

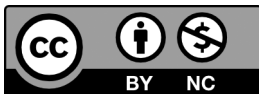
Rethinking Consumer Society: The Transformation of Generation Z's Consumption Practices under Digital Capitalism

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Abstract: Against the deepening backdrop of digital capitalism, consumption has ceased to be merely an activity for satisfying individual needs and has increasingly evolved into a core mechanism of capital accumulation and the reproduction of social relations. Grounded in Marxist political economy and drawing on the theories of commodity fetishism, symbolic consumption, and digital labor, this paper explores the structural transformation of contemporary consumer society. It argues that the platform economy, as the dominant form of the cultural industries and a key cultural technology, has rendered consumption increasingly productive and labor-like. Consumers are continuously incorporated into processes of value creation through their everyday practices, which are simultaneously acts of cultural participation and identity formation within a symbolic economy. Within this context, the consumption patterns of Generation Z exhibit a shift toward rational, low-price, and interest-driven forms of consumption. Through analyses of low-price platforms, food delivery price wars, and the interest-based economy, the article contends that this “rational consumption” is not a rupture with consumer logic but a strategic adaptation. It represents participation in a story-driven symbolic economy where “interests” are often curated cultural narratives. Moreover, anti-consumerist discourse is re-encoded within algorithmic systems, functioning as a new mechanism for intensifying engagement. The article, therefore, argues that critique must move beyond individual choice to address labor relations, data ownership, and the power structures of platforms—the core cultural technologies and financial architectures of digital capitalism—thereby re-situating consumption as a political-economic and cultural issue.

Keywords: Consumer Society; Digital Capitalism; Generation Z; Rational Consumption; Platform Economy; Digital Labor



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1 Introduction: From Consumer Phenomena to Structural Problems

Within the Marxist theoretical tradition, consumption has never been understood as an isolated social phenomenon detached from production, but rather as a concrete extension of the capitalist mode of production into the sphere of everyday life. In *Capital*, Marx's analysis of commodities, value forms, and commodity fetishism reveals how, under

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capitalist conditions, social relations between people come to appear as relations between things, as if commodities possessed an autonomous social power independent of human agency (Marx, 2004). From this perspective, consumption cannot be reduced to a random choice within the private sphere, but rather must be conceived as a form of social practice deeply embedded in capitalist structures and ideological formation.

Approached in this way, consumption functions as a crucial mechanism through which capitalist social relations are reproduced and naturalized. The apparent “freedom of choice” in consumption is not an expression of autonomous individual will, but is shaped by pre-existing commodity structures and ideological frameworks.

In contemporary society—particularly under conditions marked by the intensification of the Culture Industry and the expansion of the symbolic economy—the social function of consumption has undergone a significant transformation (Featherstone, 2007; Xiang, 2015). Consumption no longer serves merely to satisfy material needs; it increasingly operates as a key mechanism for identity formation, social differentiation, and the production of meaning—a core concern of consumer culture theory. Commodities are endowed with cultural symbolism and emotional value, turning consumption into a practice of self-expression. On the other hand, the pervasive integration of the platform economy and algorithmic systems—a dominant “cultural technology” of our time—has drawn consumption itself into the circuit of value production (Xiang, 2016). Consumption is no longer simply the endpoint of value realization, but increasingly exhibits tendencies toward productivization and laborification.

It is within this context that Generation Z¹ emerges as a critical group for understanding contemporary transformations in consumption. As “digital natives” who have grown up within digital platforms, algorithmic recommendation systems, and mobile internet infrastructures, Generation Z’s everyday life is deeply platformized, and their consumption practices are structurally embedded in regimes of data collection, algorithmic analysis, and platform governance (Ao, 2021). Discussions of Generation Z consumption reveal a striking tension. At the level of everyday practice, this generation strongly endorses cost-performance ratio logic, actively engaging with low-price platforms, group-buying mechanisms, and promotional systems, while treating frugality and calculation as markers of rational consumption. At the level of values and discourse, however, the same group frequently expresses support for sustainability, anti-consumerism, and ideals of rational or restrained consumption.

This disjunction between practical orientation and normative commitment gives Generation Z’s consumption practices a distinctly ambivalent character. On the one hand, they appear to distance themselves from traditional consumerism centered on conspicuous display and brand worship; on the other hand, their consumption is increasingly dependent on platform infrastructures and deeply enmeshed in new mechanisms of capital accumulation. This tension raises a fundamental theoretical question: do the changing consumption practices of Generation Z constitute a rupture with the logic of the classical consumer society, or do they instead represent a structural reconfiguration of capitalist consumption under digital conditions?

This article argues that shifts in Generation Z’s consumption behavior cannot be adequately explained by generational psychology or changing value preferences alone. Rather, they must be situated within the broader structural transformation of the capitalist mode of production under digital capitalism. The rise of so-called “rational consumption” does not amount to a fundamental negation of consumer society; instead, it reflects a form of consumption rationality that has been reorganized through algorithmic governance and platform power structures. Recognizing this dynamic

¹ Generation Z refers to individuals born between 1995 and 2009, also known as “digital natives” or the “internet generation”.

is essential for rethinking consumption, subjectivity, and critique in the contemporary political economy of digital capitalism.

2 Consumer Society in Theory: From Commodity Fetishism to Symbolic Consumption

2.1 Commodities, Value, and Ideology

Within the Marxist theoretical framework, consumption has never been understood as a domain detached from production or concerned solely with individual preference. Rather, it represents the concrete unfolding of the capitalist mode of production in everyday life. In *Capital*, Marx famously characterizes the commodity as the “cell-form” of capitalist society, precisely because it embodies not only use value but also specific social relations via exchange. On the surface, commodity exchange appears to rest on principles of equality and voluntariness. Yet this formal equality conceals the class divisions and power asymmetries embedded in the process of production itself (Marx, 2004). Consumption, therefore, cannot be reduced to a private act of need satisfaction, but must be examined within the broader framework of capitalist value production and social relations.

From this perspective, commodity fetishism provides a crucial point of entry for understanding the ideology of modern consumption. Marx argues that under capitalist conditions, social relations among people tend to appear as relations between things, as if commodities naturally possessed value and meaning of their own. This phenomenon does not arise from individual misperception, but from the ideological effects of capitalist exchange relations themselves (Yang, 2003). In the sphere of consumption, commodities typically present themselves through visible attributes such as price, brand, or function. At the same time, the labor process, conditions of production, and underlying class relations are pushed out of view. What consumers encounter in the market is no longer a network of social relations, but a highly naturalized commodity form. In the contemporary era, this process is intensified as commodities are systematically endowed with layers of cultural symbolism and narrative meaning by the Culture Industry, transforming consumption into a key site for identity negotiation and social distinction (Featherstone, 2007; Xiang, 2015).

Seen in this light, the notion of “free choice” in consumption is not grounded in fully autonomous subjectivity. Rather, it is shaped and guided within pre-existing commodity structures and ideological frameworks. While responding to individual needs, consumption practices simultaneously reaffirm and reproduce capitalist social relations at the level of everyday life. In this sense, consumption should be understood as an ideological social practice, rather than a value-neutral personal decision.

2.2 Symbolic Consumption and Social Difference

With the continuous expansion of capitalist productivity, the social role of consumption has undergone a gradual shift. Especially since the late twentieth century, consumption has become less centered on functional utility and increasingly oriented toward meaning, symbols, and difference. In *The Consumer Society*, Jean Baudrillard argues that contemporary capitalism no longer sustains itself by responding to scarcity. Instead, it operates through the continuous production of new desires and distinctions, thereby keeping consumption in motion (Baudrillard, 2014). Under such

circumstances, the practical utility of commodities becomes secondary, while what matters more is the identity, attitude, or lifestyle they connote. Consumption thus evolves into a mechanism for producing meaning and differentiating social positions.

Within the logic of symbolic consumption, commodities are no longer merely functional objects, but carriers of socially coded meanings. What is purchased is often not the object itself, but the way of life or social image it promises. This process of symbolic encoding is the primary function of the Culture Industry. Through advertising, media narratives, and aesthetic design, commodities are systematically integrated into a seemingly natural yet deeply constructed symbolic order (Xiang, 2015). Consumption consequently becomes a means through which individuals express the self, affirm identity, and locate themselves within the social order.

From this perspective, symbolic consumption does not negate Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism; rather, it extends it under the conditions of contemporary capitalism. Bourdieu's framework reveals that consumption is never a neutral act of individual taste, but a social practice deeply embedded in structures of class and power (Bourdieu, 2015). The question of how this logic of social distinction and the accumulation of cultural capital is transformed within the platformized, data-driven economy of digital capitalism—where tastes and preferences themselves become directly measurable and exploitable resources—constitutes a critical line of inquiry for the following section.

2.3 From Fetishism to Symbols

Although Marx and Baudrillard approach consumption from different theoretical angles, their critiques of consumer society are not marked by rupture, but by a form of internal continuity. Through the concept of commodity fetishism, Marx identifies a fundamental mechanism of capitalist society: social relations between people are transformed into relations between things, and are thereby obscured and naturalized. Baudrillard's analysis of symbolic consumption reveals how this mechanism takes on new forms in contemporary society. Objectification no longer operates solely at the level of exchange, but penetrates culture, symbols, and ideology more deeply.

In this process, commodities not only conceal the labor relations behind them but also actively shape desire structures and value judgments through symbolic systems. Attachment to commodities is often driven less by concrete need than by imagined pursuits of identity, difference, and social position. Contemporary consumer society, therefore, has not entered a "post-ideological" condition. On the contrary, ideology persists, embedded in everyday life in more subtle and less visible forms (Hou, Ji, & Huang, 2025; Yang, 2024).

From a Marxist standpoint, consumption remains a crucial site through which capitalist social relations are maintained and reproduced. Critique of consumption has not lost its relevance with historical change; instead, it must be rethought in relation to new social conditions and cultural forms.

3 Digital Capitalism and the Structural Transformation of Consumption

3.1 Algorithmic Capitalism and the Productivization of Consumption

With the transition into digital capitalism, the mode of capitalist operation has undergone marked changes in both its technological conditions and its practical logic. New forms of capital accumulation—exemplified by platform economy,

data-driven business models, and algorithmic governance—have transformed algorithms and artificial intelligence from auxiliary tools into core infrastructures of capital expansion. Within this context, some scholars have introduced the concept of “algorithmic capitalism” to capture the specific configuration of digital capitalism in contemporary society (Yang, 2024). From the integrated framework of this article, algorithmic capitalism represents not only a new regime of accumulation but, more critically, a system in which algorithms function as a meta-cultural technology that restructures the entire chain of cultural production, symbolic circulation, and meaningful consumption (Xiang, 2015).

Unlike industrial capital, which relies primarily on waged labor, digital capital expands through the continuous extraction of user behavior, data resources, and attention (Sun, & Liu, 2025). Consumption, in this process, no longer functions merely as the final stage of value realization, but is increasingly incorporated directly into the chain of value production. Users’ activities on platforms—browsing, clicking, comparing prices, commenting, and sharing—may appear as ordinary acts of consumption. Yet, they are constantly recorded, analyzed, and transformed into data assets by algorithmic systems. Such data are then harnessed for targeted advertising, financial operations, and the expansion of platform scale (Wei, & Liu, 2025).

This shift signals a transformation in the very form of consumption. Consumption is no longer reducible to the act of spending money; it increasingly takes on the character of a productive activity that can be systematically appropriated by capital. Although this activity does not assume the recognizable form of traditional labor and is not compensated through wages, it nonetheless generates value that can be converted into profit. This development vividly illustrates the growing blurring of boundaries between production and consumption under digital capitalism.

3.2 “Playbour” and New Forms of Commodity Fetishism

Within digital platforms, the boundaries between labor and non-labor, as well as between production and consumption, have become increasingly indistinct. Users often participate in platforms under the guise of entertainment, leisure, or rational consumption, yet their actions are continuously translated into processes of information production and capital accumulation. To account for this phenomenon, scholars have proposed concepts such as “playbour”, highlighting the expansion and transformation of labor forms in the digital economy (Wei, & Liu, 2025).

“Playbour” does not suggest that users consciously engage in paid work. Rather, it emphasizes their objective participation in value production. The longer users remain on a platform and the more frequently they interact, the greater the data resources and traffic value generated for the platform. This form of labor is highly covert: it lacks fixed working hours, a defined workplace, and a clear employment relationship, yet it exerts a tangible impact on capital accumulation. Under conditions of algorithmic capitalism, commodity fetishism thus takes on new forms. Whereas in classical capitalism, fetishism primarily obscured factory labor, in the digital age, it increasingly operates through the erasure of consumers’ own labor.

Through personalized recommendations, interface design, and affective narratives, platforms frame consumption as an experience of being understood and satisfied, thereby concealing the underlying mechanisms of data extraction and value transformation. While consumers experience a sense of “free choice” and “rational decision-making”, they often remain unaware that they have become active participants in the production of value for digital capital. This lack of recognition of one’s own laboring role endows consumption with an intensified ideological function under digital capitalism. Therefore, the new form of commodity fetishism in the digital age consists of creating a dual illusion of “free labor” and “rational choice”. Recognizing this dynamic is crucial for analyzing the structural limits of the discourse on

“rational consumption” in the consumption practices of Generation Z.

4 The Transformation and Internal Tensions of Generation Z’s Consumption Practices

Against the deepening background of digital capitalism, Generation Z has gradually become one of the most representative consumer subjects in contemporary society. Yet the consumption practices of this generation cannot be understood simply as either a continuation of, or a departure from, classical consumerism. Rather, they emerge from structural conditions in which the platform economy, algorithmic governance, and the cultural industry are deeply intertwined, giving rise to a set of highly contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, Generation Z frequently articulates commitments to “rational consumption”, anti-consumerism, and resistance to brand premiums at the level of discourse. On the other hand, their everyday consumption is increasingly dependent on platform infrastructures and deeply embedded within algorithmically organized circuits of value production. This tension between subjective consciousness and structural reality constitutes a crucial entry point for understanding consumption under contemporary digital capitalism.

4.1 From Conspicuous Display to Interest and Cost-Performance: The Reconfiguration of Consumption Motives

Compared with earlier consumption patterns centered on luxury goods and brand worship, Generation Z exhibits a notable shift in consumption orientation. High-priced commodities are no longer automatically equated with social status, and the symbolic authority of brands has weakened markedly. Instead, consumption centered on personal interests, emotional identification, and cost-performance—exemplified by the fandom economy and other such phenomena, “goods for passion (gǔzi jīngjì, hobby peripheral economy)”, and IP-based cultural products—has gained growing legitimacy among young consumers (Ao, 2021; Zhang, & Liu, 2023). This shift is not a retreat from symbolism but a migration to a different symbolic economy. It embodies the “story-driven” logic of the Culture Industry, where consumption is an act of purchasing access to shared narratives and affective communities. The pursuit of “cost-performance” often functions as the rationalized gateway into these culturally coded circles of belonging.

This transformation is often interpreted as a return to rational consumption, or even as a loosening of consumerist ideology. However, from the perspective of theories of symbolic consumption, such a reading risks being overly optimistic. The symbolic logic of consumption has not disappeared; rather, it has been reorganized. Commodities no longer primarily generate distinction through price and scarcity, but through cultural competence, insider knowledge, and consumption strategies—such as knowing where to buy cheaply, how to compare prices, or how to avoid being “trapped” by branding. The dissemination of this strategic knowledge is often mediated by “new cultural intermediaries” (Featherstone, 2007)—such as review bloggers and niche Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs)—who act as taste arbiters and tactical guides, further entrenching new logics of distinction within consumer fields.

In this sense, the valorization of “cost-performance” among Generation Z should not be understood as purely economic rationality. It functions simultaneously as a form of cultural judgment and symbolic differentiation. The ability to consume “smartly” has become embodied cultural capital. Symbolic consumption, therefore, has not been overcome,

but has shifted from overt class display to more internalized and cognitively mediated forms of distinction.

4.2 Platform Price Wars and the Structural Production of “Rational Consumption”

The recent intensification of price competition among food delivery platforms and e-commerce platforms offers a particularly revealing empirical context for observing Generation Z’s consumption practices. Through large-scale subsidies, algorithmic pricing, and time-limited promotions, food delivery platforms create the experience of ultra-affordability. In contrast, platforms such as Pinduoduo have rapidly gained popularity among young users by institutionalizing ultra-low prices and collective purchasing mechanisms.

For many young consumers, choosing such platforms signifies not only saving money but also rejecting what they perceive as unjustified brand premiums. These choices are often framed as evidence of being more rational, more sober, and less susceptible to capitalist illusion. On social media, “buying cheap but smart” has increasingly become a marker of group identity, accompanied by ironic self-representation and collective affirmation.

Yet this form of rationality does not arise in a neutral market environment. Platforms actively shape consumers’ price perceptions through algorithmic recommendations, dynamic pricing, and targeted subsidies. What counts as the “cheapest” or “most cost-effective” option is itself the result of algorithmic calculation and platform strategy. These massive subsidies constitute a strategic investment, where platforms trade present capital for future streams of user attention, behavioral data, and locked-in consumption habits—a process of capitalizing projected user lifetime value. In repeatedly comparing prices and optimizing choices, consumers do not exit capitalist logic; instead, they participate more deeply in the data-producing processes that sustain platform accumulation.

Thus, the “rationality” encouraged by platforms is a governance technique that immerses users in intensive platform interaction. “Rational consumption” does not automatically possess critical force. Under conditions of digital capitalism, it is readily absorbed into platform governance as a mechanism for increasing engagement, consumption frequency, and user retention.

4.3 Consumption, Expression, and Labor: New Forms of Fetishism on Digital Platforms

On digital platforms, consumption is no longer an isolated act of exchange but is tightly interwoven with expression, interaction, and content production. For Generation Z, consumption on food delivery apps, e-commerce platforms, and social media is frequently accompanied by reviews, sharing, commentary, and the production of “guides” or “strategies”. Subjectively, these practices are understood as self-expression and experience-sharing; objectively, they are continuously converted into data resources exploitable by platforms.

In this process, consumption gradually acquires a labor-like character. Users are not formally employed, nor do they receive direct remuneration, yet their activities materially contribute to value production. This labor is fragmented, quotidian, and largely invisible—precisely because it is embedded in everyday life. It is here that commodity fetishism under digital capitalism takes on a new form. Rather than merely obscuring factory labor, it increasingly obscures consumers’ own participation in value production. Platforms naturalize this extraction through a discourse blending care ethics and efficiency aesthetics—“the platform understands you,” “helps you save money.” This narrative successfully reframes exploitative data extraction as a personalized cultural service, operating fetishism at the level of emotion and perceived relationship.

4.4 Limited Resistance and Structural Reabsorption: The Boundaries of Generational Consumption Change

It would be reductive to deny that Generation Z's consumption practices contain elements of critique. The demystification of luxury brands, skepticism toward excessive consumption, and growing attention to cost-performance and sustainability all indicate a degree of reflexivity toward consumer society. However, such reflexivity is largely confined to the level of consumption objects and styles, rather than extending to the structural foundations of platform capitalism and algorithmic governance.

When anti-consumerist discourse itself becomes a marketable resource, and when restraint, rationality, and thrift are mobilized to strengthen platform loyalty, their critical potential is rapidly neutralized. The success of platforms such as Pinduoduo and food delivery services exemplifies capital's capacity to appropriate and reorganize consumer consciousness in response to emerging sentiments.

From a Marxist perspective, this is not primarily a matter of individual inconsistency, but a consequence of structural constraint. The transformation of Generation Z's consumption practices represents not a transcendence of consumer society, but an adjustment contained within capitalist logic itself. This form of "limited resistance" constitutes one of the most elusive ideological configurations of contemporary digital capitalism, which is precisely what renders it so hard to challenge.

5 Conclusion

This article, grounded in Marxist political economy, re-situates contemporary consumption within the structural conditions of digital capitalism. Its core argument is that, with the deep penetration of the platform economy and algorithmic governance, consumption is no longer merely the terminal point of value realization. Instead, it has been transformed into a productive activity that is systematically organized and appropriated by capital. Consumption itself has become a key mechanism for data extraction, attention mobilization, and value accumulation.

Within this context, the low-price orientation, rational consumption discourse, and interest-driven practices of Generation Z do not represent a fundamental break from consumer society. While this generation distances itself from conspicuous consumption in attitude, these shifts are better understood as strategic adaptations to digital capitalism. The symbolic logic of consumption has not disappeared. Still, it has been reorganized—from distinction based on price and scarcity to more internalized modes grounded in cultural strategies and platform-mediated choice.

From the perspective of commodity fetishism, a new configuration has emerged. Under digital capitalism, fetishism not only obscures the labor of production but also conceals the consumer's own participation in value production. Every day, acts like browsing and reviewing are continuously mined as data assets. Yet, this process is naturalized by narratives of "convenience" and "rational choice", depoliticizing consumption even as its productive nature intensifies.

Through analyses of platform price wars and the interest-based economy, this article demonstrates that "rational consumption" is not a neutral behavior but a mode endowed with moral legitimacy under algorithmic guidance. When anti-consumerist sentiments themselves are converted into a new growth logic, their critical potential is systematically absorbed. This reflects the powerful integrative capacity of digital capitalism as a structural system.

Therefore, critique must move beyond advocating for individual restraint or ethical choice. A genuinely critical

analysis must shift its focus to the institutional conditions that organize consumption—specifically, labor relations, data ownership, and platform power structures. Only then can consumption be re-understood as a core political-economic issue.

The transformation of Generation Z's consumption does not herald a "post-consumer society". Instead, it starkly reveals the adaptive and self-renewing capacities of digital capitalism. The value of this analysis lies not in celebrating a more "rational" generation, but in using it to expose the deep operational shifts in consumer society, thereby reopening a critical path for rethinking the nexus of consumption, labor, and capital.

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