

## *Original Paper*

# The Negative Influence of Digital Consumerism on the Values of Youth and Coping Strategies

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### **Abstract**

*Digital consumerism is a new product that has evolved from consumerism in the digital space, and it is also an alienated form of consumption shaped under the manipulation of capital logic. Influenced by multiple factors such as "online media," "algorithmic domination," and "psychological manipulation," digital consumerism has contributed to the distortion of consumption content, exacerbated the misconduct of consumption subjects, and caused an imbalance in consumption rationality, thereby exerting a negative impact on the cultivation and shaping of young people's values. Digital consumerism undermines young people's value rationality through the "entertainmentization" of digital consumption, weakens their subjective consciousness through the "customization" of digital consumption, and solidifies their value perceptions through the "symbolization" of digital consumption. In response, it is necessary to regulate the orientation of digital consumption to shape young people's value rationality, supervise the orderly operation of algorithms to strengthen their subjective consciousness, and cultivate a healthy consumption psychology to construct their value perceptions. By doing so, we can effectively correct digital consumerism and promote the formation and development of correct values among young people.*

### **Keywords**

*Digital consumerism, Youth, Values, Logic of capital*

## **1. Introduction**

With the rapid advancement of information technology, the digital realm has become a ubiquitous domain of human activity. Digital consumption has emerged as a prevalent mode of spending in people's daily lives, profoundly influencing their thought patterns and value systems. However, under the influence of consumerism and capital accumulation, digital consumption has gradually evolved into digital consumerism. This not only lures individuals into pre-set traps of virtual and emotional

consumption but also undermines their ability to make sound value judgments and pursue meaningful goals. When confronted with the subtle control and enticement of digital capital, young people increasingly exhibit signs of addiction to the pleasurable experiences offered by digital consumption and an obsession with material indulgence in their value pursuits and lifestyles. Therefore, it is imperative to clarify the realities of digital consumerism, expose its adverse effects on the values of young people, and define clear pathways to resist it. This holds significant practical importance in fostering correct values among the youth and promoting their spiritual well-being.

## **2. The Real Symptoms of Digital Consumerism**

Digital consumerism represents the latest variant and alienated form of consumerism in the digital realm. It not only embodies the fundamental attributes of consumerism but also exhibits distinct characteristics of digital dissemination and emotional consumption. Leveraging digital technologies such as online media and intelligent algorithms, digital consumerism has propelled the development of consumption alienation towards deeper and more widespread levels. This has further exacerbated issues such as the distortion of consumption content, the misconduct of consumption subjects, and the imbalance of consumption rationality, ultimately steering human spiritual life towards abstraction and mystification.

### *2.1 The Distortion of Consumption Content Pushed by "Internet Media"*

Digital consumerism relies on digital technologies to reshape content and widely disseminates content that intertwines "capital logic" with "entertainment attributes" through online media. Compared to traditional media, online media disseminate consumption-related content in a more intelligent, open, and efficient manner. Driven by digital consumerism, major online media platforms, in an effort to cater to the psychological tendencies of consumer groups—such as the pursuit of novel experiences or the desire to cultivate a unique identity—aggressively promote a distorted consumption philosophy that prioritizes entertainment above all else. They even elevate this consumption philosophy to the status of a life value pursuit, thereby eroding the public's value perception system. Digital consumerists leverage online media to propagate the consumption ideology that "everything can be commodified," thereby obscuring consumers' correct value judgments and trapping them in the vicious cycle of "commodity fetishism" and the dilemma of polarized thinking, ultimately leading to their manipulation and enslavement by digital consumerism. Through online media, digital consumerists advocate the value pursuit that "consumption equals freedom," capturing the attention of consumer groups with heterogeneous symbols and, in doing so, subtly shaping their values. Digital consumerists, through online media, exaggerate the concept of "hedonic consumption," vigorously promoting the idea of living for the moment and indulging in immediate pleasures. This leads consumers to become addicted to digital consumption landscapes such as online live-streaming and online gaming, where they are unwittingly eroded by negative social trends such as digital consumerism, hedonism, and utilitarianism. Digital consumerists establish a value standard of "traffic-driven aesthetics" through online media to

incite the entertainment sentiment among consumer groups, immersing consumers in vulgar cultures such as "rustic culture," "internet celebrity culture," and "fan circle culture." This has led to the generalization of entertainment functions and the entertainment-oriented transformation of consumer spirit, significantly weakening the influence of mainstream societal values.

### *2.2 Algorithmic Domination Intensifies the Loss of Norms of Consumer Subject*

Digital consumption leverages intelligent algorithms to break down the limitations of consumption spaces, facilitating the shift of consumption scenarios and experiences towards virtual realms. This not only drives an open-ended upgrade in consumption patterns but also plunges consumer subjectivity into an unprecedented predicament. Digital consumerists utilize intelligent algorithms to create highly immersive virtual environments, luring consumers into indulging in the sensory stimuli brought about by emotional consumption. This gradually erodes human subjectivity, ultimately reducing individuals to mere appendages of digital technology. Firstly, "virtualization" exacerbates moral disorientation among individuals. Intelligent algorithms create "virtual illusions" that immerse consumers, providing them with highly realistic and engaging interactive experiences. The sense of reality cultivated in this virtual space not only leads people to gradually shift their lives from the physical world to the virtual realm but also results in emotional alienation between individuals and others, as well as between individuals and society. This virtual space, which transcends the physical boundaries, moral constraints, and institutional regulations of the real world, serves as a "breeding ground" for the proliferation of moral disorientation. Secondly, "virtualization" exacerbates emotional disorientation among individuals. Both "digital technology" and "consumption" are products of human practical activities, with the shared objective of serving the development of society's "genuine community." However, the "virtual community" established by intelligent algorithms obscures the "genuine community," directly resulting in a decline in emotional warmth between individuals and others, as well as between individuals and society. Moreover, it hinders the cohesion of genuine forces necessary for driving social development and progress.

### *2.3 The Psychological Manipulation Causes the Unbalance of Consumption Rationality*

Digital consumerists wield intelligent algorithms as weapons, employing relatively emotional approaches such as "customization" and "symbolization" to forge emotional connections with consumers, thereby engaging in "psychological manipulation." On one hand, intelligent algorithms, through parametric processing, capture and analyze consumers' behavioral trajectories to construct systematic "information cocoons." They leverage "customized" services to create an illusion for consumers that they are being truly "understood," thus enhancing the consumption experience. This kind of "customized" service does not aim to stimulate consumption with a one-time push but rather repeatedly and precisely "feeds" consumers with various product information, continuously igniting their desire to frequently purchase products recommended by algorithms. As a result, consumers gradually develop a "faith-like obsession" with intelligent algorithms and become immersed in this "digital panoptic prison" (Han Byung-Chul, 2019), ultimately transforming into concrete streams of

data. On the other hand, intelligent algorithms leverage big data technology to analyze consumer personas and track their preferences, thereby uncovering consumers' potential needs and depicting a "symbolic" consumption landscape for them. This further establishes an emotional connection between goods and consumers on a perceptual level. For instance, digital consumerists label goods with indicators of social class, identity, taste, and other attributes, transforming them into consumption "symbols" imbued with new meanings. Some consumers, eager to construct their ideal identities, enthusiastically engage in symbolic consumption, leading to the prevalence of luxury and false consumption. This type of symbolic consumption also accelerates the formation of barriers between different consumer groups, narrows consumers' value perceptions, weakens their rational value judgment, and diminishes their value pursuits. As a result, consumers remain trapped in a symbolic world protected by these group barriers.

### **3. The Negative Influence of Digital Consumerism on the Values of Youth**

Digital consumerism has not deviated from the "trajectory" of capital logic's proliferation. It consistently exploits digital technologies to extract surplus value, demonstrating exploitative characteristics. The negative impacts of digital consumerism on the shaping and development of youth values are manifold. The most prominent negative effects manifest as the erosion of youth's value rationality through the "entertainmentization" of digital consumption, the weakening of youth's subjective awareness through the "customization" of digital consumption, and the solidification of youth's value perceptions through the "symbolization" of digital consumption.

#### *3.1 The "Pan-Entertainment" of Digital Consumption Dissolves the Value Rationality of Youth*

The combination of "digital consumerism" and "hedonism" has further spurred people to seek meaning and fulfillment through virtual emotional consumption, as a means to compensate for the emotional void caused by the "absence of physical presence." However, this irrational and symbolic emotional consumption can also lead to deviations in value perception and the erosion of value rationality among some young people. Firstly, it blurs value standards and induces deviations in value perception. Digital consumerism advocates the consumption philosophy that "everything can be entertaining," luring young people to focus their public attention on immediate sensory stimulation and pleasure-driven consumption. This mindset that prioritizes entertainment above all else is, in essence, "the negation, dismantling, and destruction of all objects of genuine value, diluting everything of worth with entertainment guided by worthlessness." (Wang Kang & Wu Xueqin, 2021) Entertainment culture, represented by "celebrity internet influencers" and the like, is laden with various low-quality contents featuring the pursuit of the grotesque, vulgarity, and shallowness. This content is frequently delivered to young audiences through digital technologies, not only further squeezing the space for the dissemination of mainstream values but also causing some young people who are indulged in emotional consumption to diminish their "present" experience of their physical selves in reality, making it difficult for them to form a correct paradigm of value perception. Secondly, it erodes value rationality and

weakens identification with mainstream values. The mindset that "everything can be entertaining" also gives rise to an emotional narrative logic where "what's fun is right." This renders anything susceptible to being casually ridiculed, teased, or parodied. Consumers derive a false sense of meaning and fulfillment from such "fun" emotional experiences. Some young people, indulging in the pursuit of "being unique" and "grabbing attention" to shape a personalized perceptual world, may gradually drift away from the truth of life and the logic of reality, ultimately losing their ability to judge the value of things. More seriously, the individual emotions of young people often easily aggregate into group emotions within the echo chambers and information cocoons created by online circles, leading to the formation of destructive emotional discourse or behaviors. Under such circumstances, it becomes difficult for the youth group to establish a correct "value consensus."

### *3.2 The "Customization" of Digital Consumption Weakens the Subject Consciousness of Youth*

Marxist theory on the hierarchy of needs consistently emphasizes that one must first satisfy the basic survival and sensory needs of individuals, and on this basis, foster higher-level needs for a better life, ultimately achieving the ultimate need for the free and comprehensive development of human beings. In the digital era, young people confront dilemmas such as identity anxiety and emotional alienation. Digital consumerism "disciplines" the youth through entertainment-driven consumption inducements, customized consumption symbols, and the satisfaction of falsified consumption demands. This leads to a decline in young people's autonomous decision-making abilities and a blurring of their subjective awareness. Firstly, it weakens subjective awareness by establishing customized emotional connections. Young consumer groups not only focus on purchasing goods but also care about fulfilling their emotional experiences and intrinsic needs during the consumption process. Digital consumerism strips away real-world relationships and establishes emotional connections and interactive processes between consumer groups and products in virtual settings, ultimately transforming intangible emotions into tangible commodities. This leads some young people to willingly accept product marketing recommendations without actively exploring their own "authentic needs." For instance, the consumption-oriented concept of "ritual sense" embodied by the notion that "love begins with a bouquet of flowers" traps young people in the value misconception that "without a sense of ritual, love cannot be expressed." This "customized" emotional experience undermines some young people's ability to independently judge the essence of consumption, ultimately causing them to easily fall into merchants' "consumption traps." Secondly, digital consumerism weakens subjective consciousness through its "indoctrination". It creates an "information cocoon" for consumers, leading them to "lose their yearning for and pursuit of authentic life due to their immersion in spectacles, while capitalists manipulate the entirety of social life by controlling the creation and transformation of these spectacles." (Zhang Yibing, 2008) For example, the "full-reduction promotions" and "flash sales" launched by merchants during "shopping sprees" are, in fact, "consumption cages" crafted by algorithms. Digital consumerism employs such consumption logic to "indoctrinate" young people into becoming the type of consumers that capital desires.

### *3.3 The "Symbolization" of Digital Consumption Solidifies the Value Cognition of Youth*

Digital consumerism leverages digital technologies to further amplify the influence of symbolic consumption, exacerbating some young people's pursuit of it. The first is the pursuit of hierarchical symbols. "Identity anxiety" is a prominent phenomenon among the youth. It essentially represents a spiritual panic about being "at risk of failing to align with socially established models of success and thus being deprived of dignity and respect." (de Botton Alain, 2007) Since the values of young people are not yet fully solidified during their youth, the youth group is prone to self-doubt and self-denial when confronted with contradictions such as those between the individual and society, or between ideals and reality. Consequently, they tend to focus their pursuit of value on "others' approval." Digital consumerism attaches symbolic labels such as identity and taste to commodities, catering to the psychological need for "others' approval" among some young people and making them willing to pay for these consumption symbols. In fact, these symbolic consumptions no longer fall within the realm of genuine human needs but are instead artificial demands meticulously crafted by merchants. Some young people focus solely on the symbolic significance of goods while overlooking their intrinsic value attributes. This ultimately results in their consumption mindset and behaviors being dominated by the world constructed by these "symbols." The second aspect is the pursuit of personalized symbols. Some young people yearn for emotional experiences that highlight their unique individuality and are keen on purchasing "alternative" symbolic goods. They derive spiritual comfort from emotional consumption rather than paying much attention to the practical functions and economic value of the products. Non-mainstream cultures such as "otaku culture" and "quirky trends" have gained popularity among the youth, which actually lowers cultural value standards and severely weakens the unique attributes of culture. If the youth group remains confined to the virtual landscapes of cultural consumerism for an extended period, they will gradually come to view all aspects of real life as mere codes. This will narrow their perception of the real world, reduce them to beings incapable of sensing the authenticity of the world, and ultimately lead to the nihilism of their value pursuits.

## **4. The Coping Strategies of Youth Values Cultivation under the Influence of Consumerism**

To effectively rectify the erosion and interference of digital consumerism on young people's values, it is essential to standardize digital consumption guidance to shape their rational value outlook, regulate the orderly operation of algorithms to strengthen their subjective awareness, and cultivate healthy consumption psychology to build their value cognition.

### *4.1 Standardize the Direction of Digital Consumption and Shape the Rational Value of Youth*

Digital consumption serves as a crucial arena for young people to meet both their material and spiritual needs. However, digital consumerism can exert negative influences on some young individuals, leading them to develop erroneous consumption psychology and value judgments, which in turn results in the impoverishment of their world of meaning. Therefore, it is essential to regulate and guide digital consumption to reshape young people's value judgments. On the one hand, it is necessary to unveil the

capital-driven logic underlying digital consumerism and enhance young people's ability to resist it. Digital consumerism has given rise to the socialization of "subjective desires." Only by exposing and criticizing the ideological essence inherent in the logic of digital capital and its profit-driven nature concealed beneath the guise of a technological utopia can we help the youth mitigate the negative impacts brought about by digital consumerism. On the other hand, it is crucial to clarify the proper orientation of consumption and guide young people to recognize the cognitive misconceptions of digital consumerism. In fact, consumption constitutes a vital aspect of human practical activities. During the consumption process, individuals form subjective consciousness, including social attitudes, ideological will, and value systems, which continuously promote the coordinated development of material and spiritual civilizations. However, digital consumerism severely deviates from the essential requirement of humans' free and comprehensive development, forfeiting the subjectivity of consumption in serving human needs. This significantly diminishes the consumption value of consumer groups and leads to the phenomenon of consumption alienation. Therefore, it is crucial to guide young people to understand the true value of consumption, which does not lie in the emotional experiences derived from pleasure-seeking consumption detached from real life, nor in the symbolic significance of symbolic consumption. Additionally, young people should be led to recognize the inherent mission of consumption, which is to promote the free and all-round development of "real individuals." This approach will prevent the youth from becoming mere "tools" exploited by digital consumerism in pursuit of profit.

#### *4.2 Supervise and Manage the Orderly Operation of the Algorithm and Strengthen the Consciousness of Youth as the Main Body*

The lack of a core value system in intelligent algorithms inevitably leads to the complexification of the digital consumption sphere and the emotionalization of social attitudes. It is imperative to guide algorithm development with a correct value stance and "demystify" algorithms, enabling young people to recognize the "black box" nature of algorithms and the essence of digital manipulation. This awareness will encourage them to consciously return to real-world social practices, where they can cultivate a sense of responsibility and subjective consciousness. First, it is essential to clarify the stance of algorithms and uphold a "people-centered" value orientation. Grounded in historical materialism, the principal status of the people demands that digital technology must serve their needs. However, digital consumerism employs intelligent algorithms to create "precise portraits" of young consumer groups, manipulating their consumption psychology through emotional connections and luring them into carefully disguised demand traps of digital consumerism, where they willingly accept product recommendations. The domination of humans by intelligent algorithms has, to a certain extent, weakened the agency of consumption subjects. It is crucial to abandon the capital-driven tendency and continuously optimize algorithmic technologies by integrating elements of correct values and consumption concepts into the logic of algorithmic recommendations. This will enable algorithms to manifest their technological value rationality and facilitate the coordination between technological

efficiency and human values, thereby preventing young people from becoming mere "tools" dominated by capital. Secondly, it is crucial to break free from algorithmic dependency and return to embodied practices in real-world spaces. The "virtual spaces" created by digital consumerism struggle to provide young people with a tangible sense of self-awareness and meaningful fulfillment. Instead, prolonged "physical absence" in these spaces can lead to intense emotional loneliness and a void of meaning among the youth. In fact, "the spiritual richness of an individual is entirely contingent upon the richness of their real-world relationships." (Marx & Engels, 2012) Therefore, to address this emotional loneliness and lack of meaning, it is essential to break through the "emotional cocoon" constructed by algorithms. Only by immersing oneself in practical activities in the real world can one experience genuine emotional connections and value recognition through the "presence" of one's physical body.

#### *4.3 Cultivating Healthy Consumption Psychology and Constructing Youth Value Cognition*

By cultivating a healthy outlook on digital consumption, we can guide young people to build a profound and meaningful world. This not only helps resist the infiltration of Western ideologies among the youth but also strengthens their sense of happiness in the digital realm. First, we must take social mainstream values as our compass to establish a correct consumption outlook. By promoting values such as "thrift and hard work," we can guide young people to focus more on embodied practices in the real world and the enrichment of their spiritual lives, rather than being overly preoccupied with the virtual experiences brought about by pleasure-driven and symbolic consumption. Through advocating authentic consumption and criticizing the emotional disguises and desire packaging inherent in consumerism, we can help young people recognize the positive emotional benefits of authentic consumption. Secondly, emphasis should be placed on the conscious practice of correct consumption values among young people. By cultivating a digital consumption personality, we can empower youth to possess a sense of agency and dignity in their digital consumption activities, ensuring they adhere to moral principles and consciously uphold their personal boundaries in their digital consumption practices. Thirdly, it is vital to guide young people to establish a labor-based happiness outlook and foster a healthy consumption ecosystem. Rooted in human practical activities, both material and spiritual well-being are achieved through labor. Young people should be made to deeply understand the essence of digital consumption and the process of creating commodity value, leading them to respect and cherish labor achievements. This will help them cultivate correct consumption concepts and life attitudes, guiding them to grow into rational consumers.

## **5. Conclusion**

Consumption, as a process and element of production, aims to meet human survival needs and promote the free and all-round development of individuals. In contrast, digital consumerism represents a misguided social trend. Rooted in the supremacy of capital, digital consumerism seeks to transform everything into consumable goods for profit through digital means. This stands in direct opposition to Marxist theory concerning the free and all-round development of human beings. Digital consumerism,



leveraging new features and methods presented through online media and intelligent algorithms, exerts a powerful deconstructive force on mainstream societal values, which is detrimental to the shaping and development of young people's values. Therefore, it is imperative to critique and resist this alienated form of consumption that serves as a tool for capital exploitation. At a practical level, we must explore feasible strategies to reconstruct the governance paradigm of digital consumerism, providing correct guidance and solid safeguards for the shaping and development of young people's values.

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