

The Photo-First Behavior Driven by the Influencer Economy and Its Reconstruction of Contemporary Youths' Consumption and Lifestyles

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Abstract. The influencer economy has profoundly intervened in the daily lifestyles of contemporary youth. This study adopted a questionnaire survey method and collected 441 valid questionnaires from young people who actively explore and check in at popular venues. Data were analyzed from the dimensions of consumption decision-making, behavioral motivation, and experiential perception. The survey shows that 56.7% of respondents prioritize "whether photos can be taken well" when making consumption decisions, indicating that visual aesthetics has become an important consumption criterion. At the same time, young people have not been completely dominated by the influencer economy: 76.6% regard photo-related consumption as a way to "leave beautiful memories for themselves", rather than a means to chase online traffic or build a public image. Nearly 40% of participants actively seek a balance between taking photos and experiencing the moment. The study reveals that young people maintain rational judgment while pursuing aesthetic tastes in visual consumption, showing a complex state of being "attracted yet discerning". Moreover, the most profound impact of the influencer economy on consumption is not the replacement of quality value, but the shift of visual aesthetics from a secondary factor to the core of decision-making, making it an independent dimension parallel to product quality. This study provides an empirical reference for understanding changes in consumer culture under the era of visual communication.

Keywords: influencer economy, photo-taking behavior, youth consumption, conspiracy of authenticity.

1. Introduction

Along with the widespread use of social media and visual communication, "taking photos at popular spots" and "chasing photogenic experiences" have become important parts of young people's consumption and daily life. Relying on visual communication, the influencer economy turns the demand for photogenic moments into consumption momentum, and quietly reshapes contemporary consumption logic. This study focuses on this social phenomenon, exploring changes in consumption behavior and lifestyles among young people under the "photo-first" principle.

Theoretically, existing studies mainly interpret the operating logic of the influencer economy from visual culture and symbolic consumption theories. However, few studies provide empirical descriptions of the complete chain of photo-taking behavior — from attraction and consumption to online sharing. In particular, empirical research on how visual aesthetics reconstruct consumption decisions remains insufficient. Therefore, this study carries important theoretical value for revealing the deep relationship between the influencer economy and youth consumer culture. It also offers practical implications for businesses to balance aesthetics and quality, and for consumers to establish rational consumption values.

This study is carried out mainly on three levels: first, to examine how the photo-first principle influences young people's consumption decisions and social expression; second, to analyze how young people balance visual pursuit and real experience; third, to explore the logic through which the influencer economy reshapes consumption decision-making mechanisms.

Methodologically, questionnaire surveys were used to collect data from young people who visit and check in at popular venues, with 441 valid responses obtained. The questionnaire was designed around consumption decision-making, behavioral motivation, experience perception, and cognitive attitude, and data were processed with descriptive statistical analysis in Excel. This method helps systematically present the behavioral characteristics and psychological states of the group, laying a solid empirical foundation for the research.

The ultimate goal of this study is to reveal how the influencer economy reshapes the consumption values of contemporary youth, and to explain the structural shift of visual aesthetics from a peripheral role to a core role in consumption decisions. To achieve this goal, the study analyzes three layers: behavioral motivation, cognitive tension, and balancing mechanisms. Finally, it puts forward the concept of "Conspiracy of Authenticity" to respond to the academic debate between "Consumption Alienation" and "self-expression".

2. Literature review

Against the background of the rapid development of the influencer economy, the consumption behavior and lifestyles of young people are undergoing profound changes. The phenomenon of prioritizing photogenic experiences has gradually become a research hotspot. Existing studies have explored this topic from multiple perspectives, providing a rich theoretical basis and practical reference for this research.

Some studies have analyzed young people's pursuit of pseudo-exquisite life under the influence of the influencer economy, pointing out that such behavior often comes from the desire to present a perfect image on social media, rather than a real improvement in the quality of life [1]. Although this study offers valuable insights into the psychology of youth consumption, it lacks specific discussion on how photo-taking behavior affects consumption decisions.

Other studies, from a media perspective, explore how social media platforms cultivate check-in culture and reveal the role of spatial production in media communication [2]. This study provides a theoretical framework for understanding the spatial context of photo-taking behavior, but does not deeply investigate young people's specific consumption motivations and experiential feelings.

Some studies directly examine why young people are keen on taking photos and checking in, arguing that visual aesthetics and social identity are the main driving forces [3]. These studies offer important perspectives for the motivation analysis in this paper, but are relatively weak in quantitative analysis.

Some scholars have pointed out the problem of aesthetic alienation among young people in the digital-intelligent era who create content only for approval. They note that excessive pursuit of

visual effects may lead to aesthetic fatigue and the loss of authenticity [4]. This study provides a critical perspective and lays a theoretical foundation for the later discussion of "Conspiracy of Authenticity".

In addition, some studies have conducted in-depth reflections on the prosperity and myths of the influencer economy from a critical perspective based on consumerism and communication political economy [5]. A study taking Xiaohongshu as an example examines the marketing strategies of knowledge influencers in the grass-planting economy [6]. Some studies take Qingdao as an example to analyze tourists' check-in behavior under the visual context [7]; others explore the formation of online-famous check-in spots and their evolution from physical space to digital platforms [8]. These studies enrich the understanding of the influencer economy and its impact from different angles.

Based on the review of existing research, although scholars have discussed youth consumption behavior in the influencer economy from multiple perspectives, the following research gaps still exist: first, there is a lack of quantitative analysis on how photo-taking behavior specifically affects consumption decisions; second, the mechanism by which young people balance visual appeal and real experience remains unclear; third, there are few process-oriented studies on how visual aesthetics participates in the restructuring of consumption decisions [9,10].

Therefore, this study adopts the questionnaire survey method to systematically analyze young people's consumption behavior, motivation, experience perception and other dimensions, so as to reveal the logic of the photo-first phenomenon in reshaping consumption decisions. On the basis of Tong Jianjun et al.'s discussion on aesthetic alienation, this study further puts forward the concept of "Conspiracy of Authenticity", providing a new theoretical perspective for understanding the evolution of consumer culture in the era of visual communication.

3. Research methods

This study takes the questionnaire survey as the core empirical method. This method can efficiently collect data on the consumption behavior and attitudes of a large sample of young people, and accurately quantify the distribution characteristics, motivations and influencing factors of photo-taking consumption behavior.

Compared with in-depth interviews and other qualitative methods, questionnaire surveys have greater advantages in data representativeness, statistical analysis feasibility and conclusion generalization, thus providing reliable quantitative support for the study of the relationship between the influencer economy and youth consumer culture.

In existing research, the questionnaire survey method has been widely used in the field of youth consumption behavior. It has formed a mature application system in sample stratification design, question dimension construction, data reliability and validity testing, which provides a comprehensive methodological reference for the questionnaire design and data collection of this study.

The survey subjects are young people aged 18–35 who have consumption experience and use social media platforms. The sample covers different genders, regions and occupations, which can objectively reflect the characteristics of contemporary youth's photo-taking consumption and lifestyle under the background of the influencer economy.

Centered on the core research theme and guided by photo-first consumption logic, the questionnaire adopts a progressive design covering ten dimensions: consumption behavior tendency, willingness to visit online-famous check-in spots, photo-taking motivation, balance between photo-taking and experience, perception of influencer check-in photos, preference for choosing check-in

places, attitude towards poor experience, perception of photo editing, influence of consumption space on perception, and future behavior tendency.

The questionnaire includes both single-choice quantitative attitude questions and multiple-choice questions for motivation exploration, ensuring that the collected data can comprehensively support the analysis and demonstration of the photo-first phenomenon and the impact of the influencer economy on young people's consumption and lifestyles.

The questionnaire was distributed through online platforms to targeted young people nationwide, and a total of 441 completed questionnaires were collected. All questionnaires passed the validity test, with an effective recovery rate of 100%. This sufficient sample size provides a solid data foundation for the subsequent statistical analysis, conclusion derivation and verification of research themes.

4. Research findings

Based on the survey data, this study analyzes the photo-first phenomenon among young people from five dimensions: behavioral characteristics, motivational structure, cognitive logic, experiential relationship and attitude tendency.

At the level of consumption behavior, visual presentation has been deeply integrated into young people's daily choices. The data shows that 56.69% of respondents often choose places suitable for taking photos, and 53.97% plan to visit online-famous check-in spots in advance. This indicates that "whether photos can be taken well" is changing from a secondary demand to a key factor affecting consumption decisions.

From the perspective of motivation, photo-taking behavior shows an obvious feature of "self-expression first". 76.64% of respondents take photos to "leave beautiful memories for themselves", 57.6% care about the likes and feedback from friends, and 57.14% enjoy the creative pleasure of shooting and editing photos. In contrast, those motivated by utilitarian goals such as "attracting fans" and "building a personal image" account for only 31.29% and 7.48% respectively. This shows that photo-taking is more a personal daily self-recording behavior than a commercial pursuit of online traffic.

Notably, young people maintain a relatively rational attitude towards influencer content. 51.7% of respondents clearly know that influencer photos have been retouched or have commercial purposes, while only 17.69% think they are real and credible. However, this rational cognition has not been fully transformed into consistent behavioral choices: 78.91% of respondents are still willing to choose places with ordinary reputation but good photo effects for taking photos, and 31.52% of them later expressed regret. This separation between cognition and behavior reflects that visual appeal can temporarily suppress rational judgment, and also paves the way for the later discussion of the concept of "Conspiracy of Authenticity".

In terms of the relationship between photo-taking and consumption experience, young people show active adaptability. 39.91% of respondents believe that photo-taking affects the experience but they will actively seek balance — the highest proportion among all attitudes; 24.26% think photo-taking enhances the experience; 22% think the two do not affect each other; and only 13.83% hold a negative view. This indicates that most people are not completely controlled by photo-taking behavior, but are looking for a balance between visual appeal and real experience.

Further observation shows that the foundation of young people's rational consumption is still stable. 49.21% still give priority to the core quality of products, proving that practical value is still the cornerstone of consumption. At the same time, 40.63% of respondents realize that the photo-first

principle leads to the homogenization of consumption space, reflecting a clear awareness of the homogenization problem in the influencer economy.

In terms of behavioral intention, more than half of the respondents hope to reduce the impact of photo-taking on consumption decisions or try to get rid of it, indicating that young people maintain conscious reflection on the nature of consumption. This also provides empirical support for the core conclusion that the trend is "reshaping rather than replacing".

5. Discussion

This study finds that although photogenic experience has become a key consideration in young people's consumption, most individuals are not completely driven by the influencer economy. 76.64% of respondents attributed their photo-related consumption to "leaving beautiful memories for themselves", rather than pursuing online popularity or maintaining a public image.

This conclusion is different from the concern about "Consumption Alienation" in some studies. Young people show both aesthetic pursuit and rational judgment in visual consumption: they are attracted by visual effects, but do not give up the pursuit of real experience.

It is worth noting that although more than half of the respondents clearly knew that influencer photos had been beautified and processed, nearly 80% still chose places with good visual effects but ordinary reputations in order to take good photos. This form of conscious participation prompts a re-examination of the definition of "authenticity" in visual culture.

Consumers are not passively deceived; instead, they reach a tacit agreement with filters and daily life. This paper summarizes this phenomenon as the "Conspiracy of Authenticity": people tacitly accept that photos can be beautified and filtered, as long as the experience at that moment is real, it is worth recording. Authenticity itself is being redefined by visual culture.

The survey also shows that nearly half of the respondents still take core quality as the primary consideration. This means that visual packaging cannot completely replace substantive experience. If the influencer economy stays in homogeneous competition that "values appearance over experience", it will be difficult to maintain consumer trust.

Further analysis shows that the influencer economy's reshaping of consumption does not replace quality judgment, but changes the dimensional structure of consumption decision-making. Many people take photo aesthetics as an important priority, but still regard the core quality of products or services as a key reference. The two are not mutually exclusive, but coexist in the consumption decisions of contemporary youth. The decision-making dimension has been expanded, adding the weight of "photo-taking effect" to the consideration balance.

Based on the above discussion, further reflections can be put forward from three levels:

For consumers, photogenic appeal can be a way to record life, but they should be alert to the excessive suppression of real experience by visual pursuit. Only by maintaining a clear understanding of the nature of consumption and striking a balance between filters and real life can a more autonomous state be achieved.

For businesses, although visual marketing is effective, it cannot replace the quality of products and services themselves. Short-term traffic depends on visual appeal, while long-term trust is built on core quality. Only by attaching equal importance to visual effects and quality can enterprises continue to gain consumer recognition in the wave of the influencer economy.

From a social perspective, the popularity of the photo-first phenomenon reflects the increasingly profound impact of visual culture on daily life. How to establish a healthy tension between visual aesthetics and real experience, and how to guide consumers to maintain rational judgment in the visual carnival, are urgent practical problems that need continuous attention.

Overall, the core insight of this study is that the most profound reshaping of consumption by the influencer economy is that visual aesthetics has changed from a peripheral factor to the core of decision-making, becoming an independent dimension parallel to quality. The attitude shown by young people in this process is "attracted but still discerning".

6. Conclusion

Through a systematic analysis of 441 questionnaire data, this study reveals the mechanism by which the photo-first phenomenon affects young people's consumption and lifestyles under the background of the influencer economy.

The results show that the demand for photogenic experience has been deeply embedded in the daily consumption habits of young people. More than half of the respondents take "whether photos can be taken well" as a key factor in consumption decisions. However, young people are not completely dominated by visual consumption: while they often participate in influencer check-in activities, they maintain a clear awareness of content authenticity; while pursuing visual aesthetics, they actively seek a balance between photo-taking and actual experience, showing a complex state of "being attracted but not losing judgment".

Further analysis shows that the most profound reshaping of consumption mode by the influencer economy is not to replace consumers' pursuit of quality, but to change consumption decisions from single-dimensional to multi-dimensional trade-offs. The data shows that 56.7% of people prioritize good photo effects, while 49.2% still take core quality as the first choice.

The coexistence of these two groups of data precisely shows that visual aesthetics has changed from a marginal factor in the past to an independent dimension of consumption decision-making parallel to quality. On this basis, this study puts forward the concept of "Conspiracy of Authenticity": consumers choose to participate consciously even if they know that influencer photos have been beautified and processed — not because they are passively deceived, but because they have reached a tacit understanding between filters and daily life. Authenticity itself is being redefined by visual culture.

The theoretical contributions of this study are mainly reflected in three aspects: first, through empirical data, it responds to the academic debate on whether visual symbols lead to consumption alienation, and provides empirical support for understanding the relationship between the influencer economy and youth consumer culture; second, it reveals the complex characteristic of "being attracted but discerning" in youth consumer culture, breaking the binary narrative of "manipulation and being manipulated"; third, it introduces the analytical concept of "Conspiracy of Authenticity", providing a new theoretical perspective for lifestyle research in the era of visual communication.

At the practical level, this study provides dual implications for the development of the influencer economy and the guidance of youth consumption: for businesses, although visual marketing is effective, only by balancing visual effects and quality can they obtain long-term trust from consumers; for consumers, photo-taking can be a way to record life, but they should seek a more autonomous balance between visual expression and real life.

This study provides a useful reference for future research. First, in terms of research objects, future studies can expand to a wider age group to explore the differences and commonalities of visual consumption behavior between different generations. Second, in terms of research methods, in-depth interviews or field surveys can be introduced to make up for the limitations of self-reported questionnaires in capturing details, so as to further restore the specific scenes and process details of photo-taking behavior.

Finally, future research should continue to explore the dynamic relationship between visual aesthetics and life authenticity. In an era when filters are increasingly becoming a standard part of daily life, how people define "reality" and how to position themselves between virtuality and reality will be a direction worthy of in-depth exploration in visual communication research.

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