

The rational turn and cultural empowerment mechanism of Generation Z's symbolic consumption

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Abstract. In the context of a consumer society, Generation Z's symbolic consumption demonstrates a rational shift driven by socioeconomic uncertainty and cultural confidence. Economic pressure slowdown and increased uncertainty have prompted young people to pay more attention to the cost-effectiveness of consumption, while cultural revival reshapes value cognition. Unlike predecessors' brand obsession, Gen Z adopts a form of holistic rationality—deconstructing cultural narratives beyond superficial symbols. This shift constitutes a closed-loop mechanism of cultural empowerment: brands reinterpret traditional elements into modern consumption codes through cultural symbolization, while consumers reinforce cultural identity and emotional resonance through symbolic valorization. Phenomena such as the re-creation of national tide brands with the help of non-heritage elements and the revitalization of cultural heritage through digital immersion technology in the cultural tourism experience are vivid illustrations of this transformation of consumer ethics.

Keywords: symbolic consumption, Generation Z, cultural empowerment, cultural tourism, national tide brands

1. Introduction

The 21st century marks a global transition to consumption-driven societies, where commodities function as symbols of status and cultural identity. Consumerism's alienation emerges through capital-media collusion, fueling conspicuous consumption and trapping consumers in symbolic competition. In the digital and globalized age, Baudrillard's symbolic consumption theory faces digital-age challenges. Generation Z (born 1995-2009), as digital natives, are deeply involved in the logic of symbolic consumption, but also constantly generate strategies of resistance to it. The overlapping effects of economic fluctuations, cultural self-confidence awakening, and social environment changes have pushed their consumption practices to show a significant rational turn.

While existing studies predominantly emphasize the alienating mechanisms of symbolic consumption, they often lack a systematic explanation for the underlying logic of this rational transformation. Although cases such as the rise of *guochao* (domestic cultural trend) and "cultural tourism immersion experience" confirm the economic value of cultural empowerment, however, the particular path of transforming cultural resources into consumption symbols has not yet formed an operable framework.

Drawing upon critical consumerism theory, symbolic consumption theory, and the framework of cultural empowerment, this paper combines the literature to explore the symbolic consumption behaviors of Generation Z. It mainly focuses on three aspects, namely, its rational turn, the mechanism of cultural empowerment, and its manifestation across various application scenarios.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Symbolic consumption theory

Baudrillard's theory of symbolic consumption posits that in consumer society, the value of commodities has shifted from use value to symbolic value. It reveals the deeper mechanism of alienation in consumer society: when the use value of commodities is replaced by symbolic value, the "consumption of things" is alienated into the "reproduction of symbolic order" [1]. This paradigm has been divided into two paths in subsequent studies: the structuralist critical path emphasizes the construction of symbolic hegemony by capital through advertising [2], branding [3], and the alienation of the consumer as a "slave of desire" [4]; the

cultural studies approach focuses on the potential of consumer resistance to symbols [5], arguing that consumers can reverse discipline the logic of capital through symbolic collage, parody, and reconstruction.

2.2. Characteristics of Generation Z consumer behavior

Generation Z's consumption behavior is marked by distinctive and contradictory characteristics, which are both deeply trapped in the digital vortex of symbolic dependence and sprouting a rational critique of consumerism. This paper focuses on the resistance strategies of Generation Z to the alienation of symbolic consumption, which has changed from showy to rationalized, and the perception and pursuit of symbolic value has changed from the pure pursuit of brand symbols to focusing on the multiple values of products. Yang Rongjun and Lu Han have pointed out that capital and media conspire to build a symbolic consumption trap through algorithmic recommendation and social media marketing, which leads to the cognitive dilemma of the "symbolic fetishism" of Generation Z [6]. However, existing studies have yet to explain how this rational turn reconfigures market value hierarchies or systematically analyze the role of cultural empowerment. In the process of the development of consumer society, the symbolic consumption of Generation Z has made a rational turn. According to Yao and Zhou, this is a phenomenon of "dual nature" between "over-consumption" and "reverse-consumption", which is an active resistance to the alienation of consumerism, reflecting the return of cognitive rationality [7]. However, the existing research fails to explain how the rational turn reconfigures the market value order and lacks a systematic analysis of cultural empowerment. Technological determinism emphasizes "algorithmic rationality" shaped by digital habitus, but ignores consumers' resistance practices in interface interactions; cultural capitalism focuses on symbolic appropriation by subcultural communities, but fails to explain the structural impact of algorithmic recommendations on symbolic production.

2.3. Cultural empowerment

Zhang Jijiao proposes that cultural empowerment is the process of giving input objects new meaning-generating capacity and value-adding potential, and defines cultural empowerment as "the transformation of cultural resources into symbols for consumption [8]. The cultural empowerment mechanism of symbolic consumption is to transform abstract cultural connotations into a system of consumer symbols, realizing the two-way interaction between cultural meaning and capital appreciation. The transformation of cultural resources into consumption symbols needs to break through the boundaries of the original context and reconstruct the meaning interpretation system, and the transformation of consumption symbols into economic capital needs to focus on value migration and balance the relationship between culture and business. Bourdieu suggests that cultural capital can be economically transformed through education and consumption. He emphasizes the key role of field breakthroughs in cashing out capital. This paper extends Bourdieu's insights into the realm of digital consumer culture, where cultural empowerment is increasingly mediated by digital platforms and algorithmic logic.

3. The rational turn in symbolic consumption in the Generation Z

With the advancement of the new technological revolution and the further development of productive forces, human society has transitioned from a production-oriented society to a consumption-oriented society, and people's consumption of objects has gradually shifted from functional needs to spiritual needs. In the process of consumption, more and more people use objects as a medium to display their prestige and class symbols, and this consumption paradigm will inevitably give rise to extreme waves of consumer culture, and symbolic consumption is also alienated into "ostentatious consumption", "over-consumption" and "over-consumption". As digital natives, Generation Z's symbolic consumption alienation predicament is reflected in the fact that capital and media conspire to build a symbolic consumption trap through cultural inducement and one-way information manipulation, causing them to fall into the cognitive predicament of "symbolic fetishism". In the new era of maturing consumer society, a new round of changes in consumption patterns has emerged: Generation Z's symbolic consumption has taken a clear rational turn, and commodities are no longer a single ostentatious symbol but continue to be scrutinized under the scrutiny of multiple values. This trend has given rise to the two-way empowerment of cultural value and commercial value, becoming a new pole of economic growth.

3.1. Characteristics of the rational turn

Generation Z consumers present a rational consumption mode in the whole process: before decision-making, through the integration of multi-channel information to reduce over-reliance on algorithmic recommendations, thus realizing independent rational judgment; during the decision-making process, dynamic adjustment between symbolic value and practical value, cultural identity and economic rationality, no longer blindly pursuing the symbolic value of the brand, but paying more attention to the balance between the actual performance of the product and the price; after decision-making, they make secondary decisions through community interaction. Moreover, Generation Z consumers are keen to share their consumption experience on platforms such as Little Red Book, which not only accomplishes the expression of their value but also influences the purchase decisions of

other consumers. This is not only a reflection of their rational shift in consumption but also promotes the healthy development of the entire consumer market to a certain extent.

Generation Z's consumption shows a rational return from "symbolic premium" to "value core", promoting the formation of a new quality-oriented consumption trend by strictly screening high-quality products, rationally examining brand value propositions and actively choosing environmentally friendly consumption methods [9]. Essentially, this represents an active resistance to the alienation inherent in consumerism, reflecting Generation Z's rational cognition in reevaluating the subject-object relationship within consumption [10].

In the process of consumption, Generation Z has a high demand for product quality, and at the same time, they are also increasingly concerned about the brand's connotation, including the brand's values, social responsibility, cultural connotation, etc. In the process of consumption, they are also more inclined to choose environmentally friendly and sustainable products and consumption methods. When the utility brought by blind symbolic consumption diminishes, its alienation dilemma becomes increasingly clear, which makes Generation Z no longer satisfied with the superficial pleasure of consumption, but pursue the long-term value and personal growth that consumption behavior can bring, thus promoting the transformation of symbolic consumption from showy to rationalized and meaningful investment. This transformation is not only the inevitable result of the accumulation of cultural capital in the digital era but also the collective choice of Generation Z to seek a spiritual breakthrough in the alienation of symbolic consumption. The concept of rational consumption not only facilitates personal growth and development, shapes a unique identity, but also has a positive impact on social economy and culture.

3.2. Drivers of the rational turn

The rational shift of Generation Z's symbolic consumption is driven by the social environment, culture, and macroeconomic factors. These factors have shaped the rational consumption pattern of Generation Z - a dynamic balance between algorithmic recommendation and value recognition, a spiral between symbolic dependence and value reflection, and ultimately the transformation of identity from passive symbol receiver to active meaning constructor.

Firstly, the popularization and development of the Internet provide underlying support for rational consumption by reducing information asymmetry and improving decision-making efficiency. With the help of search engines, social media, and professional evaluation platforms, Generation Z can easily obtain massive amounts of information, and conduct an all-around comparative analysis of different brands and products, which makes them more rational in their consumption decisions, and they no longer easily pay for excessive symbolic premiums; the price comparison tool can track the fluctuation of commodity prices in real-time, and the AI recommender system realizes accurate demand matching through algorithmic optimization, which improves decision-making efficiency significantly compared with the traditional mode; the "De-influencing" mechanism of social media forms a dynamic consumption decision-making system. The "weed-pulling" mechanism of social media creates a dynamic screening of consumption decisions, confirming the deconstructive power of changes in the information environment on the unidirectional symbolic hegemony.

Secondly, the enhancement of cultural confidence has prompted Generation Z to transform consumption behavior into the expression of cultural identity. Collective cultural identity can effectively dominate consumption behavior, giving consumers an "Eagle Eye", accurately anchoring consumption demand, and thus effectively avoiding impulse consumption. Therefore, this kind of consumption tendency can force the market to upgrade, especially since the demand side transformation plays a key role, which also makes the consumption behavior of Generation Z tend to rationalize. In addition, the concepts of environmental protection and social justice have been spread globally, which have had a profound impact on the consumption concepts of Generation Z. They were exposed to a lot of information about environmental issues and social inequality, raising their awareness on social and environmental impact of their consumption behavior. Thus, consumption becomes not only a means of satisfying personal needs but also a channel for expressing personal values and engaging in societal discourse.

Finally, economic uncertainty is forcing consumer decision-making to become more prudent. Against the backdrop of increased global economic volatility, the consumption decisions of Generation Z are characterized by a "dual nature". They cope with economic uncertainty through preventive saving strategies and pay more attention to the product life cycle rather than simply pursuing brand premiums in their consumption decisions. They maintain a clear understanding of symbolic value and a poetic imagination of the meaning of life. In this game of sensibility and rationality, they choose to alleviate anxiety with short-term symbolic consumption and defend themselves against systemic risks with long-term rational decision-making.

4. The cultural empowerment mechanism of Generation Z's symbolic consumption

Cultural empowerment involves transforming cultural resources into meaningful consumer symbols and value-adding potential by tapping and integrating material, institutional, and customary cultural resources. Its core lies in transforming cultural elements into a driving mechanism for social innovation, economic transformation, or individual development. Specifically, the cultural empowerment mechanism of symbolic consumption refers to the transformation of abstract cultural connotations into perceptible consumption symbol systems, thus giving commodities, brands, or consumption behaviors a symbolic value that goes beyond the practical function, and ultimately realizing the bidirectional interaction between cultural meaning and capital appreciation.

The transformation of cultural resources into consumer symbols is the starting point of cultural empowerment. This initial step— "culture into symbols"—involves translating elements of traditional culture into contemporary "cultural labels" that

resonate with and are monetarily valued by modern consumers. The essence of this is the value migration of cultural capital in contemporary society and the regeneration of the cultural meaning of traditional culture through the deconstruction and reconstruction of semiotics. This process features a dual logic, which requires transcending traditional cultural elements from their original contextual constraints and systematically reconstructing their semantic interpretation frameworks within consumerist paradigms. As Bourdieu noted, the transformability of cultural capital depends on its ability to establish symbolic power in a specific field [11].

Once cultural resources enter the field of consumption, traditional cultural symbols are extracted from the historical context, and their material carriers and spiritual cores undergo the semiotics of "decontextualization", in which their material forms and spiritual meanings are reorganized. This process is like doing "modernization" to an old antique - not only to break its original specific scene but also to give it an "outer packaging" that can be understood in the new era. Through this process, the old stuff not only retains its historical flavor but also walks into the shopping mall shelves openly, and finally completes the gorgeous transformation from a museum collection to a trendy item.

Breaking through the boundaries of the original context requires the use of modern design logic to purify and simplify traditional elements, stripping them of their original functional constraints and transforming them into universal aesthetic symbols. Entering the digital era, traditional elements can break through the physical limitations of the original material carriers and realize the trans-carrier transplantation of symbols through media technology. Reconstructing the meaning interpretation system requires not only mining the emotional covenants in collective memory, transforming traditional narratives into symbolic carriers that can trigger identity, but also injecting new contemporary connotations into the symbols so that they can adapt to the value judgment system of the consumer society, so that the traditional wisdom can gain contemporary explanatory power, and the act of consumption can be sublimated into the practice of cultural identity, and ultimately realize the complete leap from cultural resources to symbolic capital.

After completing the transformation of cultural resources, the transformation of consumer symbols into economic capital enters the substantive stage, i.e. "symbols into value". Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital points out that when cultural symbols break through the limitations of a specific field and are re-contextualized in a wider social space, the symbolic power they carry will be transformed into quantifiable economic value [11]. This kind of transformation is not a simple stacking of symbols but pays more attention to realizing the value migration in the consumer market and reconstructing the value composition system of commodities. When cultural symbols are embedded in the commodity exchange system, it triggers a fundamental change in the form of value, which makes the original ordinary things suddenly become "high-class and worthy of consumption". Although culture needs to rely on material carriers to be presented, and thus commodities with cultural symbols have considerable economic value, it is worth noting that in the process of transforming cultural capital into commercial value, it is also necessary to pay attention to the "tipping point" to ensure that the concentration of elements is controlled within the comfort zone of consumer perception [12]. Make the goods not only with the unique charm of cultural heritage but also reflect their functionality. It is only by triggering cultural resonance without cognitive overload that people can find a balance between cultural reverence and commercial growth in terms of sales growth.

5. Symbolic consumption of culturally empowered application scenarios

5.1. The cultural narrative of national wave brands

The cultural narrative of the *guochao* (national tide) brand embodies the transformation from simple symbol transplantation to cultural narrative innovation, effectively "telling a good Chinese story" and realizing the creative transformation of traditional culture. Guided by the logic from "revitalization of cultural resources" to "transformation of commercial capital", and through the synergy of technological empowerment and cultural narrative, these brands tap into the scarce symbolic resources such as non-heritage skills and regional culture and realizes the commercial transformation of traditional cultural symbols. Among them, as an important link in the construction of the value of the National Tide brand, the technical credibility enhances the core competitiveness, and the cultural narrative enhances the consumption motivation, which not only improves the product power in the domestic market but also upgrades "Made in China" into the cultural symbols of "Made by China" [13]. A notable example is the Palace Museum, which adopted a "cultural relic IP + digital technology" strategy to digitally animate the classic painting A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains, incorporating blockchain technology to protect copyright. This initiative achieved annual sales exceeding 1.5 billion yuan. According to iiMedia Research, 28.55% of Chinese consumers in 2024 preferred the Palace Museum among cultural and creative brands.

The transformation process of cultural and creative products breaks through the simple logic of symbol transplantation: firstly, on the technical level, the use of 3D modeling technology to restore the details of cultural relics, so that the city life in "Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival" is presented in the form of holographic projection; secondly, on the cultural level, the "Forbidden City 600 Years" historical narrative is transformed into a consumable symbolic commodity, such as the "Forbidden City Lipstick". The "Forbidden City Lipstick" is sold in palace colors; eventually, the value is transformed at the commercial level, reaching Generation Z through the Tmall flagship store, Jittery live broadcasting, and other channels, activating the inherent cultural needs and forming a two-way closed loop of cultural identity and commercial realization [14].

5.2. Symbolic innovation in the literary and tourism experience

The cultural empowerment of the cultural tourism industry is essentially to transform local cultural resources into a perceptible and consumable symbolic system, turning local culture into a "playable and purchasable" experience, thus realizing the dynamic transformation of cultural capital into economic capital.

Firstly, recontextualize the elements of local culture, build a symbolic system that can be immersed in the experience, dress local culture in a coat that "tourists can understand", and establish a cultural bridge that is compatible with the cognition of contemporary tourists. The first step is to embed the historical narrative and cultural memories into the physical space, and transform the local area into a large-scale immersive theater so that the old place can be loaded with new stories [15]; the second step is to increase the interactive links so that the tourists can participate in person, and become a "temporary local"; the third step is to transform the historical documents into fragmented clues of the guide, and stimulate the tourists to explore the area on their own. Therefore, the economic value of cultural tourism is transformed, and the cultural experience is transformed into a network of value that can be multiplied to turn the cultural experience into a "bag of money". Design from the ticket economy, derivatives sales to customized services value-added layer, the amount of consumption and cultural depth binding; to create consumption scenarios, the design of network red card points to achieve traffic cash, so that tourists become a scenic spot free publicity, the formation of a benign cycle of culture and tourism consumption. For example, the phenomenal burst of fire in Harbin's cultural tourism industry demonstrates the remarkable wisdom of transforming regional cultural genes into economic capital [16]. Harbin's cultural tourism empowerment began with the creative translation of regional cultural genes, transforming climatic disadvantages into unique cultural capital, creating the romantic symbol of "The Wonderful Fate of Ice and Snow", and thus constructing the value network of ice and snow symbols, realizing the leapfrog development from a single ticket economy to the empowerment of the whole industry chain. According to the China Winter Tourism Development Report, the city received 430 million snow and ice tourists during the 2023-2024 snow and ice season, realizing an income of 524.7 billion yuan from snow and ice tourism [17]. In addition to the direct economic benefits, the living transformation of endangered cultures has also been realized, allowing non-heritage skills such as reindeer parades and birch-skin boat making to move from the deep mountains to the big world of ice and snow. The symbolic innovation of the cultural tourism experience is by no means a simple means of commercial realization, but a means to sublimate the geographical climate into a spiritual climate and to metamorphose the urban dilemma into a world-class cultural asset [18].

6. Conclusion

This paper reveals that the symbolic consumption of Generation Z is undergoing a profound shift from showy display to rational and meaningful investment, a shift that is the result of a combination of social environment, cultural, and macroeconomic factors. Its core lies in the innovative coupling of the reconstruction of the consumption value order and the cultural empowerment mechanism. In the information age, the Internet provides the foundation of rational consumption for Generation Z. Cultural self-confidence and social concepts influence their consumption concepts, and economic uncertainty prompts them to be more cautious in their consumption decisions.

This rational shift is marked by a shift from "symbolic premium" to "value core", characterized by rational decision-making across the entire consumption process. Specifically, Generation Z shows rational decision-making at different stages of consumption, focusing on product quality, brand connotation, and environmental sustainability, and pursuing the long-term value and personal growth brought by consumption behavior. This not only helps individuals shape their identity but also has a positive impact on society, economy, and culture.

Cultural empowerment plays a key role in this process. Through "cultural symbolization", traditional cultural resources are translated into modern contexts, and through "symbol valorization" to complete the transformation of economic capital, the two-way interactive chain of culture and capital successfully builds a value bridge between traditional culture and modern business. However, it is important to be aware of the "critical point" to avoid the risk of over-commercialization and dilution of cultural connotations leading to a low commercial realization rate, and to keep the concentration of cultural elements in the comfort zone of consumer cognition, to achieve the optimal balance between the communication of cultural connotations and commercial transformation. Among current applications, the National Tide brand and cultural tourism experience are important application scenarios of cultural empowerment, realizing the creative transformation of traditional culture and the economic value transformation of regional culture through innovative cultural narratives and innovative symbolic scenarios.

While this paper studies the symbolic consumption behavior of Generation Z, several limitations remain. It does not fully consider the differences in symbolic consumption behavior of this group in different regions and socio-economic backgrounds, lacks the depth of research on culture-driven mechanisms, and does not explore the influence of different cultural elements on the consumption decisions of Generation Z. The application scenarios only cover the national wave brands and cultural tourism experiences, and the incomplete coverage of scenarios affects the universality and completeness of the conclusions. In the future, with the continuous development of social economy and technology, the symbolic consumption of Generation Z may present new trends and characteristics. Future studies can further focus on the behavioral changes of Generation Z in the emerging consumption field, and how cultural empowerment can be better leveraged to promote the sustainable development of consumer markets and the inheritance and innovation of culture.

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