

Research on Chinese love consumption behavior based on psychological account theory

Xunmeng Shi

School of Economics & Management, Tongji University, Shanghai, China

2451426@tongji.edu.cn

Abstract. Studying the causes of abnormal consumption in love is of great significance in the context of young people's love anxiety. This article explores the irrational phenomena and behavioral mechanisms in the love consumption behavior of Chinese college students based on Richard Taylor's psychological account theory. Research has shown that romantic consumption is classified as an intimate relationship account, isolated from other practical accounts, leading to a decrease in consumer sensitivity to prices and a willingness to pay premiums for symbols such as "romance" and "ritual". By integrating the theories of fund classification, tag effect, and emotional accounts, this study systematically analyzes the psychological motivations behind behaviors such as gift exchange and symbolic consumption, and reveals how businesses can use these psychological motivations to increase sales. This article focuses on the psychological account theory of young people in China, explaining their abnormal behaviors in love consumption (such as overspending, ritualistic consumption, etc.), providing a new perspective for understanding emotional consumption behavior, and providing theoretical basis for optimizing product positioning and formulating emotional marketing strategies for businesses. It also helps college students establish a rational consumption concept, alleviate love anxiety, and contribute to the mental health of young people.

Keywords: romantic consumption behavior, behavioral economics, psychological account theory, consumer psychology, romantic experience

1. Introduction

Love provides young people with spiritual enjoyment and emotional value, and is an important stage for entering the marriage hall. However, research shows that most Chinese couples will engage in consumption behaviors that are not in line with their usual consumption habits or exceed their budget during love due to various factors such as face saving, advertising effects, pursuit of romantic experiences, hormone stimulation, etc. [1]. The scale of China's love consumption market continues to expand, and love consumption has become an important expense for young couples, and even some young groups are facing love anxiety. The abnormal consumption behavior of young couples is influenced by various factors, including emotional expression, relationship maintenance, personal image display, etc., and is significantly affected by emotional factors. Therefore, the introduction of behavioral finance theory is necessary for this analysis.

The psychological account theory is a behavioral finance concept formally proposed by Richard Thaler in 1985, which holds that psychological accounts are the process by which people encode, classify, and value outcomes (especially economic outcomes) psychologically. It reveals the psychological cognitive process of people when making (financial) wealth decisions [2].

In recent years, psychological accounts have become more mature in analyzing mass consumption behavior, designing marketing strategies, financial investment, and other aspects. However, there is still a gap in the systematic analysis of intimate relationship consumption behavior [3, 4]. This article explains the abnormal behavior in Chinese love consumption from the perspective of psychological account theory, and believes that the expenses used to maintain the relationship between couples in intimate relationships are automatically classified into intimate relationship accounts, thus showing a different psychological valuation from other expenses. Using the characteristics of intimate relationship accounts to explain the "abnormal consumption" behavior in the process of college students' love, paying attention to the impact of psychological account classification on the love consumption behavior of Chinese college students, will help enrich the application of psychological account theory in the college student population, and provide a new perspective for understanding emotional consumption of Chinese college students.

And it can help businesses better cater to consumer needs in market segmentation, product positioning, and marketing strategies, enhancing marketing effectiveness.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Mental accounting theory

There are two core theories of psychological accounts, one of which is the theory of fund classification and label effect. People tend to categorize existing funds based on their sources or purposes, and after entering into a romantic relationship, they tend to divide them into love funds, which are used for dating expenses, gift expenses, anniversary ceremony expenses, and paying additional amounts for items labeled as "romantic" by merchants. The second theory is the establishment of emotional accounts, which means that love funds are usually divided into emotional accounts for emotional maintenance and isolated from other practical accounts. In the early stages of a relationship, both parties will establish emotional accounts in their hearts based on their first impressions of each other and their expectations for the relationship. And the beautiful emotional experiences in love deposit positive emotional currency into the emotional account, making both parties willing to invest more money in the romantic relationship.

2.2. The sociological theoretical basis of love consumption

The first one is the gift exchange theory, which holds that gifts not only have practicality as objects, but also serve as symbols carrying the giver's intention [5]. Gifts in love are often used as an expression of love, serving as emotional glue. Gift giving behaviors such as Valentine's Day and Christmas strengthen collective identity through repetitive symbolic practices, and factors such as gift packaging, characteristics, and prices have become a reflection of social norms [5]. For example, luxury gifts are valued by the giver for their high price, which makes the recipient feel the giver's love. The second is the manipulation of consumer symbols. Refers to businesses using the romantic psychology of romantic consumers to endow products with the attribute of "symbolic love" through advertising slogans, so that couples can attribute their consumption of the item to emotional maintenance accounts rather than practical product accounts, guiding couples to make unnecessary additional consumption [5]. The advertising slogan of Häagen Dazs ice cream, 'If you love her, treat her to Häagen Dazs', attracts couples to come to the store for consumption [6].

3. Analysis of love consumption behavior based on psychological account theory

3.1. Groundbreaking research on the relationship between consumption and romance

In 2002, Boden and Williams focused on the new intersection of emotions and social issues, re-examined the function of consumption in achieving romance, pointed out the binary issues of mind body, rationality, and emotion in consumer literature, analyzed the changes in the social and emotional connections caused by the "purchase of romance" behavior, and laid the foundation for understanding the relationship between consumption and emotions in modern society [7].

3.2. Female consumption behavior or controlled by physiological cycle

Women are influenced by hormones and have an increased desire to consume clothing and cosmetics during specific physiological cycles, and are more inclined to purchase "appearance oriented" products. In 2011, Durant Kristina et al. studied female consumption behavior from a physiological perspective and came to this conclusion [8]. Therefore, during specific physiological cycles of emotional fluctuations in women, partners may be more inclined to consume to meet their psychological needs and maintain emotional stability.

3.3. Exploration of the correlation between romantic relationships and flower consumption

In 2013, Li and Huang studied the relationship between the development stages of romantic relationships, relationship satisfaction, and the likelihood of purchasing flowers. They found that consumers in the "personality satisfaction" stage were more likely to buy flowers, and those with high passion for the relationship often paired them with other gifts. The higher the satisfaction, the lower the likelihood of buying flowers [9]. This reasonably explains why couples who have been in a relationship for a long time tend to reduce their consumption of ceremonial products and may increase their consumption of practical items in pursuit of sustainable relationship development. Therefore, in the later stages of a relationship, the likelihood of exceeding the budget for romantic expenses decreases and tends to return to normal.

3.4. Study on the interaction between loneliness and conspicuous consumption in love

The person with high feelings of loneliness in love may compensate for emotional insecurity through frequent conspicuous consumption. In 2014, Guo et al. elucidated the interactive effects of loneliness and conspicuous consumption, explaining abnormal consumption behavior from the perspective of romantic psychological security [10]. The results indicate that the party whose emotional value is not fully satisfied or lacks confidence in the relationship tends to engage in more "face saving consumption" to compensate for the lack of security, which reasonably explains the problem of unequal consumption between couples.

3.5. Analysis of the influence of attachment style on love consumption behavior

Mende Martin pointed out that attachment style influences romantic consumption. Avoidant type is due to early emotional deficiency, avoidance of intimacy, and less romantic consumption. Anxiety type is extremely insecure and often confirms love through consumption. The fearful type both desires and fears, often imitating safe consumption. Safe inner confidence, moderate consumption, and a greater emphasis on emotional communication in consumption stem from the different perceptions of intimate relationships among individuals with different attachment styles [11].

3.6. Research on gifts in love consumption from a multidisciplinary perspective

For couples in love, gift exchange is not about exchanging value and equality, but rather an expression of love and care between both parties. Therefore, when selecting gifts for their significant other, they often make purchasing decisions that exceed their budget due to neglecting the importance of price, meaning, and surprise. This is a major psychological driving factor for abnormal romantic spending. In 2023, Perez and Clotilde first combined Pierce's semiotics, anthropological research, and consumption theory to study the meaning of gifts and gift exchange, and studied gift related content in love consumption behavior from a multidisciplinary perspective, providing new evidence for the study of love consumption behavior under psychological account theory [5].

3.7. Supplementary study on the influence of romantic experience on consumer product preferences

In 2024, Zhang and others conducted four experiments based on the theory of expansion and construction. Discovering romantic experiences broadens thinking and makes consumers more inclined to self-improve products such as books, training courses, etc. This achievement has improved the research on romantic experiences and consumer choices, revealing the mechanism by which romantic experiences affect consumer psychology, and providing new ideas for businesses to target marketing and attract consumers with romantic elements [12].

4. Conclusion

This article delves into love consumption behavior based on psychological accounts and draws the following conclusions. On a theoretical level, the psychological account theory provides a new perspective for studying romantic consumption behavior. Individuals in love will psychologically classify different types of consumption, such as dates, gifts, anniversaries, etc., which affect consumption decisions. From a practical perspective, businesses can develop precise marketing strategies based on the characteristics of their love psychology accounts, develop distinctive products and services for different accounts, and increase product sales. Couple consumers can also optimize their consumption decisions by understanding psychological accounts, avoiding excessive or unreasonable consumption, and achieving a balance between emotions and economy.

There are shortcomings in this study, such as limited sample size. This study focuses on the young population in China, and the sample size is relatively narrow, resulting in research results that are not universally applicable. And the factors influencing romantic behavior are not fully considered, ignoring possible influencing factors such as family economic status and regional cultural differences. The research method is single and mainly relies on theoretical analysis, without obtaining first-hand data through questionnaire surveys, interviews, experiments, and other methods. The rigor and reliability of the conclusions need to be improved.

Based on the theory of psychological accounts and previous research conclusions, this article proposes the following suggestions for young people's healthy love consumption, which can help maintain a balance between emotional and financial expenditures, avoid overspending, alleviate economic anxiety, and promote rational consumption and sustainable development of intimate relationships. One is to reconstruct the boundary of psychological accounts, distinguish emotional investment from symbolic premium, that is, establish an independent budget for psychological accounts, and clearly define the "upper limit of love consumption" (such as 30% of income) in personal consumption expenses to avoid emotional impulses overdrawing other necessary expenses. Be wary of the premium trap labeled as "romantic" and refuse to buy symbolic products with excessive premiums out of impulse. The second is to intentionally exercise and invest non-monetary resources to enhance relationships, such as spending time, energy, and other non-monetary resources with partners to maintain relationships, such as cooking

together, sending letters, planning birthday parties, etc., to reduce dependence on high prices. Establish a consumption concept that prioritizes emotional value, communicate with partners, reach consensus on ways to express love, focus on the substantial emotional value brought by gifts, and believe that a deep conversation may enhance trust more than luxury goods. The social should resist the influence of consumerism and face culture. Be wary of consumerism inducements such as short videos, "Ten Things Couples Must Do" on social media platforms, and "Festival Transfer Amounts Representing Love". Pay attention to the sincere expression of love between both parties in love, oppose the use of consumerism to "regulate" love, and value heart to heart communication. Track consumption destinations through accounting software, regularly analyze which expenses truly enhance relationship intimacy, and which are influenced by "face driven" or "impulsive consumption".

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