

Challenging and Remediating: The Impact of Online Cultural Consumerism on Aesthetic Education in Vocational Colleges

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Abstract: Online cultural consumerism is a social trend shaped by the interplay of capitalist logic and aesthetic consumption logic, profoundly influencing the aesthetic concepts and spiritual world-building of vocational college students. Theoretical analysis reveals that Online cultural consumerism impacts vocational college students' aesthetic education in multiple ways. On one hand, it develops students' aesthetic sensory abilities in a one-sided manner while diminishing their aesthetic cognitive abilities; on the other hand, it weakens their aesthetic judgment and undermines their aesthetic creativity. Therefore, grounded in the critical perspectives of capital critique and aesthetic consumption critique, the research analyzes that these negative impacts primarily stem from the following points: First, consumerism simplifies aesthetics into mere consumption choices and pursues profit through traffic metrics. Second, online dissemination creates information silos. Third, herd mentality leads students to be drawn to lowbrow culture. This must be addressed from multiple angles—including value-based guidance, social oversight and governance, and educational direction—to enhance students' aesthetic judgment and creativity, thereby supporting their comprehensive and free development.

Keywords: Online cultural consumerism; Vocational college students; Aesthetic education; Cultural consumption; Impact; Governance strategies

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1. Introduction

The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China states, “Chinese modernization is a modernization that harmonizes material and spiritual civilization. Material abundance and spiritual richness are fundamental requirements of socialist modernization”^[1]. Aesthetics, as a fundamental aspect of human spiritual and cultural life, is a crucial element in constructing and enriching the human spirit. In higher vocational institutions, aesthetic education constitutes an important component of higher vocational education. However, with the rapid advancement of the internet and artificial intelligence technologies, online cultural consumerism

has gradually emerged. As a social trend characterized by widespread diffusion and potent pervasiveness, online cultural consumerism—fueled by capitalist and consumerist logics—exhibits traits of utilitarianism, pervasive entertainment, and superficial sensory gratification. This phenomenon profoundly influences the aesthetic perceptions and spiritual world-building of vocational college students, even exerting negative impacts on the formation of their outlook on life, worldview, and values.

Currently, on the one hand, domestic research on “cultural consumerism” has yielded substantial findings. In recent years, scholars have increasingly focused on “online cultural consumerism”, with existing studies primarily concentrated in the following areas: First, regarding the connotation, characteristics, and generative mechanisms of online cultural consumerism, such as Su Feng et al. (2024), Gu Guihua (2023), Zheng Zhikang (2023), Lu Shujian et al. (2022), and Yang Zhangwen (2022) ^[2-6]. Zhao Hui and Yang Chaoran (2017) point out that cultural consumerism leads to the loss of spiritual beliefs and pursuits among youth, moral decline, widespread skepticism, a lack of responsibility, and refusal to confront reality, as well as crises in self-identity and self-construction ^[7]. Second, its impact on the spiritual lives of youth. For example, Cao Zhilei et al. (2022) note the erosion of ideals and convictions, distorted value pursuits, vulgar aesthetic lifestyles, and empty entertainment lives among young people ^[8]. Third, its impact on mainstream ideology. Some scholars analyze how cultural consumerism erodes college students’ political identity and socialist ideology by examining aspects like the inheritance of youth’s revolutionary heritage. Fourth, remedial strategies: Zuo Luping and Zhu Yuli (2021) propose countering cultural consumerism through government regulation, media-driven value guidance, capital-led initiatives, and individual cultivation of aspirations for a better life ^[9]. Peng Jiyu and Guo Fengrong (2022) emphasize countering its negative effects by providing high-quality cultural offerings ^[10].

On the other hand, within Western academic circles, critical researches of consumer culture emerged, represented by works such as Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism and Cultural Theory*, Daniel Bell’s *The Contradictions of Capitalist Culture*, Jean Baudrillard’s *The Consumer Society*, and Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* ^[11-14]. In their analysis of postmodern society, these scholars offered profound critiques of cultural consumption within the context of the consumer society, providing valuable theoretical insights for this research.

Although existing research has explored the connotations, impacts, and countermeasures of online cultural consumerism, most researches have not specifically focused on the group of vocational college students, nor have they provided systematic analyses of the effects on their aesthetic education. Furthermore, existing research predominantly examines ideological or spiritual life issues from a macro perspective, with few researches proposing targeted countermeasures at the practical level of aesthetic education. Therefore, this research adopts a perspective of online cultural consumerism, taking vocational college students’ aesthetic education as its research subject. It focuses on analyzing the impact mechanisms of online cultural consumerism on their aesthetic abilities, spiritual world, and value systems. Based on this analysis, it proposes practical educational countermeasures to help cultivate high-quality craftsmen and skilled artisans who meet the requirements of Chinese modernization.

2. The essence, evolution, and characteristics of online culture consumerism

What is online cultural consumerism? It refers to a social trend where, with the proliferation of the internet, people consume cultural products under the manipulation of capitalist logic, pursuing material gratification and sensory stimulation in a one-sided manner, and becoming obsessed with lowbrow or even distorted cultural consumption. This social trend continues to spread rampantly through the medium of the internet, infiltrating people’s daily lives

and influencing their values, ways of thinking, and behaviors. This phenomenon particularly impacts Generation Z vocational college students. As digital natives, they possess ingrained habits of online cultural consumption and are thus most vulnerable to the impact and influence of this social trend.

The historical evolution of online cultural consumerism has broadly followed three progressive stages: First: Consumer culture alongside the development of the entertainment industry, “idol chasers” evolved into consumer-oriented fans. Second: Cultural consumerism through the collusion of social media and unscrupulous capital. This evolved into the current form of cultural consumerism that runs counter to mainstream culture. Third: Digital media propels the evolution into online cultural consumerism. Driven by capitalist logic and market principles, this phenomenon exhibits spiritually and culturally consumptive traits characterized by utilitarianism, pervasive entertainment, and superficial sensory gratification.

How did online cultural consumerism come into being? Its emergence is inseparable from the operational logic of capital and the internet as an information-based medium. On one hand, online cultural consumerism shares a kinship with the logic of capital. As a social trend that runs counter to the content and values of mainstream culture, its operation, rise, and ability to generate traffic are all driven by the logic of capital. In the pursuit of profit and traffic, capital collaborates with certain non-mainstream cultures to promote alternative values, capturing public attention. Alternatively, it satirizes, distorts, or vulgarizes mainstream culture as a gimmick to attract netizens. As a social trend, online cultural consumerism emerges from the convergence of capital logic and aesthetic consumption logic. On the other hand, online cultural consumerism is inextricably linked to the logic of aesthetic consumption. The coupling of aesthetics and consumption constitutes this logic. Within cultural consumption, aesthetic elements are employed as factors stimulating consumption, capturing the spending preferences of college students to facilitate expanded reproduction. To dismantle online cultural consumerism, one must adopt a critical perspective grounded in both capital critique and aesthetic consumption critique.

3. The impact of online culture consumerism on aesthetic education for vocational college students

The impact of online cultural consumerism on aesthetic education for vocational college students manifests in the following four aspects:

First, it developed unilaterally aesthetic sensory perception. Day after day, immersion in shallow sensory cultural consumption relentlessly erodes the aesthetic sensibility of vocational college students. Lacking rational judgment, they fail to elevate their aesthetic cognition while simultaneously turning to algorithmic dependence. As Plato observed, “Intuition is the highest level of human wisdom.” Aesthetic sensibility, as an expression of intuition, perceives the world through sensory means. Aesthetic perception is a fundamental form of creative thinking, pervasive in human spiritual activities and playing a vital role in the objectification of human essence. Influenced by online cultural consumerism, vocational college students’ aesthetic discernment is declining. Prolonged daily usage of short-video platforms has led over half of these students to judge a work’s value by its number of likes, fostering a data-driven evaluation system.

Second, it diminished aesthetic discernment. The herd mentality in cultural consumption has eroded vocational college students’ aesthetic judgment, leading to a symbolic reconstruction of their aesthetic perceptions. The vast majority develop a brand logo worship mentality, blindly following trends by equating the purchase of trendy brands and internationally renowned labels with aesthetic expression, reducing design value to mere

trademark premiums. Additionally, a segment of vocational college students is deeply immersed in gaming culture, consuming virtual avatars with rapidly increasing trends. Another group idolizes celebrity culture, with their spending on anime-inspired virtual idol merchandise showing a year-on-year growth rate.

Third, it weakened aesthetic judgment. The lack of subjectivity in cultural consumption concepts diminishes vocational college students' aesthetic discernment, leading their aesthetic practices toward consumerist transformation. Easily influenced by livestreaming trends in influencer culture, these students fantasize about becoming streamers or internet celebrities themselves in the near future. Consequently, their interests and focus shift from campus mainstream culture—such as red culture, traditional heritage, classical music, and Hanfu—toward campus influencer incubation clubs. For instance, in intangible cultural heritage craft courses, the vast majority of vocational college students prioritize “whether it is suitable for vlogging” over skill inheritance. Under the negative influence of online cultural consumerism, they distort artistic creation into a means of monetizing traffic.

Fourth, it diminished aesthetic creativity. Byung—Chul Han observes: “Beauty establishes a free relationship with the world and with the self” ^[15]. In aesthetic activities, as the connection between the aesthetic subject and the external world evolves, it creates space for the subject's creative endeavors. The non-utilitarian nature of aesthetic activities provides individuals with an irrational environment less disturbed by rationalism. When individuals reduce the constraints of needs and utilitarian pursuits, they enhance psychological experiences of direct intuition and insight into the essence of things. Within this experience, individuals more readily develop a sense of immediacy and presence. Psychological processes become more integrated, facilitating interaction between conscious and unconscious minds. Various psychological elements become more active, sparking unexpected yet intuitively logical creative inspiration. Homogeneous cultural consumption content weakens the aesthetic creativity of vocational college students. This, in turn, impedes the construction of their spiritual world and the formation of their worldview, values, and outlook on life, transforming them into one-dimensional, unidirectional individuals.

Through the preceding analysis, it is evident that the impact of network culture consumerism on the aesthetic education of vocational college students is multidimensional. Moreover, it extends to areas such as the shaping of values, the distortion of aesthetic standards, and the diminishing effectiveness of education. This also encompasses the utilitarianization, homogenization, and superficiality of aesthetics, as well as the alienation of values.

4. An in-depth analysis of how online cultural consumerism weakened the aesthetic appreciation of vocational college students

Online cultural consumerism, in layman's terms, refers to how consumption behaviors are driven by cultural factors within the online environment, or how consumerism manifests through internet culture. The educational background of vocational college students differs from that of regular undergraduates, as they lean more toward vocational skills training. Consequently, their aesthetic education may prioritize practicality and applicability. To deeply analyze the underlying reasons behind the impact of online cultural consumerism on the aesthetic education of vocational college students, the following dimensions need to be considered.

First, aesthetic enticement. Under the manipulation of capitalist logic, online cultural consumerism cloaks itself in the guise of aesthetics and art to lure vocational college students into participation. Consumerism typically emphasizes material possession, brand symbols, and instant gratification, which may distort students' aesthetic

judgments. For instance, they might focus more on appearances and trends rather than on deeper aesthetic values. Vocational college students may be more susceptible to the influence of social media and influencer culture, as these platforms are saturated with consumption-oriented content. The purpose of aesthetic education is typically to cultivate the ability to perceive, appreciate, and create beauty, involving the comprehensive development of emotional, moral, and cultural aspects. However, consumerism may reduce aesthetics to mere consumption choices—for instance, suggesting that purchasing certain goods equates to demonstrating aesthetic taste. This leads students to equate aesthetics with material consumption, neglecting the cultivation of intrinsic aesthetic literacy.

Second, profit-driven expansion. In pursuit of greater profits, capital expands chaotically, continuously churning out unscrupulous, nutritionally devoid cultural products—the ugly, the vulgar, the tasteless, the grotesque—stimulating vocational college students to perpetually engage in the production, consumption, and reproduction of such content. Leveraging the predatory effects of the attention economy, platforms employ neuropsychological designs—such as variable reward mechanisms—to increase daily screen interactions, diminishing the sustained focus required for deep aesthetic engagement. Overloaded with fragmented information, cognitive bandwidth becomes congested, reducing prefrontal cortex activity and hindering the critical thinking essential for traditional aesthetic education.

Third, media amplification. Capital manipulates social media platforms to promote content online and expand influence. Consumerism spreads rapidly through the internet, exposing students to fragmented information that fosters superficial aesthetic values. Algorithmic recommendations in online culture readily create information silos, where students only encounter content aligned with their preferences and consumerist values, further reinforcing superficial aesthetic standards. This undermines diversity in aesthetic education, potentially leaving vocational college students lacking understanding and appreciation for diverse cultures and art forms. The value deconstruction of subculture circles. Twelve subcultural spheres—including esports and domestic fashion trends—form information silos, diminishing cross-cultural aesthetic comprehension.

Fourth, the herd mentality in cultural consumption. Regarding psychological factors among vocational college students, consumerism often exploits people's vanity and social needs. Students may pursue specific aesthetic standards under peer pressure, leading to homogenized tastes and stifling creativity. Aesthetic chaos frequently occurs, and the herd mentality in cultural consumption makes successive cohorts of vocational college students susceptible to vulgar, mediocre, and kitsch cultural products, fostering distorted aesthetic views. For instance, popular elements on short-video platforms may lead them to believe beauty lies in following trends rather than expressing individuality. Aesthetic education should instead encourage personalized expression and cultivate independent thinking skills.

Additionally, vocational college students engage more with practical courses and receive relatively less theoretical education, potentially resulting in less systematic aesthetic education. The gap between virtual personas in online culture and reality may also influence vocational students' self-perception. An excessive pursuit of "perfect" online images can lead to real-world aesthetic anxiety, impacting mental health—a factor that indirectly relates to the effectiveness of aesthetic education.

5. Aesthetic education strategies for vocational college students under the critique of online culture consumerism

How can aesthetic education be strengthened in vocational colleges amidst the critique and resistance against online cultural consumerism? This requires a multi-pronged approach encompassing value-based guidance, social

oversight and governance, and institutional educational direction to help students maintain healthy aesthetic perspectives within a consumerist-dominated digital environment. By leveraging online platforms themselves to promote high-quality artistic resources, vocational college students can develop more comprehensive aesthetic sensibilities.

Firstly, value-driven leadership: Securing the ideological leadership of Marxism. Guided fundamentally by the President of the CPC Thought on Culture, people must strengthen value-driven leadership to help college students deeply understand the essence of socialist core values. This enables them to consciously resist erroneous notions promoted by consumerism—such as materialism and entertainment supremacy—and cultivate healthy, rational cultural consumption perspectives. Whether as cultural producers, market regulators, or individuals, the guidance of Marxist ideology must be consistently adhered to. Guided by the President of the CPC Thought on Culture, actively advance embodied teaching reforms—such as the VR Dunhuang Mural Reproduction Lab. Utilize haptic feedback devices to restore traditional aesthetic perception dimensions. Align with vocational students’ specializations by implementing “blind touch assessment” in industrial design workshops, stripping visual symbols to evaluate material aesthetics. Establish an evaluation system overhaul: Introduce an “aesthetic resilience index” to comprehensively assess cross-cultural comprehension, original expression, and critical reflection; develop a “time value assessment model” for works to track their cultural vitality three years post-graduation.

Secondly, social oversight: Controlling at the source to regulate the cultural and entertainment market order. Strengthen oversight and regulation of the cultural market to purify the online cultural environment. By improving laws and regulations and enhancing industry self-discipline, combat vulgarity, false advertising, and excessive commercialization. Foster a positive and wholesome ecosystem for cultural product supply, offering college students high-quality cultural consumption options. Clarify capital sources and boundaries, guiding orderly entry into the cultural industry market for sound operations. Regulate cultural producers through both “law and ethics”, reinforcing social responsibility and highlighting the social benefits of culture. Strengthen governance of the cultural industry to prevent capital’s predatory appropriation of cultural resources. Enhance social responsibility among cultural and entertainment enterprises, uphold the principle of prioritizing social benefits, and achieve positive interaction between capital and the cultural-entertainment sector to deliver more and better spiritual products. Resolutely resist cultural consumption values such as traffic-driven content and materialism, guide digital media like the internet to integrate into mainstream culture, and prevent capital from manipulating or skewing the cultural industry.

Thirdly, School guidance: Fostering proper cultural consumption values through education. School education plays a pivotal role. Vocational colleges should prioritize integrating and expanding aesthetic education by offering courses in aesthetic theory and organizing cultural activities to systematically enhance students’ aesthetic literacy and appreciation skills. On the one hand, aesthetic education should be integrated into ideological and political theory courses to cultivate students through beauty and culture. On the other hand, it should be combined with professional practice, guiding students to embody aesthetic pursuits in skill training and creative work, achieving unity of knowledge and action. Ultimately, students will develop strong aesthetic perception and judgment, enabling them to discern and resist negative cultural influences. This fosters autonomous and critical cultural consumption behaviors, leading to well-rounded growth.

There is an urgent need to establish an educational system for “resistance-oriented aesthetic literacy”, transforming the characteristics of consumer society into teaching resources to rebuild aesthetic subjectivity through decoding the logic of capital. This demands that vocational educators possess aesthetic insight in

the digital age, seeking breakthroughs for educational innovation through the dialectic of deconstruction and reconstruction. For instance, implementing metacognitive development programs: launching “Media Critique Workshops” to enhance symbolic decoding skills through advertising deconstruction exercises; implementing aesthetic journaling initiatives requiring weekly documentation and analysis of the psychological mechanisms behind three instances of consumer impulses. Integrating more critical thinking content into specialized curricula guides students in discerning the influence of consumerism.

6. Conclusion

In summary, this research focuses on the impact of online cultural consumerism—driven by capital and consumption logic—on the aesthetic education of vocational college students, based on theoretical and literature analysis. The research finds that this trend excessively emphasizes sensory aesthetics, weakens deeper aesthetic cognition and judgment, and suppresses aesthetic creativity. Its primary causes include the simplification of aesthetics into a tool for chasing traffic and profits, the intensification of the online information echo chamber effect, and the spread of vulgar culture fueled by herd mentality. This research proposes targeted, multi-faceted, and collaborative solutions to address these issues. By guiding values, implementing social oversight and governance, and strengthening aesthetic education in schools, educators can comprehensively enhance students’ aesthetic literacy. This research not only provides insights for ideological and aesthetic education in vocational colleges but also offers a foundation for theoretical expansion. However, it lacks empirical data support. Future researches could further explore quantitative and qualitative research through questionnaires and interviews.

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