

A Multi-Dimensional Perspective on the Consumption Behavior of Generation Z College Students "Gu Zi": An Empirical Study Based on Emotion, Identity and Media Influence

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Abstract: In response to the robust growth of the 'millet economy,' this study conducts quantitative and qualitative research on the core group of 'millet consumers.' Using methods such as questionnaires, interviews, and big data analysis, it explores the characteristics and motivations behind the 'millet consumption' of Generation Z college students. By considering the influence of opinion leaders, the emotional value of self-identity and identity construction, the study analyzes the driving forces behind the 'millet consumption' of college students in an interactive media environment. This research offers a new perspective on understanding the subcultural elements of the '2D peripheral culture' among young people, reminding Generation Z college students to approach the 'millet economy' with rationality, providing a reference for the healthy development of the market economy.

1. Introduction

The global economy is evolving through a diverse ecological model, with the virtual economic system derived from the Internet establishing the foundational logic of 'emotional consumption.' The economic output of subcultures has surged dramatically, marking the arrival of an era that breaks down the boundaries of traditional dimensions. The 'Grain Economy' has emerged as a new form of productive force in the subculture industry chain. The term 'Grain' is a direct translation of 'goods' from English, primarily referring to 'intellectual property' (IP) products derived from secondary cultural elements, such as lipsticks, dolls, figurines, and human-shaped plaques. The Grain Economy has rapidly become a high-output industry since 2024. "The millet economy" has permeated various fields such as commerce, entertainment, and culture^[1]. Generation Z uses 'Grain' as a form of 'social currency,' engaging in activities like 'eating Grain' and 'showing off Grain' to rebuild their social circles. By examining the business model of the Grain Economy, we can uncover the operational logic of the fan economy.

Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2009, are the digital natives who have been deeply influenced by multiculturalism and are now at the heart of the 'Grain Economy' supply chain. The number of users in the online otaku and gaming communities has surpassed 500 million, with

Generation Z making up 95% of this demographic. Understanding the 'fan culture' driven by the 'meme theory' can shed light on the motivations behind college students' consumption in the 'Grain Economy', 'offering advice for rational spending and contributing to the healthy development of the market economy fueled by the 'Grain Economy.'

2. Emotion, identity and media: The motivation of Generation Z college students to "consume grain"

The "grain consumption" motivation of Generation Z college students is deeply intertwined with emotion, social interaction, cultural identity and self-expression. The core driving force can be summarized as the following three dimensions:

2.1 Emotion: emotional value and need for companionship

As natives of the Internet, secondary characters serve as a reference for cultural and emotional understanding, guiding emotional expression. These characters have become companions in the growth of Generation Z. In terms of emotional projection, the secondary characters behind 'Gu Zi' are like friends. As virtual social interactions increasingly influence emotional development, the role of secondary characters in connecting young people emotionally has become more prominent. 'Gu Zi' has become a symbolic medium for the personalized self-expression of Generation Z.

2.2 Social: the need to gain recognition from the circle

The second major function of 'Grains' among Generation Z is as a social currency, helping them build identity and find like-minded communities. 'Grains' helps college students alleviate loneliness and build social connections. By purchasing 'Grains' online and sharing their experiences, they gain recognition within the community. Offline, they participate in themed pop-up events, further extending their social activities and forming communities with similar interests. As a result, a 'pain culture' has emerged within the 'Grain Circle,' where symbols like decorating backpacks with 'Grains' have become identity markers for this community.

2.3 Medium: Consumer behavior under new media marketing

As e-commerce platforms continue to evolve, consumer guidance information significantly influences people's purchasing behavior, making Generation Z college students' 'guizi consumption' heavily influenced by media. According to a survey, 74% of college students believe their 'buying guizi' behavior is influenced by social media. The '2025 Xianyu Guizi Trend Report' indicates that in 2024, the guizi transaction volume increased by 105% year-over-year, with 78% of users being female. Influenced by the internet's 'save on lunch expenses and make up orders' marketing strategy, college students appear to be making rational consumption choices, supporting their 'guizi consumption' through frugality, part-time jobs, scholarships, and other means.

3. The characteristics of Z generation college students' consumption

The demands of Generation Z college students for consumption have shifted from material satisfaction to spiritual consumption, focusing on "pleasing oneself", pursuing freshness and seeking self-identity.

3.1 Consumption habits driven by the simulated environment

The self-identity of Generation Z is shaped by the media environment. The simulated environment is gradually shaping new consumption patterns among Generation Z, with a focus on personalization, rarity, and experiential consumption. Thus, 'eating rice,' the pride of 'I can afford it' built through monetary transactions, is eroding the contemporary youth, including a competitive consumption mindset. As McLuhan said, 'the medium is the extension of man,' the Internet has broadened the horizons of Generation Z college students. Their consumption habits are influenced by social media and opinion leaders, shaped by the simulated environment formed by 'communities.' Labubu, promoted on Xiaohongshu, is becoming a structural consumer favorite in the social media information environment. Additionally, with the rapid development of e-commerce live streaming, celebrities, internet influencers, and brands like Pop Mart are quickly building internet marketing scenes, making the simulated environment of 'rice consumption' increasingly extensive.

3.2 "Self-pleasing consumption" is the main position

Driven by new media marketing and internet values, Generation Z college students increasingly favor 'self-pleasing consumption.' In the '2025 Guizi Economy Industry Special Report,' 'self-pleasing' appears 25 times, and 'emotion' appears 12 times. Personalized 'Guizi' satisfies the 'exposed' social presentation of Generation Z college students, fulfilling their emotional projection onto anime characters, the emotional value provided by material symbols, and the self-presentation facilitated by symbolic communication. This leads to an identity that integrates aesthetic, taste, and value recognition. Behind 'self-pleasing consumption,' Generation Z college students have a solid economic foundation, with more family funds provided by their parents than ever before, and some students earn income from entrepreneurship and part-time jobs online. Therefore, they have significant economic control in 'self-pleasing consumption.'

3.3 "Millet" has become the social currency of Generation Z

Generation Z uses social networks to present themselves and build relationships, making 'showing off grains' a way for them to express their individuality and uniqueness. The concept of 'quanyuan culture' (a term referring to the cultural phenomenon where people form groups based on shared interests) is a rapid way to generate 'group identity' on social networks. 'Grain consumption' has become a social currency for Generation Z college students. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argued that social currency exists both offline and online. For example, grain consumption at Pop Mart is becoming a pass for Generation Z to gain group recognition on social apps like Xiaohongshu. By engaging in 'showing off grains,' they integrate into quanyuan circles, sharing their consumption experiences and the sensory pleasure of 'eating grains,' which facilitates communication and interaction, thus fostering emotional connections and building relationships. Generation Z college students share their emotions, gain affirmation from quanyuan groups, and highlight themselves, which is the intrinsic logic behind how 'grain consumption' provides emotional satisfaction for Generation Z college students.

3.4 Opinion leaders drive Generation Z consumption

Generation Z follows the latest iterations of anime and manga merchandise on social platforms like Xiaohongshu, engaging in discussions in bullet comments and comment sections, joining fan groups, and forming their own communities. Influencers in the Gu community quickly update their

'showing off Gu' content, using methods such as unpacking, showcasing, and sharing prices to spark the consumption desires of their fan base. The short videos by these influencers focus more on the immediate experience and sense of achievement from 'eating Gu,' with a higher emphasis on the consumption experience of limited edition and customized products, which easily arouses the envy of young fans, leading to their purchases and a sense of satisfaction. They then share their 'showing off Gu' experiences on social media, completing the 'multi-level dissemination.' Through this multi-level dissemination, the market share of 'Gu consumption' has rapidly increased.

According to in-depth research, the influencers in the anime and manga merchandise sector can be roughly categorized into:

3.4.1 Known Coser

A well-known domestic Coser, "Your Desire Dream," has 15 million followers on Douyin and has received 690 million likes, and is signed with Wuyou Media. Another opinion leader with over one million followers, who has not signed with MCN, is "Xiaomi No Temper," who has over 3 million followers on Douyin and her works have garnered 120 million likes. "Wu Shi Lan Shang Xia" has 3.64 million followers on Douyin, and her works have received 110 million likes. These Cosers bring classic Japanese and Chinese manga characters to their fans, expanding the influence of the secondary world and significantly promoting anime merchandise. For example, Coser "Xiao Xiao Bai" has over 1 million followers on Douyin, has published works such as "Fu," "Luo Mu," and "Bai," and has also planned for 3D animation series like "Qin Shi Ming Yue." She often shares figurines and other items on her TikTok account.

3.4.2 An active member of the two-dimensional community

Xu Yi, one of the founders of B Station, whose account name is "Bisi," has a slow update rate for B Station's content but continues to have a significant influence on the gaming culture. Guangzhou Manzhan Frontline, a self-media platform dedicated to promoting otaku information, primarily focuses on sharing manzhan news and expanding collaborations in the otaku culture media. It can announce and promote the latest domestic manzhan events.

3.4.3 Secondary creators and voice actors

Domestic creators like "Bamboo Fox" produce and promote derivative works such as illustrations, which boost the sales of related merchandise. Renowned Chinese voice actor Zhang Jie has voiced characters such as Wei Wuxian in "The Demon Path Ancestor," Ye Xiu in "The King's Avatar," and Wu Xin in "The Young Song." Teacher Bian Jiang has voiced characters such as Lan Wangji in "The Demon Path Ancestor," Zhang Xinjie in "The King's Avatar," Li Xingyun in "The Bad People of the Painting World," and Yan Ruyu in "The Fox Spirit Matchmaker." Their voices have breathed new life into these anime characters, enhancing their appeal and significantly boosting the sales of "Gu Zi" products, especially the original sound music CDs.

3.4.4 The "valley circle" influence of stars

The rapid growth of the 'Grain Economy' is largely due to the influence of celebrities. In the network environment, young people are more likely to be influenced by their opinions and take the likes and dislikes of opinion leaders as the standard for expressing their views[2]. Currently, Labubu is a global sensation. From celebrities like Kim Kardashian, Rihanna, and BLACKPINK to various internet influencers, they are all enthusiastically endorsing it. In the first week of June this year, POP MART ranked fifth and sixth among the top ten best-selling stores in the TikTok US

market, with sales exceeding 2 million US dollars. Second-hand Labubu can fetch several hundred dollars each, and a new outfit can cost 7,000 to 8,000 RMB. Thanks to the celebrity effect, domestic Labubu has become a globally influential luxury brand, driven by the 'fan economy' effect. Celebrities showcase their anime merchandise on social media, creating a viral social spread that attracts fans' attention and imitation. For example, when celebrity Yu Shuxin posted a new dance video on TikTok, she wore four Labubu on her skirt, which sparked envy and imitation among fans. This mutual success between celebrities and 'grains' not only creates a sense of fashion leadership by celebrities but also deepens fans' admiration for themselves. Additionally, celebrities have a promotional effect on the 'Grain Economy.' They endorse anime Labubu series, expanding market influence. For instance, celebrities attended the Labubu-related event at the Weibo Game Animation Expo in Beijing's Shunyi Hall on May 1, 2025. Invited to the event were KPL Dream Team players @eStarPro Huahai, @eStarPro Qingrong, and @LGDNBW-jiuwei, as well as well-known Cosers @Karinna and Ruxi, @KumaQi Xiongqi, and popular CVs like @Jiang Guangtao, along with virtual idol @PLAVE_Official. During the event, Gu Circle stars interacted with fans through games and photo sessions, enhancing the connection between fans and the 'Gu Zi' culture. As more anime game carnivals and corporate collaborations take place, the popularity of the Gu Zi economy is expected to continue to rise.

The consumption of Z Generation college students is increasingly influenced by social media. "Grains" satisfy their needs for emotional expression and release, serving as a medium for making friends. As the consumer economy grows, "Grains" products are increasingly integrated with fashion, dining, gaming, and entertainment industries, attracting more young people to engage in "Grains consumption."

4. Reference Text and Citations "Grain economy" is the consumption preference of Gen Z college students

In the consumption of millet, college students exhibit biased consumption behaviors due to the carrying, display, price, purchase channels, and the premium generated by second-hand trading of anime merchandise. According to the survey, 71% of the 'millet economy' consumers are women, with the core group primarily consisting of Generation Z, around 25 years old. Their consumption preferences vary across categories, emotional needs, cultural identity, and consumption habits.

4.1 Emotion-driven consumption: Pay for love and identity

During the transition from adolescence to maturity, Generation Z college students urgently seek external validation of their views and preferences. In their emotional development, they invest a significant amount of emotion in anime, novels, and games, linking their hopes for love, friendship, and family to these media. They use emotional resonance and cultural identity in their 'Guizi consumption.' This stage is characterized by more stable emotional traits, leading to higher IP loyalty. It becomes a 'collective memory' of adolescence, where Generation Z shares a common interpretation and recollection of a particular anime. Thus, 'Guizi' becomes an emotional symbol of this collective memory, embodying their group identity, shared memories, and a strong emotional connection to the IP, along with pride and recognition of the Guizi symbol.

4.2 Social attributes are prominent: consumption is social currency

In the era of new media, the methods for building group relationships are increasingly relying on online social interactions. The 'Grain Circle' of Generation Z is primarily formed through online grain sharing and interactions. The social attributes of 'grains' are highlighted, and social platforms

create scenarios for 'grain consumption.' Through marketing activities by merchants and the 'grain sharing' by internet celebrities and influencers, as well as blind box videos, a sense of belonging is formed within the 'Grain Circle.' Celebrating the birthdays of your favorite anime characters through online grain sharing has become a marketing strategy that deeply binds the 'grain economy' socially. This online social interaction can also extend to offline events like 'Grain Friends Meetings,' 'Grain Fans Gatherings,' and birthday support meetings for offline anime characters, presenting new forms of social engagement.

4.3 Self-presentation needs: reject homogenization and pursue scarcity

Identity is divided into four categories, namely individual identity, collective identity, self identity and social identity[3].According to the identity theory, individuals complete their identity in the interaction with others[4].Generation Z college students value identity, using personalized symbols to highlight their individuality. This sense of belonging helps young people build confidence in virtual spaces and enhances their psychological adaptability[5].As a result, 'Gu Zi' products are updated frequently, emphasizing customization and a premium feel. In the marketing strategies of merchants, 2D merchandise is crafted into rare items that even the wealthy cannot obtain. Moreover, Gu Zi offers a wide range of peripheral products, catering to Generation Z's needs for collecting, hanging, and daily enjoyment. Currently, plush toys like Labubu, along with accessories and clothing, are becoming a key marketing strategy for merchants to create unique peripheral products. In niche cultures, 2D peripherals are marketed as high-fidelity, meticulously crafted, and highly valuable items. Young people are more likely to own these items, showcasing their loyalty to 2D characters.

5. Conclusions

In the survey, 70% of Generation Z college students reported engaging in 'Guizi consumption.' The core logic behind this is that 'Guizi' fulfills contemporary college students' needs for emotional investment, social capital, and self-expression. On an emotional level, buying Guizi symbolizes cultural identity and fosters a sense of belonging in their spiritual world. Socially, 'Guizi' serves as a social currency for college students to connect with others. On a personal expression level, 'Guizi' not only provides emotional value but also satisfies their desire for a personalized and trendy identity. In 2025, with the box office success of 'Ne Zha: The Rise of the Devil Boy,' the cultural value of the Chinese animation 'Guizi' continues to grow. The popularity of China's original collectible Labubu in European, American, and Southeast Asian markets will serve as a powerful tool for boosting cultural confidence through the 'Guizi economy.' In the first quarter of this year, the market for Guizi consumption has shown positive trends, with the market transaction of Chinese animation IPs surpassing that of Rigu for the first time, driven by the trend of cultural confidence. The rise of 'China-fashion' culture in the secondary market reflects the patriotic sentiments of Generation Z college students. This trend injects a strong boost into the development of domestic cultural IPs, aligning with the preferences of young people and creating diverse and appealing cultural products, such as those from the Palace Museum, which are rich in fun, design, art, and practicality. This also provides a reference for the transformation of the 'Guizi economy.' Besides 'bibi' badges, future Guizi should incorporate more practical elements. However, in the wave of 'Guizi consumption,' Generation Z college students should maintain some rationality and restraint, avoiding blind following of trends.

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