Alternative Consumption Power: Insights into Z Generation'S Replacement Consumption Behavior

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Abstract. "Seeking replacement" is actually a proactive lifestyle change and an effort to adjust the relationship between oneself and external objects. From previously comparing who bought the most expensive goods, what luxury brands were purchased, to now comparing who buys items with better value for money. This generation of young people is becoming more frugal, starting to budget meticulously, abandoning wild spending, and advocating for reverse consumption. The "2023 China Catering Consumption Trends" report indicates that the catering industry consumption has already shown characteristics of the "fourth consumption era," where consumers increasingly emphasize simplicity and shared consumption experiences. The trend of "reverse consumption" gaining popularity among young people reflects contemporary youth's shift in attitude towards life and a reassessment of their self-needs.

Keywords: replacement, community, social media, consumer society

1. Introduction

The term "replacement consumption" originally stemmed from the use of cosmetics. Some well-known cosmetics have good effects but are too expensive for many to afford. Netizens began searching for cheaper alternatives with similar effects. They found that despite several times price differences, the actual effects of many cosmetics were similar. The high prices of well-known brands contrast sharply with much cheaper lesser-known brands. Replacement consumption is not just about low prices; its core lies in pursuing high cost-effectiveness without significantly sacrificing happiness. It signifies that young people are no longer willing to pay premiums unnecessarily. Consumer behavior is returning to an individual perspective, where individuals control their consumption decisions rather than being dictated by products. Consumption is gradually becoming rational again.

Modern society is a consumer society, the only society in human history where goods are extremely abundant. In The Consumer Society, Baudrillard analyzes that modern people are as inseparable from consumption as they are from breathing; consumption has even become a way of existence. Consumption, once for meeting needs, has now transformed in modern society to fulfill desires. People purchase goods not only for their utility but also for the production of symbols, distinctions, status, and fame. [1] At present, consumption is gradually entering the era of replacement. The so-called "era of replacement" is essentially China's version of the "fourth consumption era." Items such as previously forgotten military coats have become popular this year. Once dismissed, Pinduoduo's market value exceeded Alibaba's at one point this year. Formerly known as a "grandpa-level app," 1688's download volume topped the Apple App Store's free list this year... These "news" stories are all hallmarks of the fourth consumption era. The underlying logic of replacement is consistent with the fourth consumption era: it's not about "leveling," but about "substitution." It can be said that "exquisite thrift" based on genuine personal needs is a return to the essence of satisfying consumer needs after removing these symbols. From media reports on new trends among young people, one can see that community canteens, discount snack stores, leftover food mystery box mini-programs, browsing elderly clothing stores, sporting a "no-money" style, and traveling with senior citizens have become their new group activities. Moreover, various new popular social phenomena all bear the shadow of replacement: traveling as much as possible and resting as little as possible, termed "special forces travel" under a pseudonym; walking without spending money has a fashionable term "city walk"; browsing without buying in a mall is called "research-style shopping"; whether eating, wearing, or playing, the rule is to spend as little money as possible, buy only cheap items, and avoid expensive ones.

2. Formation of Replacement Consumption Subcultures

Generation Z has grown up in an era of rapid development of internet technology, making them digital natives who are highly familiar with social media and digital technology. They are extremely imaginative and creative, active on the internet, and have a more open and tolerant attitude towards new things in our multicultural society. Additionally, they place greater emphasis on spiritual aspects and the pursuit of self, engaging in learning and communication through online platforms, and consciously forming various subcultural circles. Young people pursuing replacement culture express their unique lifestyles and values through methods such as modifying old-age tour groups.

New media based on internet technology have rewritten the relationship between subculture and mainstream culture, leading youth culture from the rebellious, resistant, and stylish "subculture" to the fluid, segregated, and tribal "post-subculture." [2] The low threshold and decentralized nature of the internet allow a broader audience to participate. Replacement culture exhibits a post-subcultural style, lacking strong resistance and not excluding commercialization, while continuing to produce its own cultural significance. Researchers of post-subculture point out three significant characteristics of online subcultural circles as "new tribes": fluid domains, pure socialization, and shared emotions. Replacement groups share a common symbolic system, expressing approval and endorsement of concepts such as environmental consciousness conveyed by reverse consumption, attitudes of making the most of resources, and resistance to consumerism. Nowadays, the vast majority of netizens on social networks can be categorized into certain subcultural circles, such as "Hanfu Circle," "Figure Circle," "E-sports Circle," "Cute Pet Circle," etc. Due to the fluidity of subcultural identities, members often participate in multiple subcultural circles, each person contributing to the creation and self-expression of circle culture. This fluidity and non-coerciveness inadvertently promote communication between different circles, driving the spread of circle culture. Members of replacement groups continually expand the periphery of their circles through their words, attire, and interactions, enabling more "outsiders" to recognize and join the replacement consumption culture, thereby becoming "insiders." Therefore, the popularity of replacement culture is inseparable from the influence of subcultures. Consistent cultural identities among different individuals contribute to the formation of replacement culture circles. At the same time, these circles satisfy individuals' needs for identity and belonging. In constructing their identities and identities, groups continually enrich cultural capital, ensuring the sustained development of these circles.

Within these circles, knowledge and experiences are shared, providing assistance and references to those with similar needs. Positive emotions are conveyed, fostering mutual communication and progress. It also cultivates self-awareness, a sense of identity, and belonging. Members within the circle express that they haven't specifically sought out replacement consumption, but rather their consumer mindset has changed. They now prioritize material over brand, function over appearance, and are increasingly unwilling to pay premiums unnecessarily. What matters to them isn't just replacement or downgraded consumption, but finding another kind of beauty in life, adopting a different lifestyle that feels comfortable and liberating.

Compared to traditional e-commerce's product-centric business model, social platforms propagate based on users' authentic experiences. Each social interaction point can serve as an entry point for propagation and transaction, amplifying consumer groups, especially for products with high cost-performance ratios among young people through word-of-mouth and grass-roots influence. Moreover, on various social platforms, articles and videos comparing product reviews are common. By dissecting product performances, consumers reduce their reverence for brands, thereby diminishing the halo effect of brand premiums. Among consumers of replacement products, the Z generation, with a population of up to 260 million, stands out as a major force in consumption. Unlike the generations before them, who revered authority, Generation Z values independence and self-expression. When they consume, they focus more on personal satisfaction, making self-fulfillment a mainstream consumer ideology.

3. Alternative Expressions of Consumption

For a long time, consumerism has prevailed, with media reports predominantly featuring urban elites and narratives that emphasize refinement and stratification, which no longer fit the consumption patterns of young people during economic downturns. Decentralized dissemination mechanisms on social media platforms cater precisely to the emotional, populist, and entertaining aspects of the online space. Replacement consumption is a down-to-earth and popularized way of consuming, marking both a shift in material consumption and a shift in spiritual consumption. Reflecting during economic transformation, youth facing economic challenges create lifestyles full of interest and significance. It represents a positive transformation in consumption and online community culture. [3] Replacement culture enhances the discourse power of grassroots youth, enabling them to create a better life within limited economic conditions. Replacement is not about not consuming; rather, it's about adopting a more coherent way of consuming that allows individuals to exist comfortably within their consumption space.

ZULIZ shoes transformed into essential items for "cute girl" fashion. ZULIZ, originally scorned by young people as elderly shoes, underwent a transformation into budget Skechers, embraced by young enthusiasts in the Hanfu circle who customized them with homemade fabrics and bead accessories to create simple, comfortable embroidered shoes. Seasoned members of the Hanfu circle mentioned that for a period, searching "Hanfu shoes" on Little Red Book would prominently display ZULIZ images. Leveraging this popularity, ZULIZ's official account-initiated campaigns like "ZULIZ Transformation," boosting sales further. In the market, Hanfu shoes are either expensive or uncomfortable, causing blisters, whereas modified ZULIZ shoes offer comfort, affordability, and a cool look. Under the trend of community segmentation on the internet, thriftiness and a preference for simplicity and comfort over luxury brands have become fashionable. Replacement consumption is gradually becoming mainstream.

Initially observed with high-end cosmetics targeted at young women, replacement strategies have since spread across platforms such as MicroBlog, Little Red Book, and TikTok, expanding the audience of replacement culture. Young advocates of replacement culture share their experiences in selecting replacement products through WeChat groups, MicroBlog fan groups, forums, Douban groups, and other platforms. For example, travel has its replacement version; instead of Thailand, they opt for Xishuangbanna, and instead of Russia, they visit Harbin. Similarly, food can be replaced as long as the nutrients are comparable: avocado can be replaced with peanuts, kale with spinach, chickpeas with peas, and bird's nest with pig trotters. Practicing exquisite thrift has become the norm for young consumers.

On Little Red Book, there are over two million notes related to "replacement consumption," many of which offer methods for finding substitutes. Some suggest using keywords for online shopping replacements, such as using "tea house seating" instead of "Chinese-style sofa," "wide-mouth bottle" instead of "vase," and "egg carton" instead of "makeup sponge storage." Buying a three-in-one windbreaker is deemed more fashionable and practical than purchasing a down jacket. The idea that "you get what you pay for" is no longer an absolute truth; instead, the essential skill in contemporary shopping is outwitting merchants to avoid unnecessary expenses. Similarly, labeling the same products as "ideal for the workplace," "ideal for renting," or "influencer's favorite" effectively slaps them with a premium label. The internet's low entry barriers, decentralized nature, and strong interactivity have facilitated the rapid spread of replacement consumption trends. What once was a niche subculture among financially prudent youth has evolved into a widespread phenomenon and is gradually becoming mainstream. The exchange within replacement consumption circles continues to expand. More and more people openly share their experiences and frugal insights on social media, proudly acknowledging their frugality and their ability to enjoy a good life at a lower cost. Within these new social phenomena, lifestyles based on replacement consumption abound. Terms like "city walk" for strolling without spending money and "research-style shopping" for browsing without buying have emerged as fashionable. The ethos is to accomplish the most with the least money, resisting the consumer traps of capital with unique consumption patterns. In a sense, it deconstructs and resists traditional culture and elite consumption. Members of replacement consumption groups actively share "good finds" in their version of some items and advocate replacing an expensive coffee with buying a box of milk and tea. They discard the cute girl filters created by JK uniforms for inexpensive gray cardigans that achieve ninety percent of the look. Substituting storage boxes with logistics boxes not only increases capacity but also durability. Simply changing a search term can save a significant amount. This creates an atmosphere within the circle that resists the direction of refined capital consumption. According to the Birmingham School, youth subcultures are results of subordinated classes resisting and negotiating with dominant cultures and the bourgeoisie. Replacement consumption groups do not engage in direct confrontation with mainstream consumption but express themselves through a weakened form of resistance, individually and in small numbers, by sharing practical experiences of replacement consumption and discussing ways to subvert consumerism within their posts.

The members of the replacement consumption group do not adhere to the conventional consumer patterns dominated by capital. They interpret practical and comfortable consumption from a different perspective, fundamentally resisting and dispelling the allure of current consumer society's ideals and values. It is a rebellion and resistance against the anxiety and pressure brought about by prevailing consumerism. They actively resist contemporary consumerism through their actions. When the window of replacement consumption opens, members truly feel a sense of release and liberation within the group. They can express their true selves without constraint or ridicule. They do not pursue expensive items but instead prioritize practicality. They can even create durable and aesthetically pleasing goods themselves. The consumption and use of replacement products by group members express their rejection of highly priced goods and refuse the superficial judgment of consumption tied to identity and value. They choose products with the best cost-effectiveness within their own consumption range, thereby rejecting the entanglement of consumer society. They do not conform to current consumer expectations but focus solely on personal needs, achieving inner coherence. Embracing practical and affordable consumption as wisdom helps alleviate consumption anxiety.

The replacement consumption group decodes and resists contemporary consumer culture. Their differentiated products do not conform to the current trend of refined consumption, yet they do not feel anxious for not conforming to consumerism; instead, they see it as a form of self-acceptance. By de-symbolizing consumption and reconstructing self-identity and identity construction, they gradually detach from the core values judged by consumerism. They engage in dialogue with the mainstream, constructing and reproducing their own identities. [4]

4. Construction and Dissolution of Contrarian Consumption

The sense of meaninglessness in life accompanies the prevalence of hedonism, where individuals are dominated by various internal desires and external temptations, losing control over their lives. People are not only controlled by alienating forces during their labor process but also manipulated by external forces in consumption and leisure. According to Lefebvre, leisure time in modern society is actually "compensatory." People, oppressed by capital during work, engage in frenzied consumption during leisure to compensate for the pain brought by work. Many members express in their posts, "The greater the work pressure, the more I want to shop." This alienated labor, working for the boss during the day and for the businesses at night, gradually plunges individuals into a sense of "meaninglessness" and "loss of control" in life. Youth are torn between infinite desires and limited purchasing power, fragmented into fluid and uncertain atoms, struggling to construct a unified self-identity amid heterogeneous and fluctuating identities. When the chaotic state of life is replaced by a minimalistic approach characterized by order and control, life can be reshaped, facilitating a transformation towards "subjectivity" for individuals. [5]

Recently, more and more people are embracing reverse consumption and minimalist lifestyles. They have moved away from blindly pursuing big-brand logos and the allure of premium prices. They have transitioned from high-end supermarkets to local markets, from commuting by taxi to using public transportation. Many have discovered that eliminating unnecessary material desires and breaking free from the drive of consumerism allows them to honestly confront their own needs. Anti-consumerism does not mean not buying at all or being unable to afford it; rather, it emphasizes breaking free from the coercion of consumerism and human alienation. In the current era of rapid development, contemporary youth face numerous setbacks and challenges. Choosing a coherent lifestyle is an important means of self-realization. "Resistance" is not about refusal but seeking balance and avoiding alienation, choosing and reconstructing aesthetic perceptions, ideologies, and logical elements that serve modern society. Compared to "the more expensive, the better" or using installment payments for an iPhone, today's young people are more inclined to refrain from blindly paying premiums for brands. Instead, they focus on their inner needs and practical consumption, contemplating the kind of life they truly desire. For many young people opting for "replacement consumption," it represents a way to maintain a refined lifestyle even under reduced consumption standards. It not only allows them to obtain products with high cost-effectiveness but also signifies a rational approach to consumption, no longer blindly chasing luxury goods.

5. Conclusion

The vibrant circle of replacement consumption provides emotional support for embracing a lifestyle of high cost-effectiveness. Individuals explore their true selves by opposing consumerism, reflecting their comprehensive examination and reflection on the utilitarian, symbolic, and spiritual values of consumer goods. Replacement consumption culture reflects the youth's partial liberation from material dependencies, freeing themselves from the constraints of identity and social status in the community, re-examining themselves, returning to the individual, and promoting the unity of their true and ideal selves.

However, replacement consumption is not a panacea and can sometimes be a consumer trap. This is because replacement consumption always has a higher-priced big-name counterpart as a benchmark. Authentic big-name products require effort to outline the full profile of the product, while "replacement" only needs to indicate its "replacing" object. We naturally associate it with the selling points of authentic big-name products, sometimes even without much explanation, as our subconscious begins to expect the effectiveness of "replacement." Often, "replacement" is a marketing strategy used by businesses, actually involving a concept switch or hiding real issues. Therefore, this requires consumers to keep their eyes open and avoid excessive reliance on replacement consumption to avoid pitfalls.

The construction of replacement consumption has a dual-sided impact on consumerism. On one hand, the pursuit of cost-effectiveness dissolves the bonds of consumerism, supported by the influx of traffic, making more and more young consumers more sober and actively distancing themselves from consumerism. On the other hand, replacement consumption can also be co-opted by commercial interests. Businesses label products as replacements for certain products to attract audiences back into the consumerism trap, and to some extent, replacement culture also fuels the development of consumerism. Commercial capital's keen sense recognizes the potential of replacement products, making them new growth points of value. In the process of resistance, replacement consumption is also to some extent incorporated.

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