First, the micro-mechanism of the specific collusion mechanism of "capital-technology-media"—i.e., how alienation is step-by-step achieved through specific algorithm recommendations, interface design, and marketing rhetoric—this "black box" remains insufficiently analyzed. Second, existing research is somewhat scattered; how to organically integrate the three perspectives of macro (modernity structure), meso (technological media mechanisms), and micro (individual psychology and practice) to form a clear, logically consistent integrated analytical framework is a key breakthrough point this study attempts to make. Finally, the subjectivity, creativity, and reflexivity of Generation Z in emotional consumption need further highlighting.

This study adopts a purely qualitative research method, without quantitative data collection or empirical testing, but achieves research objectives through in-depth textual analysis of academic literature and real-world cases.

(1) Literature Analysis Method: Systematically review domestic and international research related to emotional consumption, focusing on analyzing Wang Ning's (2000) theoretical framework and its evolution in the digital age, laying the theoretical foundation for the research.

(2) Case Study Method: Select the most representative phenomena such as "temple tourism" and "spending money on virtual idols" for in-depth analysis. Systematically collect publicly available secondary textual data such as news reports, social media discussions, brand copy, video bullet comments for these cases, conducting multi-angle verification and deep analysis.

(3) Comparative Research Method: Compare the characteristics of emotional consumption in different periods (e.g., when Wang Ning's theory was proposed vs. the present) and of different types (e.g., healing consumption vs. performative consumption) to reveal its development patterns and era characteristics.

2.5 Technical Route

(1) Basic Research Stage: Comprehensively collect literature related to emotional consumption and Generation Z consumption behavior, establishing a research database.

(2) Theoretical Construction Stage: Based on literature analysis, construct an integrated analytical framework for emotional consumption applicable to the digital age.

(3) Case Validation Stage: Use the constructed theoretical framework to analyze specific cases, perform three-stage coding (open coding, axial coding, selective coding) on the collected textual data, extract core categories and relationships, and verify the explanatory power of the framework.

(4) Conclusion Formulation Stage: Summarize research findings, construct an explanatory model, and propose targeted viewpoints and suggestions.

In terms of feasibility, the literature resources and public case materials relied upon by this study are extremely abundant, without involving complex data collection processes, ensuring full feasibility.

3. Typical Phenomena and Motivational Analysis of Generation Z's Emotional Consumption in the Digital Age

3.1 Typical Case Analysis

3.1.1 "Temple Tourism" and Healing Consumption

Temples, once primarily frequented by middle-aged and elderly worshippers, now see an influx of young faces. They pray for bracelets, stamp seals, drink coffee, and write wishing plaques. This phenomenon is far from a simple religious revival; it is typical healing consumption. Under the immense pressure from academics, employment, and "involution" (neijuan), young people seek a "heterotopia" to temporarily detach from reality and gain

inner peace. The spatial atmosphere, sense of ritual, and underlying traditional cultural symbols of the temple provide them with a low-cost, easily accessible emotional massage and spiritual comfort. Sharing on social media adds a slight performative color, satisfying the need for social display.

3.1.2 “Spending Money on Virtual Idols” (Kejin) and Compensatory Consumption

Users invest large amounts of money (“kejin”) in virtual idols, buying virtual gifts, voting on charts, even customizing exclusive content. This deeply reflects Generation Z’s longing for emotional companionship and highly controllable emotional relationships. In a context where real interpersonal interactions may bring uncertainty and hurt, virtual idols provide an idealized object for emotional projection that is “absolutely safe” and “will never collapse” (yong bu ta fang). Through consumption, users not only gain the illusion of the idol’s “response” but also obtain a strong sense of belonging and collective identity within the fan community. Capital, through meticulously designed interaction mechanisms, ranking systems, and scarcity marketing, continuously stimulates and amplifies this emotional need, guiding sustained consumption.

3.2 Deep-Seated Motivations: Psychological Needs and Social Mentality

Behind the above phenomena lie the distinct psychological needs and epochal social mentality of Generation Z:

(1) Alleviating Anxiety and Seeking Certainty: In a highly uncertain social environment, emotional consumption becomes a coping mechanism. Whether seeking “hints” from deities (temples) or purchasing certain “responses” (virtual idols), it is an attempt to grasp constants amongst variables.

(2) Emotional Companionship and Desire for Belonging: As a generation with a high proportion of only children and potentially limited real-world social circles, their reliance on online communities and virtual relationships is deeper, longing to find understanding and resonance within them.

(3) Self-Expression and Identity Construction: Consumption becomes a label defining “who I am.” Whether showcasing aesthetic taste through consumption choices or integrating into specific communities (fandom) through consumption behaviors, it is an act of expressing and constructing identity.

(4) Experience-Oriented and Spiritual Satisfaction: Compared to the material itself, Generation Z values the sense of experience and emotional value brought by consumption more. “Pampering oneself” becomes one of the core consumption motivations, making it natural to spend

money for moods and emotions.

4. Mechanisms, Alienation, and Future Directions

4.1 The Collusion Mechanism of “Capital-Technology-Media”

Emotional consumption in the digital age does not occur naturally; it is the result of precise collusion between “capital-technology-media.” Its operational mechanism is as follows:

(1) Technology Capture (Algorithms): Platforms use algorithms to continuously capture user behavior data such as browsing, liking, and dwell time, accurately mapping users’ emotional preference profiles and identifying their anxiety points and desires.

(2) Capital Development (Marketing): Brands and capital utilize these insights to develop products and services that directly hit users’ emotional pain points (e.g., “healing” products, virtual companionship services), and conduct emotional mobilization through precisely targeted advertisements and marketing rhetoric (e.g., “you deserve it,” “love yourself well”).

(3) Media Amplification (Social Media): Social media provides a stage for display, sharing, and comparison. KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) and overwhelming UGC (User-Generated Content) jointly create consumption trends, amplifying individual emotional consumption behaviors into collective phenomena, forming a “spiral of silence” and consumption pressure.

In this process, technology is the sensitive “detector,” capital is the efficient “developer,” and media is the powerful “amplifier” and “showroom.” The three are interlocked, collectively guiding, amplifying, and even manufacturing natural emotional needs into sustained consumer desires.

4.2 From Satisfaction to Manufacturing: The Alienation Risk of Emotional Consumption

The intensification of the collusion mechanism leads to the alienation of emotional consumption, shifting from “satisfying needs” to “manufacturing desires”:

(1) Need Alienation: Consumers gradually find it difficult to distinguish their true needs from externally shaped desires. Consumption ceases to be a way to solve problems and may instead become a source of new anxieties (e.g., “gear anxiety”).

(2) Relationship Alienation: Real interpersonal emotional connections may be replaced by purchasable, formulaic virtual relationships, leading to the deterioration of social skills and estrangement from real relationships.

(3) Value Alienation: Self-worth becomes increasingly tied to consumption capacity and the symbols consumed, forming an objectified logic of “I consume, therefore I am.”

4.3 Future Directions and Guiding Strategies

Looking ahead, emotional consumption will continue to evolve. Technological developments (e.g., AI, VR, AR) will provide more immersive and realistic emotional experience products, potentially further blurring the boundary between virtual and real. Simultaneously, consumer reflexivity and criticality are also awakening, developing increasing immunity to “leak-cutting” (exploitative) marketing.

In response, healthy guiding strategies should focus on:

- (1) Individual Level: Strengthen media literacy and financial literacy education, cultivate critical thinking and rational consumption habits among Generation Z, and encourage them to explore diversified ways of emotional satisfaction.
- (2) Industry Level: Advocate for “responsible emotional marketing.” Brands should strive to provide truly valuable emotional experiences rather than over-exploiting human weaknesses for commercial gain, building long-term brand trust.
- (3) Societal Level: Families, schools, and society should work together to create a more inclusive and supportive environment, reducing individuals’ emotional lack and anxiety at the source, allowing emotional consumption to return to its supplementary position rather than becoming the core of emotional life.

5. Conclusion

This study reviewed the theoretical origins of emotional consumption since its proposal by Professor Wang Ning and, within the context of the digital age, conducted an in-depth analysis of its development and practice among Generation Z, drawing on new typological findings and critical perspectives. The research shows that emotional consumption in the digital age presents new characteristics of diversification, experiential focus, and community orientation, serving as an important way for Generation Z to cope with the dilemmas of modernity, seek emotional satisfaction, and construct identity.

However, the collusion mechanism of “capital-technology-media,” while satisfying needs, also contains the risk of manufacturing desires and causing alienation. In the future, the healthy development of emotional consumption requires collaborative efforts from individuals, industries, and society—acknowledging its rationality while being vigilant of its potential pitfalls, guiding it towards a more

rational, responsible, and people-oriented direction. The integrated analytical framework constructed in this study provides a tool for understanding this complex phenomenon, and the in-depth analysis of typical cases reveals its internal logic and dynamic mechanisms. For Generation Z, finding a balance between consuming emotions and being consumed by them will be a long-term(topic/issue) they must face.

In summary, emotional consumption in the digital age is a double-edged sword for Generation Z. It is both a band-aid for self-healing and a gently woven trap by capital. This study argues that its future development will inevitably exist within this tension between “liberation” and “alienation.” Therefore, cultivating the ability to be “consciously immersed”—that is, being able to enjoy the immediate joy brought by emotional consumption while maintaining a critical alertness to the operational mechanisms behind it—might become an essential survival wisdom for Generation Z in the digital age.

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