From Emotional Capital to Digital Nomadism: Unravelling the Consumption Mechanisms of Generation Z's Counter-Traditional Culture

Haoyi Du

New Channel, JUTES High School, Jinan, 250000, China
Email: duhaoyi123@126.com

Abstract:

The diffusion of mobile Internet and social media has fostered a generation who grew up online and strive for differentiation. Existing studies describe their shopping habits and media use but seldom examine the mechanisms behind their counter-traditional cultural practices. Drawing on theories from sociology, economics and media studies, this paper reviews emotional capitalism, platform capitalism, cultural hybridity, liquid modernity and global cultural flows. Through case studies of blind-box toys, bullet-comment communities, virtual idols and VR concerts, the "Digital Nomad consumption" model is proposed, and the concept of dynamic "cultural discount rate" is refined. It is found that Generation Z's counter-traditional consumption operates through four interlocking processes – identity construction, emotional capitalisation, utopian imagination and avant-garde commodification – and that these activities are shaped by global cultural flows and platform algorithms. This study enriches the understanding of Gen Z's cultural consumption and offers practical insights for marketers and policy makers.

Keywords: Generation Z, counter-traditional culture, emotional capitalisation, digital nomad consumption, cultural discount rate

1. Introduction

Generation Z refers to those born roughly between 1995 and 2012, now aged about 10–29. They have grown up with smartphones and social media and are often described as digital natives. Research notes that this cohort values individuality and social responsi-

bility, yet they embody a clear "intention–behaviour" gap: surveys show that many Gen Zs identify as eco-conscious but still buy inexpensive fast-fashion items[1]. They follow trending videos, purchase products embedded with subcultural symbols and cultivate identity through online communities. These practices form a counter-traditional cultural ecosys-

tem, weaving together youth subcultures and algorithmic platforms. Previous studies often focus on marketing tactics or media influence without cross-disciplinary theory, leaving the deeper interplay among culture, emotion and capital unexplored. This paper attempts to fill that gap by addressing two questions: (1) how do counter-traditional cultural practices generate distinctive consumption mechanisms through the interaction of emotions and capital? (2) how do the values of cultural products fluctuate over time and across platforms in a platformised society?

2. Literature review

2.1 Emotional capitalism

Eva Illouz argues that modern capitalism has not diminished emotions but rather absorbed them into market logic, entwining intimacy and economic behaviour[2]. Under this regime, emotions become quantifiable and exploitable by companies and platforms. Likes, shares and real-time comments on social media are forms of emotional currency.

2.2 Platform capitalism

Nick Srnicek's concept of "platform capitalism" describes how digital platforms mediate interactions, harvest data and monetise it, relying on network effects that produce winner-takes-all outcomes[3]. In China, platforms such as Bilibili, Xiaohongshu and Taobao Live use recommendation algorithms to distribute content and amplify certain cultural products, intensifying competition for attention and data.

2.3 Cultural hybridity and the third space

Homi Bhabha emphasises that cultural identity emerges in a "third space" where different traditions intersect[4]. Gen Z grew up amid rapid information flows. Their embrace of Western festivals alongside "guochao" (national trend) products, and their love for cyber-punk aesthetics or virtual idols, illustrate the mixing of oriental and occidental motifs.

2.4 Liquid modernity

Zygmunt Bauman characterises "liquid modernity" as a condition of constant change in which stable social roles dissolve and life is marked by precarity[5]. Gen Z's consumption patterns – shifting quickly with trends and focusing on experiences and instant gratification – echo this fluidity.

2.5 Global cultural flows

Arjun Appadurai highlights how the flows of people, media, technology, finance and ideas blur the boundaries between the local and the global[6]. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram expose Gen Z to cultures from around the world, enabling consumption practices that transcend geography.

2.6 Digital nomadism and cultural discount theory

Recent studies of digital nomads – people who work remotely while traveling – reveal that millions adopt itinerant lifestyles thanks to mobile technologies. In 2024, about 18.1 million Americans identified themselves as digital nomads and visited on average 6.6 destinations, staying 5.7 weeks at each[7]. Governments recognise their economic impact: more than fifty countries now offer special visas, and reports note that digital nomads spend about 35% of their income in the communities they inhabit[8]. Cultural discount theory, rooted in media economics, posits that cultural products lose value when transferred across cultures; this value is typically calculated via discount factors over time[9]. However, current models neglect the influence of digital platforms and user engagement.

In sum, extant literature illuminates emotional, technological and cultural dynamics in contemporary consumption but rarely integrates these theories to explain how Gen Z's counter-traditional culture emerges, leaving interplay among culture, emotion and capital unexplored.

3. Analysis

3.1 Identity construction and cultural hybridity

Gen Z shape multi-layered identities through counter-traditional practices. They participate in subcultures such as anime fandoms and cyber-punk fashion while embracing modernised traditional motifs. Fast-fashion brands monitor platform trends to capitalise on this fluidity: Shein, for instance, uses algorithmic recommendations and TikTok challenges to encourage users to share unboxing videos, blending personal expression with collective trends[14]. Consumers are drawn not to functional attributes but to the symbols and communities represented by products. Such interactions illustrate Bhabha's "third space" where cultural identity is renegotiated[4]. Moreover, the rise of digital nomadism underscores identity mobility: in 2024, 18.1 million U.S. workers identified as digital nomads and travelled across multiple cities, staying weeks at each[7]. This nomadic lifestyle decouples consumption and com-

munity from specific locales, highlighting the fluid nature of belonging.

3.2 Emotional capitalisation and platform power

Blind-box toys exemplify how emotions are commoditised. The thrill of unboxing is driven by a variable-ratio reinforcement: buyers never know when a rare figure will appear, which fuels repeat purchases[11]. Research shows that anticipation triggers stronger dopamine responses than the reward itself, making the suspenseful unwrapping and rarity design key to the blind box's appeal. Companies orchestrate scarcity and series themes to monetise this anticipation. Simultaneously, platforms like Bilibili (video bullet comments) and Xiaohongshu (product seeding) convert user interactions into commercial assets; algorithms parse sentiments, deliver targeted content and advertisements, and derive revenue from emotional expression[2][3]. This cycle embodies Illouz's "emotional capitalism" and Srnicek's data-centric platform business model. A further illustration is the lonely-economy platform Soul App, which matches users through avatars and interest tags. Interviews reveal that the app has about 30 million monthly active users, with roughly 80% belonging to Gen Z[13]. It monetises social connection by selling premium features and shows how digital platforms can capitalise on isolation.

3.3 Utopian imagination and the paradox of governance

Brands often craft utopian narratives to resonate with Gen Z. The outdoor brand Patagonia, for example, voluntarily donates 1% of its sales to environmental causes, calling it an "Earth tax"[10]. This practice signals commitment to sustainability but also leverages consumer goodwill. Meanwhile, Gen Z advocate environmentalism and social responsibility yet continue buying cheap fast fashion, highlighting the intention–behaviour gap[1]. Fast-fashion platforms satisfy immediate desire through low prices and rapid product turnover, yet struggle to uphold ecological ideals. Social media algorithms amplify appealing narratives and filter out content that conflicts with commercial interests, constructing a fantasy of ethical consumption. Appadurai's global cultural flows remind us that these utopian imaginaries are embedded in transnational media and capital circuits[6].

3.4 Avant-garde commodification and future experiences

Futuristic culture is rapidly commercialised. The virtual idol Ling, developed by Xmov, debuted in 2020 and presents a classical Chinese aesthetic while garnering over 470,000 followers on Weibo[12]. She collaborates with luxury brands like Tmall Luxury and Pechoin and appears on the cover of Vogue Me. At the same time, art exhibitions and concerts migrate into virtual reality platforms, and virtual idols and VR concerts offer immersive experiences. Companies transform avant-garde imagery into commodity value through scarcity and ambience.

3.5 Model and methodological innovation

Building on these observations, this paper introduces a "digital nomad consumption" model. It contains three core elements: (1) nomadic consumers – Gen Z and digital nomads who work, study and live across regions, carrying their consumption preferences and emotional needs with them; (2) hybrid goods – a mix of virtual and physical offerings, from digital avatars and online content to pop-up stores and events; and (3) deterritorialised scenes – consumption occurs seamlessly across social media, virtual worlds and physical spaces. Data show that U.S. digital nomads visited 6.6 locations and stayed 5.7 weeks per site in 2024[7], and more than fifty countries now issue nomad visas, acknowledging that nomads spend roughly 35% of their income locally[8]. Such trends underlie the model's temporal and spatial fluidity.

We also extend the cultural discount framework proposed by Haeusler. Classical formulations discount cultural value only over time[9]. We add a platform dimension by defining a dynamic factor $f(t,p)=\exp(-r_t \cdot t - r_p \cdot p)$, where t is time, p denotes platform popularity (measured by user growth or search indices) and r_t and r_p are temporal and platform discount rates. In fast-cycle media such as short-video apps, a high r_p implies rapid decay of cultural hype; in long-tail platforms or classic art contexts, r_t is lower and value persists. This approach allows researchers and practitioners to evaluate cultural assets by incorporating both time and media environment.

4. Conclusion

This study integrates theories of emotional capitalism, platform capitalism, cultural hybridity, liquid modernity and global cultural flows to build a comprehensive framework for understanding Gen Z's counter-traditional consumption. We have shown that identity construction, emotional capitalisation, utopian imagination and avant-garde commodification co-constitute this ecosystem. These processes involve self-expression and idealism but are regulated by algorithms and commercial logics. The "digital nomad consumption" model emphasises the nomadic nature of Gen Z consumers and the blurring of virtual and physical goods. Our dynamic cultural discount rate

introduces a quantitative tool that captures how platform dynamics and time shape cultural value. Overall, Gen Z consumption embodies contradictions between idealism and pragmatism, global and local influences, and online and offline spaces. By integrating multiple disciplines, our work offers theoretical insights and practical guidance. Future research could employ surveys, interviews and big-data analysis to empirically test the model and explore how emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and the metaverse will further reshape Gen Z consumption.

For practice, businesses should move beyond chasing traffic to engage Gen Z through meaningful cultural symbols and algorithmic personalisation while avoiding emotional exploitation. Governments and industry bodies can implement nomad-friendly policies, strengthen cross-platform data governance and educate consumers to protect quality and copyright. Methodologically, we recommend combining social-network analysis, neuroeconomic experiments and cross-cultural comparison to refine the mechanisms and models proposed here.

References

1. FashionUnited. (2024). "The Gen Z dilemma: eco-conscious but addicted to fast fashion." FashionUnited News.

2. Illouz, E. (2007). Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism. Polity.

3. Srnicek, N. (2017). Platform Capitalism. Polity.

4. Bhabha, H. K. (1994). The Location of Culture. Routledge.

5. Bauman, Z. (2000). Liquid Modernity. Polity.

6. Appadurai, A. (1996). Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization. University of Minnesota Press.

7. Pumble Team. (2025). "Digital Nomad Statistics for 2025." Pumble Blog. Available online.

8. Bhutia, P. D. (2024). "Goa Tourism Minister on Vision to Turn Indian Beach Destination into Digital Nomad Hub." Skift. Available online.

9. Haeusler, P. (2020). Cultural Discount Rate. Available online.

10. Patagonia Action Works. (2024). "1% for the Planet." Available online.

11. Chan, E. Y. (2025). "Blind box toys are booming: Are they just child's play or something more concerning?" Toronto Metropolitan University Research Blog (The Conversation).

12. BeautyTech.jp. (2022). "From AYAYI to Liu Yang Xi: Meet China's Virtual Humans and the Future of the Metaverse." Medium.

13. Dao Insights. (2024). "Soul App: the social platform built for the lonely generation." Dao Insights.

14. ContactPigeon Blog. (2024). "Shein Marketing Strategy: Decrypting the Growth Patterns."