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Consumerist Internet Culture in the Age of Short Video and Its Influence on Adolescent Values: A Critical Review

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Abstract. Short video has become one of the fastest-growing internet applications among minors in China and, at the same time, the most active arena for the spread of consumerist internet culture. Drawing on consumer society theory, cultivation theory and social comparison theory, this paper offers a critical review of the literature on how consumerist culture in short-video contexts shapes adolescent values. Three mechanisms are identified: algorithm-driven immersive cultivation, influencer marketing that blurs the boundary between advertising and content, and upward social comparison combined with conspicuous consumption display. Evidence from authoritative surveys and representative empirical studies indicates that materialism is robustly negatively related to adolescent well-being, and that exposure to commercial content raises materialism via the pathway of product desire. Yet the effects are highly heterogeneous: moderate use and addictive use have sharply different consequences, and sweeping "moral panic" judgements are not supported by the evidence. The paper concludes with implications for platform governance, advertising disclosure and media literacy education, and argues that conceptual advertising literacy alone offers weak protection under the low-elaboration conditions in which short video is consumed, so that educational measures must be paired with structural governance of platform commercial architecture.Au^{3+}

Keywords: Short Video, Consumerism, Adolescent Values, Materialism, Influencer Marketing

1. Introduction

Short-video platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou and TikTok have reshaped adolescents' digital lives. Unlike text- and image-based social media, short video attracts a vast underage audience through fragmented clips of fifteen seconds to a few minutes, low barriers to content creation, and interest-based recommendation [1]. Official Chinese surveys show that the share of minor internet users who frequently watch short videos rose from 40.5% in 2018 to 54.1% in 2022, with more than 100 million underage users; in the same year, 55.9% of minor internet users obtained news through short-video platforms, overtaking television for the first time [2]. Short video is thus no longer merely an entertainment medium: unboxing reviews, livestream commerce, curated displays of "refined living" and "seeding" (zhongcao) discourse flow continuously, with algorithmic amplification, toward adolescents whose value systems are still in formation. This paper asks:

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through what mechanisms does consumerist internet culture in short-video contexts influence adolescent values, and how strong is the evidence on its consequences? Adopting a critical review approach, the paper presents the evidence of risk while resisting the temptation to reduce a complex empirical phenomenon to a one-dimensional media panic.

The same official data reveal how deeply commercialised leisure is woven into this usage pattern. Among minor short-video users, 73.6% report watching mainly to relax and pass the time rather than for any defined purpose; Douyin (60.4%), Kuaishou (59.3%) and WeChat video channels (45.0%) are the dominant viewing venues; and 11.9% of minor users already exceed two hours of viewing on ordinary school days [2]. In the same survey, 51.8% of parents and 69.9% of teachers identified addiction to games and short video as the most pressing problem of minors' internet use in need of governance. Purposeless, habitual viewing matters analytically because it is precisely the reception mode in which embedded commercial persuasion is least likely to be scrutinised: attention is relaxed, content is entertaining, and the boundary between programme and promotion is deliberately blurred. Three questions therefore organise this review. First, which theoretical traditions best illuminate the encounter between consumerist culture and adolescent value formation in short-video contexts? Second, through which concrete mechanisms does that culture operate? Third, how strong, how consistent and how generalisable is the empirical evidence on its consequences? The paper proceeds from theory (Section 2) to mechanisms (Section 3) and evidence (Section 4), before turning to a critical assessment (Section 5) and implications (Section 6)

2. Theoretical perspectives: sign consumption, cultivation and social comparison

Baudrillard argued that in the consumer society the use value of commodities gives way to their sign value: people construct identity and social distinction through the consumption of signs [3]. Short video pushes this logic to an extreme. Filtered depictions of "the good life" embed commodities into replicable lifestyle scripts, turning consumption into a performance that can be liked, imitated and shared. At the level of media effects, cultivation theory holds that repeated media exposure gradually shapes audiences' perceptions of reality; television research has already demonstrated that heavy viewing cultivates materialist values [4]. Algorithmic recommendation renders such "repeated exposure" more personalised and more frequent, so the cultivation potential of short video is, in theory, even greater. At the individual level, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) explains why conspicuous consumption content is particularly potent: adolescents are at a sensitive stage of self-concept formation, are prone to upward comparison when confronted with carefully curated depictions of other people's lives, and often turn to materialism as a compensatory strategy for threatened self-esteem [5, 6]. Materialism, a value orientation that places the acquisition of possessions at the centre of life and treats them as the yardstick of happiness and success, carries well-documented long-term costs for well-being [7-9].

The intellectual lineage of these ideas is longer than the platforms themselves, and recognising it guards against treating short video as historically unprecedented. Veblen observed more than a century ago that consumption functions as a display of status whose value depends on being witnessed by others; what he called conspicuous consumption presupposes an audience [10]. Short-video platforms industrialise the supply of that audience: likes, comments, reposts and follower counts quantify the invidious comparison Veblen described and return it to the displayer as measurable social reward. Cultivation theory, likewise, predates the algorithm: Gerbner and Gross first argued that heavy exposure to a symbolically consistent media environment gradually shapes viewers' conceptions of social reality, and Shrum et al. later demonstrated the mechanism for material values specifically [4, 11]. These three perspectives address different aspects of the same

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process. Consumer society theory explains why commodities become symbols of identity and social distinction. Cultivation theory highlights how repeated exposure can gradually normalise particular consumption patterns. Social comparison theory explains why adolescents, whose self-concepts are still developing, are especially sensitive to these influences. Materialism, as operationalised by Richins and Dawson, is the point at which these strands become empirically measurable, which is why the evidence reviewed below is organised around it [7]. What algorithmic short video changes is therefore not the underlying social logic but its intensity, personalisation and reach, a difference of degree that may nonetheless amount to a difference in kind.

3. Mechanisms of influence: algorithms, influencer marketing and comparative display

Synthesising the literature, three mechanisms can be distinguished (see Figure 2). First, algorithm-driven immersive cultivation. Interest-based recommendation continuously reinforces homogeneous content according to dwell time and engagement; once an adolescent shows interest in consumption-related content, a "the more you watch, the more you are shown" loop takes hold, giving sign-consumption narratives an exposure density far beyond that of traditional media [1]. Second, influencer marketing and the dissolution of advertising boundaries. Influencer marketing appears in the personalised guise of "authentic sharing", and perceptions of its informational value and credibility translate directly into consumer trust [12]. Because children's and adolescents' advertising literacy is still immature, they often fail to recognise embedded commercial intent, making them a high-exposure, low-defence audience for influencer marketing [13]. Longitudinal research shows that commercial exposure raises children's materialism precisely through the mediating pathway of heightened desire for advertised products [14]. Third, upward social comparison and conspicuous display. Entertainment and self-expression are adolescents' core motives for using short video, which naturally turns platforms into arenas of peer lifestyle competition; formats such as "unboxing" and "haul" videos render consumption hierarchical and visible, inviting feelings of relative deprivation and imitative, premature consumption [15].

A fourth consideration cuts across all three mechanisms: the weakness of adolescents' cognitive defences under the specific processing conditions that short video creates. It is often assumed that advertising literacy, knowing what advertising is and what it intends, protects young audiences. Rozendaal, Lapierre, van Reijmersdal and Buijzen show that this assumption is poorly supported: because contemporary advertising is affect-based and entertaining, children typically process it under conditions of low elaboration and rarely retrieve their conceptual knowledge of advertising at the moment of exposure, and their recognition of embedded, non-traditional formats develops considerably later than their recognition of television commercials [16]. "Seeding" content on short-video platforms approximates the worst case for defence activation: it is entertaining, delivered in a trusted peer voice, and stripped of conventional advertising cues. The stakes of this defencelessness were established well before short video existed. Reviewing the television era, Buijzen and Valkenburg concluded that advertising exposure is associated not only with heightened materialism but also with increased parent–child conflict and unhappiness, with parental communication moderating the effects, findings that map directly onto the family tensions now reported around short-video use [17].

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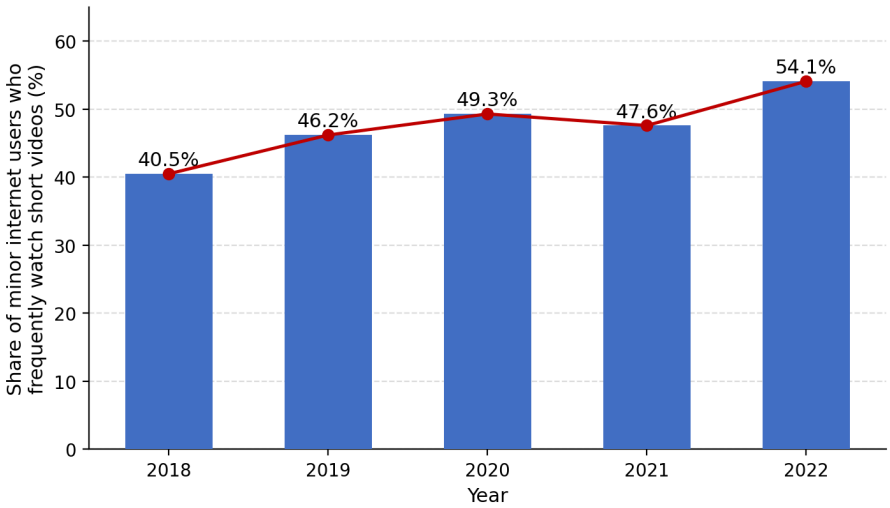

Figure 1. Share of minor internet users in China who frequently watch short videos, 2018–2022[2, 18]

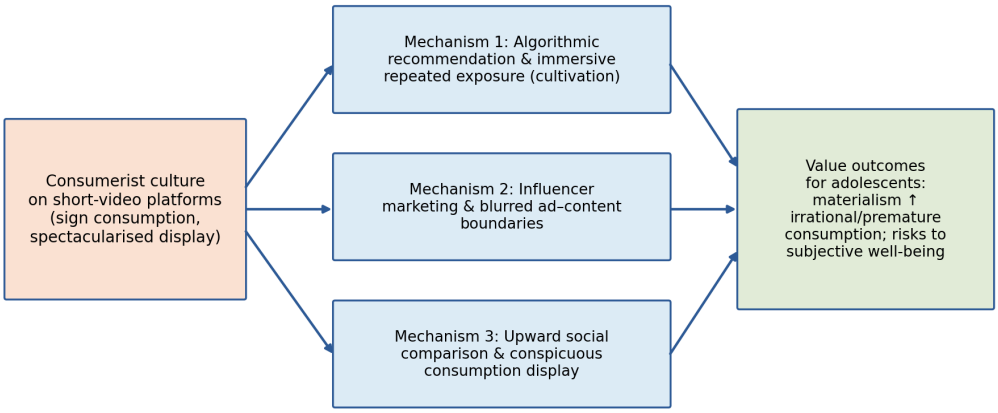

Figure 2. Mechanisms through which consumerist short-video culture influences adolescent values (author's elaboration)

4. Evidence: survey data and empirical studies

Table 1 summarises the official survey indicators most directly relevant to this review. Short video is now deeply embedded in minors' information practices and self-expression, and nearly four in five parents report concern over usage time, indicating that the issue has become a salient social concern [2].

Table 1. Indicators of short-video use among minor internet users in China, 2022

Indicator	Share
Minor internet users who frequently watch short videos online	54.1%

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Table 1. (continued)

Minors who shot and posted short videos on Douyin, Kuaishou, WeChat, etc. in the past year	32.9%
Minors obtaining news and major information via video platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou and Bilibili (exceeding television, 50.2%)	55.9%
Parents worried that their children spend too much time watching short videos	77.5%

Source: CNNIC & CYLC (2023) [2].

Beyond these headline indicators, the 2022 survey contains three findings that bear directly on the consumerist dimension of short-video culture. First, 26.7% of minor internet users reported encountering online content that flaunts personal wealth or family background, making conspicuous-consumption display one of the most frequently encountered categories of undesirable information. Second, only 47.3% of minor short-video users said they consciously distinguish whether information is posted by official media or by self-media accounts, so that most young viewers apply no source-based filter to commercially motivated content. Third, 56.3% of minor internet users reported consciously guarding against excessive online consumption. It is the evidence that self-protective dispositions are widespread yet far from universal [2]. Read together, the figures describe an environment in which exposure to consumption display is routine, discrimination of persuasive intent is patchy, and roughly two-fifths of minors report no deliberate restraint toward online spending.

Table 2 assembles representative empirical and review studies along the "commercial exposure–materialism–well-being" chain. Overall, the evidence supports three conclusions. First, the negative association between materialism and well-being is robust across methods and cultures, and materialistic children's lower life satisfaction interacts with the context of advertising exposure [9, 19]. Second, a causal effect of commercial exposure on materialism is supported by longitudinal designs [14]. Third, early adolescence is both the peak period of materialism and a window for intervention [6]. Research on short video itself is more recent, but existing evidence links addictive use to poorer mental health, school performance and family functioning [20].

Table 2. Summary of representative empirical and review studies

Study	Sample and method	Key findings relevant to this review
Buijzen & Valkenburg [17]	Narrative review of survey and experimental studies on television advertising and children	Advertising exposure is associated with higher materialism, more parent–child conflict and lower happiness; parental communication moderates the effects
Chaplin & John [6]	US children and adolescents aged 8–18; cross-sectional comparison	Materialism peaks in early adolescence (ages 12–13); changes in self-esteem are a key psychological mechanism

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Table 2. (continued)

Rozendaal et al. [16]	Conceptual analysis integrating empirical findings on children's advertising processing	Conceptual advertising literacy is rarely activated during low-elaboration, affect-based processing; knowledge of advertising alone offers weak protection
Opree et al. [19]	Dutch children aged 8–11; two-wave longitudinal survey; SEM	Among children frequently exposed to advertising, lower life satisfaction longitudinally predicts higher materialism
Opree et al. [14]	466 Dutch children aged 8–11; two waves, 12 months apart	Advertising exposure has a positive longitudinal effect on materialism, fully mediated by desire for advertised products
Dittmar et al. [9]	Meta-analysis integrating a large number of independent samples across countries	Materialism is robustly negatively associated with personal well-being (life satisfaction, positive affect, mental health)
Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz [15]	Survey of pre-adolescent and adolescent TikTok users	Entertainment and self-expression are core uses-and-gratifications motives, forming the contextual basis in which commercial content is embedded
Chao et al. [20]	1,346 adolescents from three Chinese schools; group comparison	Addictive short-video users show significantly worse mental health, school performance and family environment; moderate users do not differ from non-users

5. Critical discussion

Although the evidence of risk is considerable, three caveats deserve emphasis. First, effect heterogeneity is systematically underestimated. Chao et al. found that moderate users did not differ from non-users in mental health or school performance; negative outcomes were concentrated among addictive users [20]. Stigmatising short-video use wholesale is neither consistent with the evidence nor attentive to confounders such as family environment. Second, the direction of causality remains contested. Materialism and low well-being may be mutually reinforcing, and low life satisfaction itself drives adolescents toward material compensation; consumerist content may be a symptom as much as a sole cause [19]. Third, adolescents are not passive audiences. Uses-and-gratifications research documents clear agency and creativity in their platform practices, and some young users produce parodic, anti-consumerist content of their own [15]. A balanced analysis should avoid treating short-video use as inherently harmful while also recognising the role of platform design. Recommendation algorithms, traffic distribution mechanisms, and embedded advertising can increase minors' exposure to commercial content and shape their consumption preferences.

A fourth caveat concerns the remedies most often proposed. Media literacy education is the default policy response to youth advertising exposure, yet the evidence counsels modesty about what it can achieve on its own. If conceptual knowledge of advertising is rarely activated during

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low-elaboration processing, then classroom instruction that raises such knowledge without changing the conditions of exposure may leave actual susceptibility largely intact; effective protection is more plausibly a joint product of literacy education, mandatory disclosure that inserts recognisable cues at the moment of exposure, and structural limits on how commercial content is pushed to underage accounts [16]. Distributional questions deserve equal attention. The official data show that rural minors trail their urban counterparts by more than eight percentage points in routine information search and online shopping, indicating that digital consumer practices and the resources for navigating them are unevenly distributed; whether consumerist short-video content widens or narrows existing inequalities of aspiration across urban–rural and class lines is an open empirical question that current studies, mostly drawn from urban or Western samples, cannot answer [2]. Finally, the comparability of the evidence base has limits of its own. Much of the strongest causal evidence concerns television advertising and Dutch or American children, whereas direct evidence on algorithmically personalised short video in China remains sparse and largely cross-sectional; transferring effect sizes across media, cultures and platform architectures should therefore be done with explicit caution rather than by assumption [14, 17].

6. Conclusion and implications

Consumerist internet culture in short-video contexts acts on adolescent values through three mechanisms: algorithmic cultivation, influencer marketing and comparative display, with the core risk lying in the strengthening of materialist orientations and the attendant erosion of well-being; yet the risk is heavily concentrated in high-intensity, addictive usage contexts. Three implications follow. First, platform governance should be improved by optimising recommendation algorithms and content pools for minors and limiting the push intensity of consumption-inducing content to underage accounts. Second, commercial content labelling should be strengthened through mandatory advertising disclosure for influencer marketing directed at minors. Third, advertising literacy and algorithmic literacy should be incorporated into media literacy education, helping adolescents to recognise sign-consumption discourse and to build intrinsic value orientations. Future research should develop longitudinal and quasi-experimental designs specific to short video, test whether algorithmic personalisation amplifies cultivation effects, and attend to heterogeneous outcomes across urban–rural and class lines.

Two further points qualify these implications. On the governance side, the direction proposed here converges with the recommendations attached to the official survey itself: improving content review, recommendation algorithms and traffic-allocation mechanisms in the short-video industry, and accelerating a common content-pool standard for minors' mode so that protected use becomes technically routine rather than exceptional [2]. From an educational perspective, research on advertising literacy suggests that media education should go beyond teaching students how to identify advertisements. It should also help them develop critical attitudes towards commercial content, particularly in the low-attention environments common on short-video platforms [16]. This review also has several limitations. The evidence on Chinese short-video use is mainly based on cross-sectional surveys, while much of the causal evidence comes from other media contexts and Western samples. In addition, this paper provides a narrative review rather than a meta-analysis. Future research should therefore use longitudinal data on Chinese adolescent users, examine algorithmic exposure more directly, and better distinguish whether short-video use contributes to materialism or simply reflects existing differences in well-being.

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