Education

Cultural Consumption of Chinese Generation Z

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Generation Z, having grown up in an internet-based environment, exhibits distinctive cultural consumption behavior. This study gives an overview of popular forms of cultural consumption in Chinese Generation Zers, including blind box purchases, virtual product buying, and circle-informed consumption, and investigates factors affecting their cultural consumption behavior. Also discussed are its positive and negative impacts on the Chinese cultural industry. Additionally, the article looks at the issues with cultural consumption of this group as well as solutions proposed in the literature.

Keywords: Generation Z; Cultural Consumption; Consumption Behavior

Introduction

CULTURAL Consumption, a product of social advancement, is a popular consumer activity, meant to meet the cultural needs of individuals (Ou, 2017). It is about the consumption of goods and services with primarily aesthetic functions and only secondarily instrumental uses (Rössel et al., 2017), such as tourism and entertainment. Individuals' cultural consumption behavior is contingent on their values, aesthetic tendencies, and interests. Generation Z (Gen Z), born between 1995 and 2010, has been heavily exposed to the internet and mobile devices and is dubbed "digital natives," swinging between the virtual and real worlds. Gen Zers' outlook and identity have been profoundly shaped by their growth environment (Li et al., 2022), leading to their distinctive cultural consumption behavior.

Having grown up in an increasingly affluent society, Gen Zers pursue more diverse consumption interests beyond the basic necessities, prizing self-pleasing experiences and interpersonal interaction, which distinguishes them from preceding generations in terms of consumption. Recent data shows that the population of Generation Z in China has exceeded 230 million, with an aggregate consumption expenditure amounting to approximately 5 trillion CNY (Liu, 2023). With their ever-growing consumption power, Chinese Gen Zers have become a significant group of consumers with increasing capacity for cultural consumption, posing a tremendous impact on Chinese social and economic development. This necessitates in-depth research into their unique cultural consumption behavior. Based on the exist-

ing literature, this study seeks to address the following questions: "What are the popular forms of cultural consumption among Gen Zers?" "What factors influence their cultural consumption behavior?" "What impacts does their cultural consumption have on the development of the cultural industry in China?"

Popular Forms of Cultural Consumption in Chinese Gen Zers

Living a life with high penetration of internet technologies, Gen Z not only pursues personalized, more diverse consumer experiences in cultural consumption, but also has higher requirements for the quality and novelty of cultural products. This section is devoted to an analysis of blind box purchases, virtual products buying, and circle-informed consumption as illustrations of cultural consumption in Chinese Gen Zers.

Blind Box Purchase

The "blind box" is a special form of sale in which products of a certain category are randomly chosen and placed in opaque boxes. These products can be dolls, animations, and video games, peripheral goods of film and television programs, cultural artifacts from museums, etc., which have certain collection value. Blind box purchases can elicit senses of mystery and anticipation in buyers as they are unable to identify the specific component in the box from the packaging. Blind boxes are often sold in a range based on a specific theme, with each range containing a variety of products. The seller will list the names of the products in a range on the packaging without indicating which specific product is in the box. In addition, some ranges may include "hidden items" that are not displayed on the packaging and are in relatively small quantity. Therefore, those buyers who accidentally get a "hidden item" are deemed very lucky. The purchaser can buy one or several products in a range, or the whole range. Those who seek a collection of a range or a greater chance to obtain the "hidden item" may choose to buy the whole range.

According to Liu (2022), the "blind box" industry has developed into a chain of businesses, ranging from intellectual property (IP) incubation to cultural promotion programs. Recent years have seen a growing interest in blind boxes in Chinese young consumers. The market size of the blind box industry in China was reportedly about 7.4 billion CNY in 2019 and is expected to grow to 25 billion CNY in 2025 (China Industry Information Network, 2019). Furthermore, 2000's survey data shows that Gen Zers constituted 38.4% of all blind box consumers in China. The figure continued to grow in recent years (Shen & Chen, 2022). There are studies focusing on exploring the reasons for the popularity of blind boxes among Gen Zers. The reasons identified by Yan and Wu (2021) include the affordability of a single blind box to most consumers; the novel consumer experience brought by the uncertainty of the specific content of the box; consumers' provoked desires to collect the whole range of products; consumers' interest in the "hidden item" due to its scarcity; and the ongoing launch of new products for a specific theme, making the collection of and communication about blind boxes being trendy. According to Shen and Chen's (2022) study, the appearance, design, production techniques, fun, and cultural qualities of blind box products are key factors in fueling con-

sumption of them.

Despite the widely recognized positive roles of bind-box consumption in meeting the cultural needs of consumers, studies in this field show concerns about its potentially negative influence on Gen Zers. The unpredictable nature of blind box consumption, the release of products by range, the random mechanism for purchasing, and other factors can instigate unfavorable consumption tendencies in buyers, such as the gambling mentality, irrational consumption, competitive consumption, and conspicuous consumption (Wang & Zhou, 2019). For young Gen Zers, these unhealthy consumption behaviors may negatively affect their outlook on life. Therefore, it is important to guide youngsters to develop rational attitudes towards blind-box consumption.

Virtual Product Buying

Compared With the preceding generations, Gen Z is more ready to spend money on virtual cultural products, such as audio-visual content, video games, virtual idols, and paid knowledge. Gen Zers constitute the majority of the audiences of audio-visual media (Gao, 2020; Gu & Yuan, 2022), with a high demand for top-notch online music and videos. They not only buy digital singles and albums but also subscribe to membership, services of streaming music and video to enjoy ad-free, personalized content recommendations. Moreover, they have a special liking for audiobooks. In the video game market, Gen Zers are the chief consumption force, being avid buyers of new gaming equipment and software, as well as other auxiliary items to enhance the capacities and looks of their characters in the game. Zhang and Liu (2023) made the point that these virtual characters are digital images of the gamers themselves, extended from their images in real-world life; hence, their consumption in this area is also a process of self-discovery and expression. Virtual idols, an emerging cultural phenomenon, have attracted a lot of attention from Gen Z, who are willing to pay for virtual idols' concerts, goods endorsed by virtual idols, and other peripheral products to show their liking for and attachment to their idols (Zhu & Zhang, 2022). In the paid knowledge market, Generation Zers are also the active group of consumers, acting as not only customers of knowledge services but also producers and disseminators of knowledge from time to time. They spend money increasing their exposure to various cultures, based on which, they manage to construct and consolidate their cultural circles (Zhang, 2023).

To sum up, Gen Z showcases diverse needs for virtual cultural products, with strong intention of paying for high-quality content and individualized services and participating in the construction and development of cultural ecology. Their behavior as consumers of virtual cultural products and services manifests their value orientation in cultural consumption, driving the development and flourishing of the virtual cultural market.

Circle-Informed Consumption

Circle-informed Consumption is a prominent feature of Gen Zers' cultural consumption behavior. The majority of Chinese Gen Zers is the "only child" in their respective families and thus, is more likely to suffer from loneliness and identity crises. As a

result, they pay more attention to establishing their social circles and maintaining social relationships, seeking identification with peers (Liu, 2023). Emblematic of this psychological need are the rise of circle-informed consumption in Gen Zers and their emphasis on the social function of consumption activities. In circle-informed consumption, Generation Zers purchase products with special cultural symbols or attributes, which are valued by a group of "like-minded" peers (Liu, 2023). For instance, a Gen Zer as an e-sports enthusiast may buy peripheral products related to their e-sports or limited-edition game props, which not only serve as signifiers of their personal interests but also become part of their social currency, assisting them in establishing connections in the e-sports community, seeking senses of belonging, and even further expanding social networks. Therefore, circle-informed consumption is more about social and emotional satisfaction than material gratification.

In addition, the internet has provided robust platforms for circle-informed consumption in Gen Zers, where "purchasing in groups" emerged, differing from conventional e-commerce models or brick-and-mortar store shopping (Zhu & Zhang, 2022). Cultural products favored by Gen Z, such as products peripheral to anime or games, often target specific groups, which are not surely available in the mass market. Therefore, "group buying," based on a specific cultural circle, becomes an ideal solution among Gen Zers. There are two chief forms of group buying. One is about the intra-group transaction with the buyers and sellers being both group members, which largely enhances the efficiency of information exchange and transaction. With the other form, there are only buyers in the group, namely, Gen Zers with common needs of goods. The group leader or organizer is responsible for seeking out a reliable seller, and the group members share the costs of a certain collective order. This form of group buying is meant to spread the design fees of a unique product or meet the minimum delivery quantity set by the seller.

While circle-informed consumption in Gen Zers may appear as a group behavior, which circle to join is determined by the individual's personal interests and hobbies, as well as their personalities. Therefore, circle-informed consumption is reckoned a behavior pursuing both individuality and group mentality (Ding & Dong, 2021). Wang (2021) claims that circle-informed consumption is not an ordinary form of group buying, but rather a purchasing behavior with tribalism tendency. This consumption pattern is supported by emotional connections between Gen Zers, enabling them to release their emotions and experience group-shared fun through collective consumption.

Factors Influencing Gen Zers' Cultural Consumption

This section is an analysis of factors influencing Chinese Gen Zers' cultural consumption for an in-depth understanding of the logic behind it. It focuses on analyzing the impact of their philosophy of consumption and the consumer environment of the time on their cultural consumption behavior.

Gen Zers' Philosophy of Consumption

Generally, Gen Z in China is characterized as a population with strong characters and broad horizons, being independent and tolerant as well. These qualities differentiate Gen Zers from their preceding generations in terms of the philosophy of consumption. They have their distinctive consumption habits, choices, and methods. Our review of relevant views on Gen Z consumption behavior in the literature finds that its philosophy of consumption bears certain salient characteristics: (i) Valuing consumer experience. According to Ao (2021), consumer experience is about the individual's feeling and perception of the use of a product or service. Gen Zers not only have their own standards of the quality of products but also place a high value on the shopping experience itself and the service provided by the seller. That explains their liking for blind box purchases, which give them a unique gaming experience, prompting their continual buying of these products. (ii) Emphasizing emotional satisfaction over extravagant consumption. Gen Zers, like their parents, value the cost-effectiveness of products. As per a survey on the lifestyles of Gen Z by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and other institutions, 78% of respondents reported having the habit of regularly saving money and fully considering their economic conditions when purchasing non-basic necessities (Ao, 2021). In the meantime, Gen Z is more ready to spend money on goods that enhance their senses of happiness and belonging, meeting their emotional needs. (iii) Focusing on the social aspect of consumption. As mentioned in the earlier section of this article, cultural consumer goods often play the role of social currency among Gen Zers. Products like blind boxes, figurines, and player skins are the objects of communication in a Gen Z community while also serving as gifts to be exchanged among friends. Also, the consumption of virtual cultural products, such as video games, contribute to the elevation of the individual's status in the virtual world (e.g., achieving higher rankings in competitive games), thereby giving them senses of identity and superiority that can hardly be experienced in real-world life (Wang, 2021). (iv) Pricing the cultural value of consumer goods. Gen Zers' consumption decision-making mirrors their value orientation; they show greater interest in goods and services that conform to their outlook on the world, philosophy of life, and affective imagination (Liu, 2023). They also pay attention to the corporate image and brand ethics of the provider of the product, more willing to purchase goods produced by companies that actively fulfill their social responsibilities. This is evidenced by Wang and Yang's (2023) research finding that the cultural attitudes of the manufacturer often matter more than the cultural value of the product itself. In addition, Chinese Gen Zers hold a unique perspective on Chinese society, with strong awareness of national honor and pride. The love of their nation can result in greater tolerance and support for local products (Li et al., 2022).

Changes in the Consumption Environment

The profound changes in the consumption environment have posed profound impacts on Gen Z's consumption behavior. First off, technological advances have brought more diverse cultural consumption channels for Chinese Gen Zers. Currently, digital platforms, such as social media, have permeated all facets of their lives and are reconstructing the consumer ecosystem with their digital mechanisms (Wang, 2023). Through algorithms, they can accurately measure and assign values to users' online behaviors, such as clicking, liking, commenting, and placing

orders, and establish direct and effective connections with target consumers, continuously improving their profiles and pushing pertinent advertisements to them. Also, digital platforms have made significant progress in promoting products in a timely manner by transitioning from the traditional "delayed dissemination" to "real-time live streaming." In the meantime, with a surge of ad content creations, users are exposed to colossal amounts of fresh information on goods and services whenever they face the screen, resulting in their largely boosted motivation for consumption. Furthermore, digital platforms have the potential to create a novel consumption scenario by integrating various activities, such as shopping, display, communication, and lending, with the purpose of providing instant satisfaction. In such a scenario, users can not only browse for and purchase desired products with ease but also share shopping experiences and knowledge through the platform's built-in display feature, which engages them in deep communication with like-minded friends and can potentially induce additional consumption. It is noteworthy that the impact of digital platforms on consumption behavior is not confined to Gen Z in China. According to Smaliukiene et al.'s (2020) study, Gen Z in Europe also exhibits consumption behavior different from that of older generations because they are more subject to the influence of the intelligent communication environment, which prompts them to indulge in self-reward and hedonic consumption.

Furthermore, businesses' efforts to adjust their product development and marketing campaigns to the needs of Gen Z have also had significant effects on the latter's consumption behavior. Businesses' realization of the enormous potential of the youth cultural market has driven them to focus on commercial opportunities in this area (Ding & Dong, 2021). Ongoing is their investment in technological research, development of IP peripheral products, and creative design to render their products more compatible with the consumption habits and needs of Gen Z. In the meantime, businesses have adopted the marketing strategy that combines niche marketing and precision marketing, using social media platforms and big data analytics in identifying target consumers and enhancing interaction and connection with Gen Z through customized content and services. Additionally, they have conducted in-depth research into the characteristics of the audiences of subcultures and have continuously explored novel and innovative marketing approaches, such as online live streaming, virtual social networking, game linkage, and more, to enhance the attraction of their offerings.

The Dual Impact of Gen Z's Cultural Consumption

As a major group of cultural consumers in the new era, Gen Z's consumption has significant impacts on the development of the entire cultural industry in China. This section focuses on examining the positive and negative consequences of cultural consumption boom in this group.

Positive Impacts

The increased demand for cultural products is the chief motivator of the development of the cultural industry, prompting its upgrading, which, in turn, gives rise to new fashions and trends in cultural consumption in the popular public (Lin, 2011). Gen

Zers' cultural consumption behavior has multiple positive impacts on cultural industry development in China. First, Gen Zers' emphasis on consumer experience has continuously driven businesses to improve their service standards. They prefer tailored or customized products, willing to communicate personal preferences to brand owners and get involved in the design process of products and services. This special demand for consumption experience propels the shopping process towards becoming more transparent and efficient; making the sales and service of businesses more aligned with the needs of consumers in different age bands (Ao, 2021). Second, as Gen Z's consumption power for cultural products, especially native cultural products, enhances, an increased number of local brand owners begin to pay attention to traditional Chinese cultural elements, reprocessing them and integrating them into the cultural construction of their own brands (Zhang & Lu, 2022). This move helps improve the quality of local brands and upgrade Chinese local companies while also contributing to the revival of interest in traditional Chinese culture. Third, Gen Zers' love and pursuit of sub-group cultures have positive effects on cultural diversity. They are more receptive to novel cultural elements and a diversified cultural market, which increases the market entry and development opportunities for cultures of various origins.

Negative Impacts

Concurrent with its positive consequences are the negative impacts of Gen Z's cultural consumption on the cultural industry. The enormous potential of Gen Zers' consumption capacity for cultural products has attracted the attention of many businesses, instigating intense competition in this market. This competition may become vicious when sellers resort to illegitimate means to secure the market share, such as marketing hype, price wars, and IP right infringements. These practices violate the rights and interests of Gen Zers as consumers and are harmful to the healthy growth of the cultural market by undermining its fairness. At the same time, the ever-evolving patterns and platforms of cultural consumption has posed challenges to market regulation. Issues, including but not limited to the proliferation of vulgar products, inordinate hype, and live streamed sales via rude performance, are pervasive (Wang, 2023), severely disrupting the normal order of the cultural market, increasing burdens on regulatory authorities while also misleading the young generation. Additionally, certain researchers expressed their concerns that use of internet technology is fueling the diffusion of certain unhealthy cultural consumption behaviors and notions in Gen Zers, such as advanced spending, excessive consumption, and luxury consumption (Yu, 2022), which is unfavorable for the development of appropriate values in this group.

Issues with Gen Z's Cultural Consumption and Proposed Solutions

The primary purpose of cultural consumption is to satisfy the individual's spiritual needs, enabling them to obtain mental pleasure and nourishment in the cultural market (Wang, 2021). Nevertheless, the actual circumstances are less ideal than expected among Gen Zers. Insufficiently mature are their notions, strategies, and decision-making associated with consumption. For some of them, cultural consumption may generate more

troubles than mental benefits. First, fun-pursuing buying like blind-box purchase may elicit addictive consumption in Gen Zers (Zhang & Yang, 2021). Products like blind boxes can successfully pique consumers' interest in collecting novel stuff, and their random nature coincides with Gen Z's psychological needs for sensation-seeking, leading to excessive consumption. Second, being members of various social circles, Gen Zers are subject to the influence of peers and internet influencers, or popular trends on social media, which may result in blind, mimicking consumption—in other words, buying products that one does not really need, but for the purpose of integrating into a certain group for senses of belonging. Third, a portion of Gen Zers feel the need to show off their "superior" taste and social status by sharing online pictures of those rare blind boxes they have collected. This may instigate a climate of conspicuous consumption. Lastly, with the assistance of the internet, certain businesses have adopted buying-stimulating strategies like the flash sale and limited-edition release to fuel impulsive consumption in Gen Z consumers (Yu, 2022). With the widespread promotion campaigns on social media platforms, Gen Zers can be easily tempted to overspend.

Liu (2023) gives an analysis of the causes of these issues. First, a portion of Gen Zers have difficulty distinguishing between judicious and excessive consumption. Compared to older generations, they are more susceptible to external temptations to consume irrationally. Also, their inadequate knowledge of consumerism and poor judgment of the value of specific cultural goods compromise their ability to reach sensible consumption. Furthermore, despite their emphasis on individuality in consumption, Gen Zers' buying behavior has been strongly influenced by the platforms, capital, and social circles. This is supported by other studies (Zhang & Yang, 2021; Wang, 2021), which reveal that Gen Z's consumption notions and processes have been heavily shaped by social media platforms and capital, primarily via two avenues. One is the joint efforts by capital and mass media to prompt the audiences' identification with and pursuit of the lifestyles (particularly, those of the wealthy) they present. Using narrative techniques of new media, they try to stimulate false demand and elicit identity anxiety in Gen Zers, enticing them to consume cultural products in an irrational manner (Zhang & Yang, 2021). The other avenue is to utilize the influence of the central figures in social circles. In circle-informed consumption, each circle has its leading members, who play the role of opinion leaders because of their professional expertise, extensive networks and social resources. These members may actively or unconsciously partner with businesses to promote products or guide consumption of ordinary members in their respective circles (Wang, 2021). The latter may have an aversion to this conduct but still get involved in it because of group pressure.

Researchers have actively explored solutions to issues with Gen Z's cultural consumption. Liu (2023) argues that improving the quality standards of cultural products is of paramount importance for bolstering cultural consumption in Gen Zers, recommending increasing aesthetic qualities of cultural products, placing heavier weight on their originality, and integrating sound life philosophy into them to foster Gen Z's healthy consumption habits. Wang (2023) suggests that the government strengthen regulation of the cultural consumption environment, particularly the cyber consumption setting. It is important to set limits to marketing hype from the brand owners and intensify supervision over self-media practitioners to prevent instigation of overspending and impulsive consumption in Gen Zers. Furthermore, consumer culture is deemed to have a latent impact on Gen Z's consumption behavior. To reshape consumer culture for the young generation, it is necessary to rectify those illegitimate consumption behaviors in certain consumer circles and give play to the role of mainstream media in guiding public opinions, which have the potential to give objective comments on topical events and questions relevant to cultural consumption (Liu, 2023).

Conclusion

As a result of the expedited development of Internet technology and livestreaming media, consumption have become increasingly convenient. In this context, Gen Z's cultural consumption can serve a multitude of purposes, such as emotional satisfaction, social networking, and group identification. Chinese Gen Zers are avid consumers of fun-provoking products, such as blind boxes and virtual cultural products that meet their emotional needs, and active participants of circle-informed consumption that bears additional social value. These emerging forms of cultural consumption are emblematic of the distinctive characteristics of the young population, providing valuable clues for deep understanding of this generation. Their cultural consumption has significant impacts, positive and negative, on cultural industry development in China. Amid the ongoing advancement of technology and evolvement of consumer markets, it is expected that Gen Z's cultural consumption will give new impetus to the Chinese cultural industry. All stakeholders should pay close attention to the challenges Gen Z faces in cultural consumption, jointly creating a healthy consumption environment for this generation.■

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