

Suspension and Self-Consistency: the Generative Mechanisms and Identity Dilemmas of Pseudo-Middle-Class Practices among Young University Students

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Abstract: In the current era of social transformation and the deep integration of digital media, young college students face a profound tension between the need to enhance their cultural capital and real-world economic constraints. This paper focuses on the mimetic middle-class lifestyle practices of this group. Drawing on social construction theory and subcultural studies, and employing a mixed qualitative research methodology combining online ethnography and in-depth interviews, it explores the mechanisms underlying the formation of their group identity and the inherent dilemmas they face. The study identifies three primary mechanisms of formation: reconstructing a sense of psychological deservingness through taste anticipation and strategic substitutes; delineating the boundaries of peer taste through "symbolic display in digital spaces"; and achieving "spiritual coherence" with the self and the environment through the ritualistic nature of micro-daily life. However, this identity, built upon symbolic compensation, exhibits a profound sense of "suspension" and gives rise to a threefold identity dilemma: a structural disconnect between digital highlights and real-life speechlessness; the dissolution of agency within consumer echo chambers under algorithmic discipline; and psychological strain resulting from symbolic dependence. This paper emphasizes the need to view young people's micro-level self-consistency practices dialectically and to guide college students in transforming psychological adaptation into a practical foundation for real life.

Keywords: Mimetic Middle Class; Suspension; Psychological Coherence; Identity; Class Experience

1.Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In recent years, internet buzzwords have spread widely among digital youth and resonated strongly with them. As beneficiaries of the era of universal higher education, contemporary college students-under the influence of intellectual cultivation, aesthetic training, and intensive aesthetic education via digital social platforms-have actively cultivated extremely refined aesthetic tastes and accumulated high-level cultural capital. They are familiar with the origin characteristics of various specialty coffee beans, the olfactory profiles of niche boutique perfumes, and the visual aesthetics of design-oriented home furnishings, and they express strong identification with and aspiration toward the lifestyle, aesthetic sensibilities, and joys of middle-class existence.

However, as young adults who have not yet achieved full financial independence-and faced with the severe and complex employment environment of recent years, downward-trending social class expectations, and limited control over their living expenses-this group has developed a significant structural mismatch between "high cultural capital" and "low economic capital." In the traditional sociological sense, class divisions are often marked by income, assets, and occupational thresholds. University students, however, are in a transitional phase from economic dependence to economic independence. This structural asymmetry of capital traps them in a dilemma where "cultural class leads, while economic class lags behind."

Against this backdrop, university students have neither completely abandoned their pursuit of taste nor slipped into a state of total passive asceticism. Instead, they have developed a strategic and resourceful daily practice of pseudo-middle-class living-that is, within limited financial budgets, they simulate and deeply

experience the lifestyle of the middle class through meticulous strategic substitutions, small-scale yet high-quality purchases, and symbolic reenactments on online social platforms. This practice is not merely a matter of consumer choice; it is a complex process of identity construction in which young people, faced with the uncertainty of social mobility and the pressures of social structures, seek psychological coherence and self-affirmation by reconstructing their micro-level daily order.

1.2 Research Questions and Significance

Based on the above phenomenon, this paper aims to conduct an in-depth exploration of the following core questions:

1. How do college youth transform the 'mimetic middle class' life into specific action strategies through micro-daily practice under the rigid constraints of limited real economic capital? What are the logical chains of its micro-generation mechanism in individual psychology, community interaction and life order reconstruction?

2. Does this identity construction based on symbolic compensation, aesthetic adjustment and strategic replacement really bring lasting internal certainty and security to young people? What kind of deep identity dilemma and spiritual crisis has it triggered in the crevice between digital filter and realistic survival?

In the theoretical sense, this study integrates the class theory of sociology, the self-consistent mechanism of consumer semiotics and psychology, expands the academic vision of the field of youth culture, class experience and digital media, and fills the gap in the analysis of the cross-cutting daily practice of 'small taste investment'; in practical sense, this study deeply analyzes the real survival picture and spiritual dilemma of contemporary youth, and provides valuable micro-empirical basis for higher education education, youth mental health counseling and institutional support for social class mobility.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Literature Review

In recent years, with the deep integration of deep mediatization and consumer culture, the consumption logic of young people has been undergoing a profound shift from "function-

oriented" to emotion-oriented and identity expression. The academic community has engaged in multidimensional discussions centered on emotional consumption, emotional value, and youth identity. A review of the existing literature reveals that scholars' research has primarily focused on the following three dimensions:

2.1.1 Drivers and Manifestations of Emotional Consumption among Youth

Existing studies have pointed out that youth emotional consumption is the product of real pressure, emotional absence and digital technology. Zhao Yufeng (2025) and Chen Wei et al. (2026) believed that in the era of material abundance and post-materialism, youth consumption presents the characteristics of "emotional priority" and "spiritual pleasure."^[8] Li Jianguo et al. (2026) conceptualized the phenomenon of young people using digital media to relieve their emotions as 'electronic analgesia', pointing out that it has the characteristics of instantaneous pleasure and virtual compensation.^[3] In terms of specific practical forms, the academic community has discussed emerging business forms such as millet economy^[4] Li Huanyu et al. (2025), Chao play blind box^[1] Wang Yuhao et al. (2026), doll consumption^[6] Wang Yawei et al. (2025), and emotional tiezi^[7] You Zhichun et al. (2025), indicating that emotional consumption has become an important carrier for young people to reconstruct individual life order and circle identity.

2.1.2 "Human-Object" Interaction and the Logic of Dynamic Evolution in Emotional Consumption

Some scholars have begun to examine the psychological evolution and behavioral cycles of young people in emotional consumption from a dynamic perspective. Mei Kai (2025) proposed that young people's emotional consumption forms a complete logical loop of "consumption-experience-psychology-behavior-consumption."^[10] Wang Yuhao et al. (2026), drawing on a neo-materialist perspective, revealed that young people's consumption of trendy toys evolves from the instant gratification and aesthetic experience of getting hooked to emotional fatigue and emotional exhaustion caused by capital control and emotional manipulation, ultimately leading to the emotional disengagement process of "quitting the hobby."^[1] Wang Yawei et al. (2025) also

used grounded theory to validate the dynamic evolutionary pattern of "getting hooked-deeply hooked-partially disengaged-disengaged" among Generation Z in doll consumption, pointing out the tension between the drive for immediate gratification and self-awareness and reflection.[6]

2.1.3 Risks of Alienation and Critical Reflection on Emotional Consumption

Although emotional consumption provides young people with a temporary psychological refuge, the vast majority of scholars remain vigilant about its latent risks. Ma Chao (2025) and Li Zhaoyue et al. (2026) point out that algorithm-driven emotional profiling and platform technologies are highly prone to leading to "capital coercion" and "emotional devaluation," triggering tendencies toward atomization and excessive dependence among young people. You Zhichun et al. (2025) and Sun Bingyan et al. (2025) further caution that an excessive obsession with emotional value may trap young people in the mental fallacy that "everything can be reduced to emotional value" and the trap of "pseudo-emotional value," leading to emotional emptiness and the dissolution of agency.

2.1.4 Limitations and Gaps in Existing Research

In summary, the existing literature has systematically explored the motivations, specific forms, and risks of consumption alienation associated with young people's emotional consumption, providing a rich academic foundation for understanding the spiritual world of contemporary youth. However, existing research still has the following three gaps.

First, existing research has largely focused on purely illusory emotional commodities or entirely virtual digital experiences, while relatively neglecting the intersectional everyday practice of pseudo-middle class -in which young people skillfully combine taste and style with the micro-economy. This practice concerns not only emotional comfort but also the simulation of class identity and the control of aesthetic symbols. Second, existing literature often simplifies young people's emotional regulation into a binary opposition of getting hooked on consumption versus falling into the trap of blind consumption, lacking a micro-level analysis of the deep-seated mechanisms through which young people achieve psychological coherence by strategically substituting products and making micro-investments in taste when facing the uncertainty of social mobility. Finally, existing

research has failed to fully reveal the profound identity dilemma underlying this self-consistency-namely, the discrepancy between online self-presentation and real-world social silence-and has not sufficiently explored the structural roots of the "suspended" state of existence behind it. Based on this, this study aims to fill this gap.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Drawing on the aforementioned literature on young people's emotional compensation and psychological adaptation, this study incorporates Bourdieu's "distinction of taste," Baudrillard's "symbolic consumption," and Berger and Luckmann's "social construction theory" to construct a theoretical framework for analyzing the "pseudo-middle-class" practices of college students.

2.2.1 Bourdieu's Distinction of Taste and Taste Anticipation

Pierre Bourdieu points out that taste is not a purely natural personal preference, but rather a hidden marker of specific class position and the accumulation of cultural capital. In the traditional logic of class reproduction, the acquisition of cultural capital depends on family class background and substantial economic investment. However, in today's highly developed digital media environment, high-density visual communication and aesthetic tutorials have greatly lowered the threshold for acquiring aesthetic knowledge. Young people in higher education have already accumulated advanced aesthetic knowledge through digital platforms even before they possess the corresponding economic capital, thereby achieving "taste anticipation." This temporal gap between "taste" and "economics" forms the cognitive foundation for the practice of the pseudo-middle class.

2.2.2 Baudrillard's Symbolic Consumption and Symbolic Compensation

Jean Baudrillard believes that in the late capitalist consumer society, the dominant logic of consumption has shifted from the use value of goods to symbolic value. What consumers buy is no longer the practical function of the item itself, but the class identity, lifestyle and social status symbol behind it. When the actual economic capital of college youth is not enough to support a full range of middle-class life, they turn to achieve symbolic compensation by consuming micro-symbolic goods rich in

middle-class symbolism, so as to obtain a sense of psychological matching and class simulation identity.

2.2.3 Social Constructionism and "Micro-Coherence"

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's social construction theory holds that social reality and individual identity are not a priori fixed objective existence, but the result of continuous construction of individuals in the practice and interaction of daily life. In the face of the suspension state brought about by the social transition period, that is, the state of uncertain reality and ambiguous future expectations. Through the triple path of externalization-objectification-internalization, young people take back control in the micro-daily scene arrangement and ritual performance, forming a self-protective spiritual self-consistency.

3. Research Methods and Data Collection

This study adopted a mixed qualitative research paradigm combining online ethnography with semi-structured in-depth interviews to ensure both the breadth of the research data and the depth of micro-level experiences.

3.1 Online Ethnography

The study selected RED and Douban as the core observation fields. These two platforms are the core positions for the current domestic youth groups to share their lifestyles, taste demonstrations, and exchange experiences. The researchers conducted an immersive online observation for a period of four months (October 2025-January 2026) in a participatory observation manner. More than 300 posts on topics such as flat style, college students petty bourgeoisie life, dormitory atmosphere transformation and small and exquisite experience were collected. In-depth analysis of its graphic presentation, high-frequency vocabulary in the interactive comment area, and implicit taste review rules in the community.

3.2 Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

In order to explore the psychological mechanism and internal identity experience behind the behavior, the research team recruited 18 college students from different types of universities nationwide for in-depth interviews. The respondents were coded as P01-P18, aged between 19-24 years old, covering undergraduate and postgraduate students. The

interview focused on daily consumption preferences, social media display motivation, psychological adjustment in the face of economic constraints, and future class expectations. The length of the single interview was 45-90 minutes. All audio was transcribed into text and three-level grounded coding analysis was performed.

4. The Mechanisms Underlying the Pseudo-Middle-Class Practices of College Students

Based on the three-level grounded coding of interview data and the text analysis of network ethnography, the identity construction mechanism of college youth's pseudo-middle class practice presents three progressive dimensions from inside to outside and from micro to community.

4.1 Individual Level: Aesthetic Maturation and Strategic Substitutions Reconstruct a Sense of Psychological Deservingness

Through the influence of higher education and daily immersion in digital media, university students have achieved a middle-class aesthetic sensibility at an early age, exhibiting typical characteristics of aesthetic maturation. However, faced with strict economic budget constraints, they do not simply succumb to blind consumerist trends but instead demonstrate a strong sense of strategic substitution. They reject the exorbitant capital premiums of luxury brands and instead skillfully satisfy their pursuit of a high-quality lifestyle by meticulously seeking out luxury brand alternatives, purchasing niche designer brands, or engaging in small-scale taste-testing experiences.

Among young people, this practice of seeking alternatives is imbued with a high degree of rationality and aesthetic legitimacy. They refuse to define affordable alternatives as a compromise born of poverty or a humbling act of necessity; instead, they reframe it as "a victory of wisdom and discernment over brand capital premiums." For example, respondent P04 expressed the psychological satisfaction derived from this micro-compensation: "I can't afford a Chanel or Jo Malone bag costing tens of thousands of yuan, but every month I spend 150 yuan on a sample of niche boutique perfume or go to a specialty coffee shop for an iced Americano with latte art. Sitting by the window with a logo-emblazoned paper cup while writing my thesis-in that moment, I feel that my life

hasn't been downgraded because of a tight budget; I'm still enjoying this refined taste." (Respondent P04, female, 21, junior)

Through this strategy, young people psychologically reconstruct their sense of "deservability." They believe that a refined lifestyle is not determined by a bank balance, but rather by personal aesthetic knowledge and discernment. Respondent P09's remarks typify this psychological strategy of deconstructing brand premiums: "What's the fundamental difference in fragrance molecules between a 30-yuan budget-friendly alternative and a 300-yuan luxury brand? Being able to create the same sophisticated bedroom ambiance at one-tenth the price shows I have good taste-that's what I call 'smart consumption.' I haven't fallen into the trap of consumerism, yet I've enjoyed an equivalent aesthetic experience." (Respondent P09, male, 22 years old, senior in college)

4.2 Community Level: Symbolic Display in Digital Spaces and Defining Peer Taste Boundaries

On digital social platforms, the practice of mimicking the middle class takes on highly symbolic and visual characteristics. Through carefully composed photos, specific vintage film filters, and captions imbued with a particular lifestyle attitude and philosophical undertones, college students repackage and encode their otherwise extremely affordable daily lives into visual symbols that align with middle-class aesthetics.

In digital interactions, young people use these elements to define boundaries of taste among their peers. These boundaries are not meant to flaunt wealth, but rather to find like-minded individuals with "compatible tastes." Through social interactions such as "asking for links," "sharing budget-friendly alternatives," and "mood-setting tutorials," young people find peers with similar aesthetic tastes and economic circumstances. Frequent interactions-such as likes, saves, and comments-establish a "sense of belonging to a virtual community" based on a shared sense of taste. Interviewee P12 described this process of symbolic representation: "When posting on Moments or Xiaohongshu, I don't directly reveal prices-I even deliberately hide them-but instead showcase the plating, the angle of natural light, and magazine-style layouts. When someone in the comments replies, 'This really has a sense of lifestyle quality' or 'Where

can I find the same picture frame?', that feeling of being recognized by like-minded people is incredibly satisfying. It feels like I've found my circle and gained a sense of cultural identity." (Respondent P12, female, 20 years old, sophomore)

This symbolic display in the digital space is, in essence, a micro-level "performance of cultural capital." By demonstrating "how to discover beauty within affordability," young people successfully establish an identity position characterized by a sense of superiority and aesthetic autonomy within peer interactions.

4.3 Psychological Level: Control over Order and Psychological Coherence in Micro-Daily Life

Faced with macro-structural pressures such as intensifying academic competition, rising barriers to employment, and narrowing pathways for social mobility, the external social environment presents a high degree of uncertainty and uncontrollability. Young people are prone to experiencing a profound sense of suspension-that is, the feeling of floating within the social structure, struggling to find a solid foothold in life. At such times, the practice of pseudo-middle class provides young people with a highly performative micro-sanctuary.

Placing a warm-light desk lamp at the head of a narrow, cramped dorm bed; carefully plating a homemade Western-style fruit and oatmeal bowl; or regularly visiting free art exhibitions or parks on weekends-these extremely low-cost small investments in taste constitute healing rituals in daily life. By asserting control over these minute details-demonstrating that "I will never compromise on my quality of life"-young people reclaim control over their own micro-order of daily life, thereby achieving psychological harmony with themselves and their oppressive external environment. The account of Respondent P15 profoundly reveals this psychological defense mechanism: "I sent out dozens of resumes for internships and was rejected every time. I had absolutely no idea whether I'd be able to stay in the big city or would have to return to my hometown-I felt completely adrift and extremely anxious. But every night, I turn on the small lamp in my dorm, light some affordable incense, and play some jazz-that hour belongs entirely to me. During that hour, I control the rhythm of my life, and I feel that I am still an individual with quality and

dignity." (Interviewee P15, male, 23 years old, first-year graduate student)

5. The Threefold Dilemma of Pseudo-Middle-Class Identity among College Students

Although the practice of pseudo-middle-class identity provides college students with immediate psychological comfort and emotional relief at the micro level, this identity construction is severely detached from solid economic capital and objective social structures; as such, it is essentially a suspended identity built upon symbolic compensation. As time passes and real-world pressures mount, this identity inevitably reveals its inherent flaws, giving rise to three profound identity dilemmas.

5.1 Structural Disconnect: The Deep Divide Between Digital Glitz and Real-World Speechlessness

The practice of the mimetic middle class relies heavily on mediated displays and visual representations on social media platforms. In the digital space, young people are lifestyle connoisseurs with refined taste and a mastery of sophisticated lifestyles; but in offline reality, they must face cramped, makeshift six-person dorm rooms, the tight allocation of their monthly living expenses, and deep uncertainty about their future career paths.

This stark contrast between online middle-class sophistication and offline financial hardship leads to a severe internal fragmentation of self-identity. Once removed from the protection of digital filters, the weight and awkwardness of real life strike back with double force, triggering deeper identity anxiety and a sense of emptiness. Respondent P02 described the suffocating feeling behind this glossy facade: "My Xiaohongshu account has over 10,000 followers, and people think I'm a sophisticated, bourgeois girl. But the reality is, just to take that polished afternoon tea photo, I might have eaten cheap takeout for three days straight. After taking the photo, I still have to write my thesis in a six-person dorm room piled high with books and dirty clothes. When I turn off my phone screen and see my face reflected in the pitch-black display, the psychological disconnect is so overwhelming it feels suffocating." (Interviewee P02, female, 22, senior) The illusory glamour constructed by digital symbols not only fails to alleviate real-life deprivation but instead makes that deprivation appear even more glaring,

resulting in a structural fracture in self-identity.

5.2 Erosion of Agency: the Erosion of Subjectivity by Consumer Echo Chambers under Algorithmic Discipline

In a deeply mediatized environment, commercial platforms and algorithmic recommendation mechanisms precisely capture young people's aesthetic preferences and emotional anxieties, continuously pushing targeted content such as refined lifestyles, affordable alternatives that capture the vibe, and small-scale, bourgeois-style consumption. This has caused the practice of pseudo-middle-class living to gradually shift from a conscious, autonomous choice by young people to a form of consumer jointly woven by algorithms and commercial capital.

Subjectively, young people believe they are using their wits to "resist" the markups of consumerism, but in reality, they have fallen into a new type of consumption trap: constantly buying, buying, buying just to create an affordable alternative atmosphere. These small, incremental purchases not only fail to save money but actually result in a significant drain of scattered funds. Respondent P07 deeply reflected on this dilemma of algorithmic discipline: "The algorithm knows I like vintage style, so it pushes all kinds of budget-friendly coffee makers, niche wall art, and mood-setting decor at me every day. I originally intended to save money, but ended up buying a bunch of cheap yet useless 'mood-setting trinkets.' All told, I spent several thousand—I've been completely ensnared by the algorithm. I thought I was resisting consumerism, but in reality, I was just finding a more covert way to funnel money to capital." (Interviewee P07, male, 21, junior in college) In this process, young people's agency is quietly stripped away by algorithms, and their self-identity is disciplined within a refined echo chamber constructed from micro-consumer goods.

5.3 Pseudo-Solutions: the Postponement of Real-Life Survival and Psychological Pressure Caused by Symbolic Dependence

The psychological self-consistency derived from the mimetic middle class is, in essence, a form of psychological defense and symbolic compensation on an emotional level. When young people tie too much of their energy and sense of self-worth to symbolic indicators—such as "whether their coffee shop check-in spots are

'prestigious enough' or "whether their dorm's atmosphere is 'upscale enough'" -the structural, real-life dilemmas that urgently need to be addressed are temporarily obscured, postponed, or even avoided.

Symbolic satisfaction cannot be converted into genuine social or economic capital. When graduation season and the harsh reality of job hunting loom large, this "suspended self-consistency"-lacking a foundation in reality-can collapse in an instant, triggering even more intense psychological pressure and a sense of failure. The reflection of interviewee P18 is highly representative: "Sometimes I feel like living the 'bohemian' lifestyle is like consuming a kind of spiritual opium. Spending two hours every day figuring out how to decorate my dorm room to look like a trendy boutique hotel felt therapeutic and self-contained at the time, but at the fall job fair, HR didn't care at all whether my dorm had style-they only looked at my internship experience and hard skills. Symbolic satisfaction simply can't alleviate real-world anxiety; I was just using elaborate packaging to escape reality." (Interviewee P18, female, 24 years old, first-year graduate student)

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