



# Exploring the Phenomenon of “Exquisite Poverty” in Generation Z Based on the Perspective of Dramaturgical Theory

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**Abstract.** In the changing times, the large and ever-growing Generation Z, who advocates individualities and trends, has attracted a lot of attention, along with the phenomenon of “excessive consumption” in the disguised form — “exquisite poverty”. The emergence of this phenomenon not only reflects the young generation’s pursuit of a better life, but also shows the imbalance between self and performance, as well as reality and ideal. Based on the perspective of Goffman’s dramaturgical theory, this paper deeply considers the external and internal logic of the phenomenon of “exquisite poverty” through the explanation of terms, the characteristics of the phenomenon and the analysis of its causes, and proposes suggestions to solve the “exquisite poverty” dilemma from the perspective of Generation Z itself.

**Keywords:** Exquisite poverty · Generation Z · Dramaturgical theory · Sociology

## 1 Introduction

With the rapid changes in Chinese society, Generation Z has begun to rise as a new main consumer force, creating a new lifestyle and attitude pursuit. Among them, the contradictory expression of “exquisite poverty” is increasingly active in the public discourse space. The unbridled desires and hardships of the reality of the younger generation have sparked heated discussions on the Internet. What are the characteristics of “exquisite poverty”? Why do these characteristics appear? What are the deeper meanings hidden behind the debt to pay for exquisiteness? How to guide Generation Z to resolve the contradiction between “exquisiteness” and “poverty”? These are the questions this paper attempts to answer.

## 2 Term Explanation

### 2.1 Generation Z

“Generation Z” follows the popular terms used to divide the birth population, such as “Generation X” and “Generation Y” in the West. In 1994, “Generation Z” was first

proposed by Hunter Thompson [1]. In China, this term first appeared in the article “The Newest Population — The Survival Status of ‘Generation Z’” published in China Youth Study in 1999. The article refers to young people between 1980 and 1984 as “Generation Z” [2]. Currently, this concept is often used to refer to the population groups born between 1995 and 2009, namely “post-95s” and “post-00s”.

“Generation Z” is born in the rapidly developing network information age. Their growth process is accompanied by the iteration of digital information technology and intelligent electronic products, and is greatly influenced by the Internet. Therefore, it is also known as the “Internet Generation”, “Internet Natives” and so on.

The “Generation Z” group in the current era has significant characteristics such as active thinking, distinctive personality, pursuit of innovation, and advocacy of sharing [3]. At the same time, in terms of consumption concepts, they also have unique ideas: advocating “face score”, favoring beautiful and textured product appearance, having the habit of virtual consumption and online consumption, tending to pay for interest, being keen to “grow grass” in the Internet community before consumption and being willing to “show” products and share their shopping experience after consumption [4].

## 2.2 “Exquisite Poverty”

Regarding the meaning and essence of “exquisite poverty”, it can be viewed from the following perspectives:

From the deconstruction of the word, “exquisite” is defined in “Modern Chinese Dictionary” as delicate and meticulous, which originally means that the craftsmanship is ingenious, and here it can refer to a kind of quality of life. The extended meaning of “poverty” is used here, namely, being materially impoverished and unsuccessful, and here, it can refer to a state of life.

From the perspective of the origin of the Internet, on October 20, 2018, the Weibo blogger “Language Command Center” explained the word “exquisite poverty” for the first time, which means a way of life that is commonly seen among young people: In order to pursue exquisiteness, they try their best to support unequal consumption desires with low income and never get tired of it [5].

From the academic point of view, some scholars believe that “exquisite poverty” is the product of the combination of irrational consumption patterns and the pursuit of exquisite life attitude [6]. In essence, “exquisite poverty” is a disguised “excessive consumption”, that is, paying future income in advance to meet current consumption needs that exceed short-term income potential.

Combining the above multiple perspectives, this paper summarizes and defines “exquisite poverty” as a lifestyle of the “Generation Z” youth that is spawned by a consumer culture, which is a result of the derailment between ideals and reality, and the mismatch between income and consumption.

## 2.3 Dramaturgical Theory

Erving Goffman, a Canadian sociologist, proposed the dramaturgical theory in 1959 in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

In dramaturgical theory, an individual's behavior in front of others will have a certain impact on the other's situational definition, so that a person can “effectively” project a specific situational definition to others. Therefore, the communication between people is regarded as “performance”.

Here, the individual is the “performer”, others are the “audience”, and the interactive place is the “stage”. The standard expressive equipment that an individual uses, intentionally or unintentionally, during a performance is the “front stage”. At the “front stage”, “personal front stage” and “stage backdrop” are also included. “Stage backdrop” means the stage arrangement of stage facilities, decorations and other stage equipment. The “personal front stage” is a medium used to transmit symbols in expressive equipment, which is composed of various stimuli, such as official position, official rank, race, age, clothing, gender, etc. According to the different functions of stimuli, “personal front stage” can be divided into two categories: “appearance” and “behavior”.

What is opposite to the “front stage” is the “back stage” which is isolated from the audience. On the “back stage”, the ritual equipment in the “performance” will be hidden, and the “performer” can put down his guard, temporarily forget his role, and reveal his true self [7].

### **3 The Characteristics and Causes of the “Exquisite Poverty” Phenomenon of Generation Z**

Combined with the dramaturgical theory, this paper believes that the “exquisite poverty” phenomenon of Generation Z presents two characteristics of social media as the main “front stage” and the separation of “front stage” and “back stage”.

#### **3.1 Social Media as the Main “Front Stage”: Performance and Presentation**

Goffman writes in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*: “Regardless of the particular purpose an individual may have in mind, or whatever his intentions may be in having that purpose, his interest is always in controlling the behavior of others.” And individuals can achieve this by designing a “personal front stage”. Precisely, because of social media's virtuality and anonymity that allow users to shape idealized personal images at will, social media has become a front-stage medium for focusing on displaying a specific self.

Taking the “Xiaohongshu” APP as an example, when opening the “Discovery” homepage, users will be greeted with modified and beautified pictures, accompanied by carefully polished copywriting titles. The content of the notes is often based on beauty makeup, fashion and daily life. Of course, the most eye-catching is the chemical reaction between various delicate elements. For example, while users are “sincerely recommending” major beauty products, the new entry-lux bags of the season “accidentally” appears on camera. Or there are all kinds of expensive smart home appearing in a vlog of a room tour. Or the fine food and fine view and a beauty with a good appearance and a good shape are in the same frame, and the end of the note is located in a five-star hotel. Through the above-mentioned various forms of performance, the performers seem to share life naturally and normally, and at the same time inadvertently show off their

superiority of high consumption, freely project intuitive or potential situational definitions to the audience, and convey information directly or indirectly, so as to complete self-expression and specific “character setting” creation [8].

On the one hand, the rapid development of social media has prompted the establishment of its main “front stage” status. According to the “Global Digital Overview 2022” report released by Hootsuite and We Are Social on January 26, 2022, at the beginning of 2022, global Internet users have risen to 4.95 billion, and the Internet popularity rate has now reached 62.5% of the world’s total population. In January 2022, there were 4.62 billion social media users worldwide, which was equivalent to 58.4% of the world’s total population. And people spent as much as 2 h and 27 min a day on social media [9]. What behind the huge numbers represents that under the wave of the Internet, social media has gradually been embedded in people’s daily life, becoming another “performance stage” in addition to face-to-face interaction. In addition, the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic in 2020 has profoundly changed people’s social mode, and online social media has replaced face-to-face social contact as the main “front stage”.

On the other hand, in recent years, high-quality content communities focusing on sharing daily life have quickly occupied most of the youth group market. The social platform “Instagram”, which is favored by Generation Z abroad, has quickly gathered a large number of young consumer groups with exquisite, trendy and high-end content. According to the “2022 Global Internet Overview” report, 48.4% of Internet users between the ages of 16 and 24 chose “Instagram” as their favorite social platform. The “Xiaohongshu” App, labeled as “China’s version of Instagram”, with the slogan “Marking My Life”, has become an important life trend birthplace and an entrance for consumption decisions for today’s young Chinese. As of October 2019, the monthly active users of Xiaohongshu APP exceeded 100 million, and more than 72% of the users were “post-90s”.

Besides, unlike reality, audience views of social media “performances” are transformed into a series of quantitative data of outputs. More intuitive audience feedback will directly affect the image of the performer. On social networks, the relationship between performers and audiences has become “paying attention” and “being noticed”. Performers get likes and comments from the audience by posting pictures, texts, videos and other self-presentation methods. The audience’s opinion expression is changed from face-to-face verbal evaluation to a like or a short text comment in the lower right corner of the APP page, which is fast and convenient, and can improve the enthusiasm of the audience to respond. The performers understand the audience’s likes and dislikes through intuitive quantitative data, which provides guidance for personal image modification and beautification, thus forming a cyclic process of “image creation — audience evaluation — image change”.

### **3.2 Separation of “Front Stage” and “Back Stage”: Pleasing Oneself and Leapfrogging**

As mentioned earlier, when a performer performs, he will try to emphasize the part he wants to present that is conducive to image building, while the part that is detrimental to impression building will be strongly suppressed. Obviously, the part that the performer wants others to see that is strongly emphasized tends to appear in the “front stage” area,

which, combined with the above, is social media. Covered facts and the performer’s true self are hidden in the “back stage” area, which is real life.

In daily life performances, the “front stage” and “back stage” are often inconsistent, but the “exquisite poverty” phenomenon of Generation Z shows the separation of “front stage” and “back stage”, and the ideal life presented by social media is at odds with the real life taking place in the real world.

In the reality show “ALLIN”, there is such a leading character Venny, who just graduates and starts work, with a monthly salary less than 5,000 yuan. Under the circumstance that her first month’s salary has not yet paid, she has borrowed nearly 100,000 yuan from major platforms. What’s even more surprising is that when the host takes a closer look at her billing details, he finds that most of the expenses are non-rigid expenses, such as manicures, art photos, learning Korean, etc. Among them, the hobby expenditure for learning Korean alone is as high as 13,000 yuan, which is more than double her monthly salary. The debate topic of “exquisite poverty” was also discussed in the online variety show “U CAN U BIBI”. A girl named Ah Ying says that beauty and exquisiteness are synonymous with herself and her everyday food and clothing expenses all reflect exquisiteness: She has countless beauty products such as lipsticks, and she only chooses Panama’s Geisha Ice Drip for coffee and only drinks Romanee from Burgundy for red wine. Behind the seemingly pursuit of high-quality life and freedom from care, what hides is her identity as an ordinary office worker. But she still insists that even if she spends all the money, she must maintain her exquisite life.

Statistics show that the average debt of the post-90s generation is as high as 18.5 times their monthly income. If the average salary is 6,917 yuan, the average debt is as high as 127,900 yuan. Those with debts have established a “debt alliance” group on Douban with nearly 40,000 people. According to the statistics of the members of the group, a total of 362 people in this group disclose the reasons and amounts of debts, and the total amount reaches a staggering 134.54 million yuan, and most of those with debts are young people.[10] Invisible poverty has become a unique feature of Generation Z. They live a glamorous life in front of people, but have empty pockets in private. They are tempted back and forth between loan and an exquisite life. The “front stage” and “back stage” are separated.

#### **4 Deep Thinking Behind the “Exquisite Poverty” Phenomenon of Generation Z**

Goffman argues that when a person presents himself to others, the performance always tends to tell and embody the universal values of society, even if his set of actions doesn’t contain such values. Essentially, it is an expressive representation of the moral values of society. In other words, individuals express general and formal social values through performance.

Generation Z doesn’t stick to the traditional saving concept like the previous generations, and is more willing to pay for interest and exquisiteness, thinking that they can achieve an ideal exquisite life in advance through “leapfrog consumption” — through borrowing consumption. This is closely related to social mobility and social stratification. Individuals seek upward mobility and development through expressive symbolic

equipment to perform in everyday life, such as status symbols in the form of material wealth. At the same time, blind obedience to exquisiteness is also related to the psychological predicament of individuals falling into self-confusion under the prevalence of consumerism.

#### **4.1 External Logic: Individual Dilemmas in the Grand Context**

Just like the popularity of the “Versailles” literature, the frequent occurrence of the phenomenon of “exquisite poverty” reflects the risk of class solidification caused by the large gap between the rich and the poor in China.

According to the “2019 China Urban Household Assets and Liabilities Survey”, 1% of Chinese households own 17.1% of social wealth. The top 10% of the households own 49% of the total social wealth; the top 20% of the households own 64.5% of the total social wealth; the top 40% of the households own 82.6% of the total social wealth; the last 20% of the households own only 2.3% of the total social wealth [11]. The fact that a few people hold the majority of the wealth has led to high economic inequality, which not only makes it difficult for individuals to climb up the ladder, but also changes the social conduct — the “elite culture” and “middle class” are promoted, and class contradictions are exacerbated.

#### **4.2 Inner Logic: Self-lost in Blind Pursuit**

Showing exquisiteness only through external material symbols reflects the internal lack and self-lost of the Generation Z.

Emiko Kato, the leader of Japanese fashion art, pointed out in her book *Exquisiteness* that the essence of exquisite life is minimalism and beauty, and a beautiful life comes from the consciousness of beauty. In contrast, the young people who are deeply trapped in “exquisite poverty” define the exquisite life still as “the more expensive the better” and “the more upscale the better”. In fact, what “pleases oneself” is only the brand symbol of the material rather than the functional value of the commodity itself. They blindly follow the trend in pursuit of symbols, lack thinking about beauty and exquisiteness, and obtain only sensory pleasure rather than spiritual pleasure. This is doomed to their inner uneasiness and emptiness, which is also a major reason for the emergence of terms such as current anxiety, “rat race” and “lying flat”.

Turning on social media, what they see is the vision of exquisiteness and wealth; when they return to daily life, what they see is the reality of scarcity and poverty. The individuals involved are stagnant in the predicament of desire, and in the fast-developing society, individuals can’t bear the severe sense of abandonment and disconnection. Therefore, under the coercion of consumerism and the anxiety of discourse created by the media, Generation Z would rather be heavily in debt than stop and face their own troubles. In this context, “exquisiteness” and “poverty” both contradict and inspire each other [12].

### **5 Getting Out of the Predicament: Facing Up to the Needs, Enriching the Inner Being**

It is undeniable that “exquisite poverty” is a “poverty trap” for the immature Generation Z. But from another perspective, this is also the pursuit and yearning of contemporary

youth for a better life, reflecting the great achievements China has made in the rapid economic and social development.

Therefore, in addition to criticizing and examining the phenomenon of “exquisite poverty”, it is more about correct guidance. For Generation Z, consumption is a necessary way for individuals to enjoy life and express their individuality, and has an irreplaceable and important position in improving the quality of life, motivating labor and work, and promoting personal development. The healthy and rational consumption concept of Generation Z should be advocated through various channels and methods. Generation Z must oppose the material-centered fetishism, reject the consumerist verbal trick of “buying the best within the ability”, and treat Internet advertising and marketing rationally.

Most importantly, Generation Z needs to learn to face up to their own needs and find a happy balance between the present and the future. Li Yinhe once said: “An exquisite life is first of all sober, not ignorant, that is, one should be aware of his own existence”. An exquisite life is not limited to material things, but more of a personal way of life with inner fullness and outer enrichment. The heart follows the sense of ritual and order and the material level pays attention to the less but the finer taste.

## 6 Conclusion

Robert E. Parker wrote in *Race and Culture*: “In a sense, if this mask represents the self-concept that we ourselves have developed — the role we are constantly striving to represent — the mask, then, is our truer selves, the selves we want to be. Eventually our conception of our role becomes second nature, an inseparable part of our personality” [13]. Therefore, for the “exquisite poverty” phenomenon of Generation Z, it is necessary to see not only the negative part of overdrafting the future to meet the current desires, but also to see the individual’s vision for a better life, and to affirm the individual’s consistent efforts to achieve an ideal life and achieve the consistency of “front stage” and “backstage”.

**Authors’ Contributions.** This paper is independently completed by Sirui Li.

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