



The Impact of Self-media on the Spread of Consumerism

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Abstract. The research background of this essay is based on contemporary China in the last two decades, and it aims to explain the positive relationship between the prevalence of self-media and the emergence and spread of consumerism in contemporary China. This may provide a new angle to investigate media studies and economics as well as people's daily life in contemporary China. With the boost of the economy and the reform of the market system, consumer market activity is mobilized, and consumerism is gradually getting influential. Meanwhile, self-media is taking a larger proportion of the mass media. With the establishment of the growing e-commerce, self-media is promoting the spread of consumerism not only through embedding advertising in people's daily lives but also through creating an atmosphere of public opinion in which consumption is used to locate someone in a higher social status. By disclosing the procedure of how self-media promotes overconsumption, this essay aims to give individuals valid suggestions on how to increase personal savings. The research method of this paper is mainly literature analysis; it is concluded that self-media is boosting the emergence of consumerism, and individuals should be more aware of the face so that unnecessary spending can be avoided to a great extent.

Keywords: Self-media · Consumerism · E-commerce · Overconsumption

1 Introduction

With the reform and opening up of China at the end of the twentieth century, its economic capacity has shown a steady rise, which provides the most basic economic foundation for the development of consumerism in China. In 2010, China surpassed Japan to become the world's second-largest economy and has shown continuous growth trends. Other corresponding elements with economic prosperity are technological development and the growth of national consumption power. China's per capita consumer spending in 2021 has risen to 24,100 from 21,210 in 2020, an increase of 12.6 percent [1]. Against the backdrop of the epidemic's severe negative impact on world economic development and people's savings, the significant increase in China's per capita consumer spending reflects the trend of expanding domestic demand in the Chinese economy. Likewise, as the economy develops and domestic demand expands, the trend of consumerism has become increasingly popular in China in recent years.

In addition to economic development, the progression of self-media as an important approach to information dissemination in China has also contributed to the spread of consumerism. The rise of self-media has played a particularly significant role in this regard. Taking data collected at 18:24 on August 1, 2022, as an example, there are a total of 96,000 live streams being watched by a total of 5,829,000 people on one Livestream platform, TikTok. Of these, a total of 1,813,000 people are watching 29,000 live streams for the purpose of selling [2]. These two jointly indicate the circumstance in China that the market with self-media as a sales method has a large number of agents and audience at the same time. Additionally, the rise of various e-commerce platforms has simplified the procedure of purchasing, which promoted the development of consumerism in China.

Some scholars in China have noticed the corresponding relation between self-media and the emergence of consumerism in China. However, the existence of the corresponding relationship between the two factors is still to be confirmed. Investigating previous research on self-media and consumerism in China in the last two decades, most scholars have put emphasis on the evolutionary procedure of the two factors separately. For instance, starting from the underlying logic of short videos, the profit-seeking nature of MCN companies as emerging media companies is explained [3]. Despite the fact that potential intentions that the spread of consumerism in China is positively relevant to self-media are disclosed in some previous research, this article strives to validate the direct and positive effect self-media has on the march of consumerism in China. On top of that, some applicable action can be deduced to promote the acceleration of any individual's savings.

This essay analyses 12 papers from digital libraries to explore the relationship between self-media and the spread as well as the practice of consumerism in recent China. It starts by interpreting several significant terms such as self-media, consumerism, and e-commerce mentioned in this article and reviews research done in this field. Subsequently, it tries to build the connection between these several elements and support the stance that self-media has reinforced consumerism in China. Eventually, based on the previous discourse, this article aims to give valid suggestions on how individuals can resist consumerism and increase private savings.

2 Definition of Consumerism and Self-media

2.1 Definition of Consumerism

Before the essay unfolds further discussion, clarification of significant terms is necessary, especially when one terminology can refer to contradictory explanations. For instance, consumerism in Cambridge Dictionary can be explained in two ways. One is “the protection of consumers against harmful products or business methods”. The other is “the situation when too much attention is given to buying and owning things, often things that are not really necessary” [4]. In this essay, the latter one is adopted for later discussion. Notably, the definition above comes into effect from two perspectives. One is the psychological approach that individuals subjectively are willing to acquire and keep things. The other is the action of purchasing something. Both can be regarded as consumerism. Additionally, to clarify “things that are not really necessary”, personally

excessive hoarding of goods or goods bought under marketing rather than practicality is also covered.

2.2 Definition of Self-media

As for self-media, the explanation and definition from Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis in the book *We Media. How Audiences Are Shaping the Future of News and Information* are adopted. Self-media can be seen as participatory journalism that “the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information” and defined as “A way to begin to understand how ordinary citizens empowered by digital technologies that connect knowledge throughout the globe are contributing to and participating in their own truths, their own kind of news [5].” This definition focuses on the subjective initiative of each individual as a publisher, receiver, and disseminator of information in the age of self-media. With the prevalence of Weibo, TikTok, and other platforms in China, self-media in recent China has revealed some other features. Three distinct traits are equalization of cultural communication methods, popularization of cultural communication subjects, and personalization of cultural communication contents [6]. To refine the forms of self-media mentioned in this article, short-form video, live streaming, and picture blog are the three main forms.

2.3 The Huge Market for E-commerce Shopping

As self-media generally may only be influencing one individual’s consumer consciousness and cannot complete the trading procedure between the buyers and merchants, E-commerce platforms such as Taobao and Jindong provide direct trading instruments remotely and plays an unreplacable role in the promotion self-media has on the spread of consumerism. According to STARMAP, live e-commerce sales during the 2021 pre-sale period (Oct. 20–Nov. 3) were RMB 82.1 billion, higher than the total phase of the 2020 Double 11 (Oct. 21–Nov. 11) sales of RMB 72.9 billion. As of October 26, 2021, Taobao Livestream had 165 live broadcast rooms with a turnover of more than 10 million RMB, and 9 brands, such as Estee Lauder and Lancôme, had a turnover of more than 100 million RMB. Meanwhile, the amount of contribution from head anchors is obvious. On the first day of the Tmall Double 11 pre-sale on October 20, Li Jiaqi and Weiya occupied the top two spots with a huge advantage of 11.5 or 8.5 billion RMB turnover, respectively, occupying about fourteen percent and ten percent of the total sales in the pre-sale stage. The statistics listed may not be sufficient to prove the prevalence of consumerism in contemporary China. However, the outstanding proportion of lives shopping contributing to the overall sales demonstrates the fact that self-media and e-commerce jointly have a significant impact on contemporary Chinese consumption.

3 How Self-media Promotes Consumerism

3.1 Commercialized Agents of Self-media

As self-media evolved, Multi-Channel Network (MCN) company emerged and contentiously played a role in the development of internet celebrities. A professional MCN

includes screening, incubation, content development, technical support of the self-content platform, continuous creativity, user management, platform resource matching, event operation, commercialization and cooperation, sub-IP development, and other series of complicated work. To put it simply, MCN is a company that helps contracted internet celebrities continuously export their content and make a fortune from their outputs. Owing to the profit-orientated nature of any company, MCNs inevitably have to or at least try to maximize their profits from production [3]. Looking into the business model of MCN, they bond the connection between their contracted internet celebrities and agents with advertising needs and afterward produce advertisements to be placed on short-form video platforms. After the deals, their MCN profits from a share of advertising revenue. The proportion of the share is usually split in half, or MCNs may even take a greater share. The case is similar when it comes to power during the production of advertisements. Agents, as the funders, usually take a dominant role, undoubtedly. However, due to strict constraints of the contract and other reasons, internet celebrities are often under MCNs' control, which leads to the result that internet celebrities as individuals' willing are relatively weakened, but MCNs' profit-seeking nature as a company comes to the fore. This leads to the further result that most internet celebrities cannot be directly responsible for their fans, and the fans thus become more of an approach for MCNs to obtain benefits.

In his book *Agents of Power*, Herbert analyzes the interaction of media with political, economic, and cultural power and argues that media content often reflects the interests of funders [7]. This can also be applied to self-media, especially the production of advertising. As for the agents with advertising needs, their greatest command tends to be convincing the audience to purchase their products to the maximum extent. Additionally, George Franck argues in the economy of attention that self-media becomes the financial institution of the attention economy, with a powerful ability to gather and distribute attention [8]. On top of that, attention functions as the means of interest and generates additional income. Therefore, MCNs, as experienced intermediaries, often take full advantage of their full comprehension of platform regulations, audience preferences, and abundant internet celebrity resources to maximize their corresponding profits with the agents, which, from the opposite perspective, more possibly makes the audience trapped by them and spend more money on buying their products. Therefore, the conclusion is drawn that the consumer landscape arising from the influence of the short video field is often a consumer trap created by consumerism under the domination of capital. As mentioned by Foster in his article *Capitalism and Ecology*, consumerism adapts to the needs of capital proliferation and is an active cultural strategy for capital proliferation [9]. During this process, MCN has gradually evolved and played the role of the gatekeeper behind streaming news and information flow during its development. They control the daily production, dissemination, and circulation of a large number of short videos through big data and algorithmic recommendations. Once monopolistic platform companies, such as ByteDance, transform news and information, music, film, games, knowledge, and other cultural products into profitable commodities, taking advantage of capital and communication technology to intervene in the field of content production and marketing, the result is often a profound impact on people's consumption concepts and habits, generation as well as expansion.

3.2 The Unique Relationship Between Advertiser and Audience

Another phenomenon that may strengthen the positive effect self-media has on consumerism in China is the well-constructed relationships between internet celebrities and their audiences, as well as how they might influence further consuming habits of their fans. One notable feature that makes self-media advertising varied from traditional television advertising is that these advertisements have stronger customer adhesion [10]. Imagine a scenario. Once someone had subscribed to an internet celebrity, chances were that he would passively receive his or her video on a regular basis. The result is obvious that he bonds a concrete bridge between him and a certain source of information until he unsubscribes to him or her someday. It generates the possibility that after a period of following, he might develop some belief in the internet celebrity and raise the chance of purchasing the commodities they implicitly recommend or explicitly sell. Moreover, due to artificial intelligence algorithms, the audience and producers are categorized into varied groups, and the system will recommend matching internet celebrities, which increases the possibility that someone may follow certain kinds of internet celebrities and believe them.

Jointly affected by the mode of live commerce and the well-constructed relationships between internet celebrities and their audiences, audiences tend to spend more money online. Live commerce fulfills the inert need for viewers to select goods passively. In a live broadcast of a topic, products are often selected after a series of alternatives filtered by internet celebrities. The considerations include the suitability of the product for their fans' consumption level, the cost-effectiveness of the product itself, and the profit that each order can provide to the network star. In the process of choosing the commodity, the internet celebrities and their team also have to do a series of introductions about the products and other work. With internet celebrities backed up by materials and explanations of the selection in advance, viewers do not need to bother with active selection to pick the right product for them. The secondary screening based on the existing selection greatly saves the viewers' time and intensifies their consumption enthusiasm. At the same time, it is also easy to accumulate further trust of the audience in the internet celebrities, providing the basis for the next carry. At the same time, in order to attract viewers to buy goods through their own channels, web stars often negotiate with goods providers to a certain extent, trying to offer better prices or more freebies [10]. Under such a shopping model, people easily submit to this time-saving shopping method, are willing to learn about the content in the live broadcast, and even take the initiative to give feedback to the internet celebrities in the hope that they can get to purchase the goods they plan to buy through the internet celebrities and carry out the next round of consumption behavior. As this positive circulation reinforces, audiences tend to be more reliable on the internet celebrities and have a higher chance of conducting irrational consuming behavior.

3.3 A Profound Influence on the Consumption Concept

Besides the explicit impacts self-media has on consumerism in China, self-media potentially creates an environment that inspires the prevalence of consumerism. As Baudrillard states in his book *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, people acquire their

identity with others by consuming the symbolic meanings of objects [11]. The symbolic meaning, which is linked to social values, distinguishes people through the differences given to objects. With the vigorous development of China's socialist market economy, the culture of consumerism has implicitly changed people's traditional consumption concepts. Some people with economic power highlight their economic power with high consumption and even luxury consumption, while many people with weaker consumption power also have obvious consumerist tendencies out of comparison and herd mentality, trying to pursue and imitate the consumerist lifestyle, equating high consumption with a good lifestyle [12]. Self-media platforms undoubtedly provide civilians with the possibility to share their own lives but equally make it easier for such materialistic comparisons to occur. This kind of sharing with certain bragging nature fully intensifies people's comparison mentalities. On the one hand, those who already have a certain material base will further prove their consumption ability and stabilize their position on social media by consuming continuously. On the other hand, people with lower consumption levels will try to become high spenders and get satisfaction from it. Furthermore, in fact, the merchants take full advantage of this mentality by laying out products of different consumption levels, solidifying people's consumption levels in this way, and trying to make people with lower consumption levels strive to buy products of higher consumption levels. Social media also continues to radicalize consumerism in this way.

4 Suggestions on How to Increase Personal Savings Under the Influence of Self-media

In terms of practical application, citizens should be clearly aware of the negative effects that consumerism may have on personal savings and take corresponding measures. Resisting the erosion of consumerism is not the same as not consuming. After all, from a macroscopic perspective, consumption contributes to the promotion of economic development but also to the improvement of the quality of life in the long term, and what should be encouraged is planned consumption within reasonable limits. First of all, to carry out consumption with opportunities rather than impulsiveness. In the live shopping process, netizens tend to use hunger marketing to limit the number of purchases while creating as much relative tension as possible to drive impulsive consumption. As consumers, the goods that are necessary should be determined in advance and try to avoid impulsive consumption due to the atmosphere. Second, pay more attention to the practical value of the product itself rather than the symbolic value. As mentioned above, consumerism often symbolizes the product so that customers continue to buy non-essential goods or goods at unreasonable prices. As consumers, what should be considered with priority is whether a product is of good quality, whether it can fulfill its most basic functions and whether it suits us. There is no doubt that consumers can pay for the brand premium, but only if they can really feel pleased and after a second consideration. Finally, avoid overspending. The use of credit cards or installments is often a way for many people to try to buy more than their own purchase level while also weakening our perceived level of spending to some extent. The disadvantages of this are many. On the one hand, because there is no clearer perception of the amount spent, more expenses may come

without being able to notice it. On the other hand, such a spending pattern adds a lot of potential risks to the future, as the principal and interest that need to be paid back often inadvertently reach higher or even unaffordable levels. There is no denying that self-media and e-commerce do bring convenience to and decorate our daily life. However, only by being adequately aware of the hazards of consumerism can consumers benefit more from these new technologies.

5 Conclusion

This paper has argued how self-media influences the spread of consumerism in contemporary China. It firstly defines consumerism as over-purchasing. Then, it discusses the explicit and implicit effects self-media has on the spread of consumerism in China. Explicitly, self-media and e-commerce have jointly changed the way of advertising and trading. They simplify the procedure of shopping and contain more implications for driving consumption compared with the traditional shopping mode to boost consumption. Implicitly, self-media, by symbolizing products and connecting consumption with social identity, creates a trend of public opinion that high consumption should be advocated, which has a profound and far-reaching promotion in the spread of consumerism. After analyzation about the relationship between self-media and consumerism, this paper tried to propose some suggestions on how individuals can diminish the influence of consumerism during online shopping. As for future research, emphasis can be laid on whether there is an emergence of anti-consumerism in China and its influence on consumption behavior. As the trend of consumerism goes on, an increasing number of scholars and netizens in China have noticed it and have reflected on it. Whether this option will fade away or bring more profound influence still need to be discovered.

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