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How Social Media Platforms Influence Chinese Teenagers' Spending Habits by Promoting Consumerism

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Abstract. This study examines how social media use is associated with symbolic consumption, impulse buying, and comparison consumption among Chinese teenagers. A questionnaire containing 19 items was distributed online to respondents aged 15-19, and the reported analyses used 100 observations. Independent-samples t-tests assessed gender differences, one-way analysis of variance examined variation across platform-use and usage-time groups, and Pearson correlations tested associations between daily social media use and the three consumption measures. No statistically significant gender differences were found for symbolic consumption, impulse buying, or comparison consumption. Platform analyses indicated differences in symbolic-consumption scores associated with Xiaohongshu and Bilibili use, while the linear correlation was significant only for Bilibili. Daily social media use was positively correlated with all three consumption measures, with the strongest association observed for impulse buying. However, usage time was not significantly associated with the proportion of allowance spent, instalment use or overspending, or financial planning. These findings suggest that heavier social media exposure is linked to consumer attitudes and impulsive tendencies without, in this sample, corresponding evidence of more problematic financial behaviour.

Keywords: social media, Chinese teenagers, symbolic consumption, impulse buying, comparison consumption

1. Introduction

Social media has become a part of daily life of Chinese adolescents. Teenagers spend a lot of time watching short videos and reading image-text posts, where they are exposed to ads, product recommendations, lifestyle content. This type of content can encourage purchases for symbolic reasons, such as belonging, status, and emotional satisfaction, and not for function alone. Consumerist messages may be especially influential on adolescents [1] because they are still forming their values and identities. Likewise, the symbolic consumption theory indicates that products can be purchased for their social significance and not necessarily for their practical utility [2].

Li and Su [1] argue that contemporary consumerism creates a symbolic environment in which products are associated with social image and emotional states. Yet much existing research focuses on adults or Western samples. Studies of Chinese youth have examined the broad effects of social

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media, but fewer have compared specific content formats, such as short-video and image-text platforms, or tested whether boys and girls respond differently. This study therefore uses symbolic consumption theory, a questionnaire, and secondary research to examine how social media content relates to the purchasing behaviour of Chinese teenagers. It focuses on gender differences, platform differences, and the relationship between daily social media use and symbolic, impulse, and comparison consumption. The study also tests whether usage time is associated with financial behaviours such as spending a large share of one's allowance, using instalment payments or overspending, and financial planning.

2. Literature review

2.1. Chinese adolescent consumer behaviour

In China, consumer culture is increasingly influenced by digital media and that is where teenagers spend their money. Social media can mix entertainment, social interaction and marketing, and can expose young users to persuasive content in their everyday online activities. Li and Su [1] mention three characteristics of modern consumerism that might affect Chinese teenagers. The first is that products gain cultural and emotional meanings as well as functions. Second, consumerist messages can be embedded in normal media content. Third, consumption may be associated with pleasure seeking, status and material aspiration in ways that appeal to young audiences.

Research on Chinese social media users has found evidence for social comparison. Xu [3] studied the use of social network and its association with upward social comparison and conspicuous consumption in Chinese university students. Teenagers who compare themselves to peers or online figures may worry about not keeping up with current trends, prompting impulsive purchases or purchases made to support a desired identity. Previous research on Chinese adolescents has also revealed a link between materialism and social comparison and peer communication [4]. These findings give reason to consider symbolic, impulse and comparison consumption all together.

2.2. Consumption concepts and measurement

Richins [5] operationalised materialism through the Material Values Scale, which treats acquisition as central to happiness, success, and self-definition. These values overlap with the three consumption tendencies examined in this study.

Symbolic consumption refers to purchasing primarily for symbolic meaning rather than functional attributes. Luna-Cortes [6] describes this behaviour as using consumption to communicate identity, express group membership, and gain recognition. Among teenagers, it may involve branded clothing or fashionable products that signal wealth, taste, or social belonging. The questionnaire's symbolic-consumption items were adapted from the instrument developed by Luna-Cortes [6], which draws on self-congruity and perceived-value measures developed by Sirgy [7] and Sweeney and Soutar [8]. The items asked whether respondents believed that their brand choices reflected who they were, communicated their identity to others, or affected how others viewed them.

Impulse buying involves an unplanned purchase prompted by a sudden urge or emotion. Damong and Perez [9] reviewed gender differences in financial behaviour and reported that emotional states can be associated with impulse purchasing. In the context of Chinese social media, live-streaming commerce, influencer recommendations, and time-limited offers may intensify excitement or urgency. The questionnaire's impulse-buying items were adapted from the Impulse Buying Tendency

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Scale developed by Rook and Fisher [10], including statements about buying impulsively or without prior thought.

Comparison consumption, closely related to conspicuous or status consumption, involves purchasing to match or exceed the perceived position of others. Islam et al. [11] found that social comparison contributed to materialistic values and compulsive buying among adolescents and young adults. Xu [3] reported a similar mechanism among Chinese university students, in which social network use encouraged upward comparison and, in turn, conspicuous consumption. The comparison-consumption items therefore assessed whether respondents bought products to impress others or felt dissatisfied when others owned better products.

Together, symbolic consumption, impulse buying, and comparison consumption provide a framework for examining how social media may shape the spending attitudes and decisions of Chinese teenagers.

2.3. Effects of social media on teenage consumption

Social media can stimulate symbolic consumption by repeatedly linking products to lifestyle and identity. Wilska et al. [12] found that luxury brands were prominent in the social media posts of brand-conscious young people in Finland. In such posts, products function as signs of social identity and recognition rather than merely as useful objects.

Social media also creates an environment for continuous comparison. Islam et al. [11] studied 298 teenagers and 345 young adults and found that frequent social comparison was associated with stronger materialistic values. Xu [3] identified a similar relationship among Chinese university students. Tuominen et al. [13] extended this argument to influencer followership, reporting that following social media influencers was associated with materialism and purchase intentions among Finnish young people. Influencers can therefore operate as socialisation agents who shape ideas about desirable products and lifestyles.

Impulse buying may also be encouraged by live-streaming commerce and influencer recommendations. These formats use excitement, scarcity cues, and time pressure to reduce deliberation [14]. Damong and Perez [9] further suggest that emotional regulation can contribute to gender differences in impulse purchasing. Whether the same gender pattern appears among Chinese teenagers remains an empirical question.

2.4. Research gaps

Several gaps remain in the literature. First, relatively few studies focus specifically on Chinese teenagers. Much relevant research has used Western samples, including studies from Finland [12] and Russia [15]. Xu [3] examined Chinese university students but focused on conspicuous consumption. The influence of China's platform environment, including Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Bilibili, may differ from that of Western social media.

Second, many studies treat social media as a single category. Short-video, image-text, and community-oriented platforms differ in format, recommendation systems, and user practices, so their associations with consumption may also differ [14]. Third, limited research has tested how daily usage time relates to multiple forms of consumption among Chinese teenagers. Greater use increases exposure to advertisements, recommendations, and curated lifestyles, but this exposure may not translate directly into problematic financial behaviour.

Finally, evidence on gender differences is mixed and often based on adults or Western samples. This study addresses these gaps by examining Chinese teenagers' consumption across platforms,

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testing gender differences in symbolic, impulse, and comparison consumption, and analysing the relationship between daily social media use and both consumption tendencies and financial behaviour.

3. Methodology

3.1. Questionnaire design and participants

A questionnaire was used to collect primary data on how social media relates to Chinese teenagers' spending habits. It measured symbolic consumption, impulse buying, and comparison consumption and examined three issues: gender differences, differences associated with platform use, and relationships between social media usage time and consumption behaviour.

The target population was Chinese teenagers aged 15-19. This age range was selected because identity formation remains important during adolescence and because young people may be receptive to consumerist messages on social media [1]. The questionnaire was distributed online through WeChat. The first questions recorded age and gender, and responses outside the stated age range were excluded. Participation was anonymous, and respondents were informed that their answers would remain confidential and be used only for academic research.

The questionnaire contained 19 questions in three sections. The first collected demographic information, including gender, age, and monthly allowance. The second measured symbolic consumption with three items adapted from Luna-Cortes [6], impulse buying with two items adapted from Rook and Fisher [10] and informed by Damong and Perez [9], and comparison consumption with two items based on Islam et al. [11] and Xu [3]. The third section recorded daily usage time, preferred platforms, perceived social media influence on purchasing, purchase frequency, the proportion of allowance spent, instalment use or overspending, and financial planning.

A total of 105 complete responses were reported. The statistical tables used in the paper contain 100 observations, including 55 male and 45 female respondents. Independent-samples t-tests compared male and female mean scores for the three consumption measures. One-way analysis of variance tested differences across platform-use and usage-time categories, and Pearson correlations assessed linear relationships between usage time and the consumption measures. The analyses were conducted with SPSSAU, an online statistical analysis platform.

3.2. Literature search

The literature search used Google Scholar and China National Knowledge Infrastructure. Search terms included social media and teenage consumption, symbolic consumption, impulse buying, comparison consumption, gender differences in consumer behaviour, and Chinese adolescent consumer behaviour. The search focused on literature published from 2017 to 2025, with most sources published from 2020 onward. Older studies were retained when they provided foundational theories or established measures, such as the Impulse Buying Tendency Scale [10].

Most sources were peer-reviewed journal articles. Priority was given to research on adolescents, social media, and Chinese consumers, including the studies by Wilska et al. [12] and Xu [3]. The review established the theoretical background for the three consumption measures and identified the research gaps concerning gender, platform type, and usage frequency.

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4. Results

4.1. Gender differences in consumption

Table 1. Symbolic consumption by gender (independent-samples t-test)

Measure	Male (n=55)	Female (n=45)	t	p
Symbolic consumption total score	9.62 ± 3.46	10.04 ± 2.93	-0.656	0.514

Table 1 reports the independent-samples t-test for symbolic consumption. The mean score for males (M = 9.62, SD = 3.46) was slightly lower than the mean for females (M = 10.04, SD = 2.93), but the difference was not statistically significant, t(98) = -0.656, p = 0.514. The hypothesis that female teenagers would show a greater tendency towards symbolic consumption was therefore not supported.

Table 2. Impulse buying by gender (independent-samples t-test)

Measure	Male (n=55)	Female (n=45)	t	p
Impulse buying total score	5.53 ± 2.33	5.78 ± 2.22	-0.546	0.587

Table 2 shows that the male mean for impulse buying (M = 5.53, SD = 2.33) was slightly lower than the female mean (M = 5.78, SD = 2.22). This difference was not statistically significant, t(98) = -0.546, p = 0.587. The hypothesis that female teenagers would be more likely than male teenagers to engage in impulse buying was therefore not supported.

Table 3. Comparison consumption by gender (independent-samples t-test)

Measure	Male (n=55)	Female (n=45)	t	p
Comparison consumption total score	5.15 ± 2.51	5.09 ± 1.86	0.129	0.897

As shown in Table 3, the mean comparison-consumption score for males (M = 5.15, SD = 2.51) was close to that for females (M = 5.09, SD = 1.86). The difference was not statistically significant, Welch's t(97.07) = 0.129, p = 0.897. The hypothesis that male teenagers would be more likely than female teenagers to engage in comparison consumption was therefore not supported.

Across the full sample, symbolic consumption had a mean of 9.81 (SD = 3.22) out of 15, impulse buying had a mean of 5.64 (SD = 2.28) out of 10, and comparison consumption had a mean of 5.12 (SD = 2.23) out of 10. Symbolic consumption was above the midpoint of its scale, while impulse and comparison consumption were close to their respective midpoints.

4.2. Platform use and symbolic consumption

Table 4. Symbolic consumption across social media platforms (one-way ANOVA)

Symbolic-consumption score	Douyin	Xiaohongshu	Bilibili
3 (n=6)	1.67 ± 0.58	1.50 ± 0.71	1.00 ± 0.00
4 (n=2)	1.00 ± NA	NA	2.00 ± 1.41
5 (n=4)	3.00 ± 1.00	3.50 ± 0.71	1.67 ± 1.15
6 (n=2)	2.50 ± 0.71	4.00 ± 0.00	2.00 ± 1.41

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Table 4. (continued)

7 (n=4)	1.33 ± 0.58	2.33 ± 0.58	2.75 ± 1.26
8 (n=10)	1.78 ± 0.97	3.38 ± 0.74	3.00 ± 1.12
9 (n=25)	1.32 ± 0.57	3.25 ± 0.75	3.07 ± 1.03
10 (n=4)	2.00 ± 1.00	3.50 ± 0.71	2.00 ± 1.73
11 (n=12)	1.75 ± 0.62	3.40 ± 0.52	3.50 ± 0.71
12 (n=9)	2.13 ± 0.99	2.25 ± 1.04	3.13 ± 1.36
13 (n=8)	2.14 ± 1.07	2.50 ± 0.84	3.57 ± 0.79
14 (n=4)	1.75 ± 0.96	3.00 ± 1.41	3.33 ± 0.58
15 (n=10)	2.00 ± 1.22	2.83 ± 0.75	3.17 ± 1.17
ANOVA F	1.600	2.804	2.165
p	0.111	0.006**	0.025*

Note: Values are mean ± standard deviation unless otherwise indicated. NA, not available because no respondents were recorded in the group. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01.

Table 4 reports one-way ANOVA results for platform-use scores across levels of symbolic consumption. No statistically significant difference was found for Douyin use ($F = 1.600$, $p = 0.111$). Differences were statistically significant for Xiaohongshu use ($F = 2.804$, $p = 0.006$) and Bilibili use ($F = 2.165$, $p = 0.025$). These results indicate that use of Xiaohongshu and Bilibili varied across symbolic-consumption score groups, although the tests do not by themselves establish a positive linear relationship or causal direction.

Pearson correlations showed no significant linear association between symbolic consumption and Douyin use ($r = 0.086$, $p = 0.433$) or Xiaohongshu use ($r = -0.105$, $p = 0.415$). By contrast, symbolic consumption was positively correlated with Bilibili use ($r = 0.415$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, the evidence for a positive linear association applies only to Bilibili in this dataset.

4.3. Usage time and consumption

Table 5. Correlations between social media usage time and consumption measures

Consumption measure	r	95% CI	p	n
Symbolic consumption total score	0.223*	0.028 to 0.402	0.026	100
Impulse buying total score	0.322**	0.134 to 0.487	0.001	100
Comparison consumption total score	0.271**	0.079 to 0.444	0.006	100

Note: CI, confidence interval. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01.

Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the association between daily social media use and the three consumption measures. As shown in Table 5, daily usage time was positively correlated with symbolic consumption ($r = 0.223$, 95% CI [0.028, 0.402], $p = 0.026$), impulse buying ($r = 0.322$, 95% CI [0.134, 0.487], $p = 0.001$), and comparison consumption ($r = 0.271$, 95% CI [0.079, 0.444], $p = 0.006$).

The association was strongest for impulse buying, followed by comparison consumption and symbolic consumption. These results show that heavier social media use was associated with

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stronger consumption tendencies in the sample. Because the data are cross-sectional and self-reported, the correlations do not establish that increased usage caused these tendencies.

4.4. Usage time and financial behaviour

Table 6. Financial behaviour across social media usage-time groups (one-way ANOVA)

Financial behaviour measure	1.0(n=7)	2.0(n=13)	3.0(n=25)	4.0(n=8)	5.0(n=47)	F	p
Proportion of pocket money spent	1.14 ± 0.38	1.69 ± 0.85	1.32 ± 0.56	1.38 ± 0.52	1.53 ± 0.69	1.284	0.282
Instalment payments or overspending	1.00 ± 0.00	1.31 ± 0.48	1.20 ± 0.41	1.38 ± 0.52	1.23 ± 0.48	0.797	0.530
Financial planning	3.86 ± 1.46	3.23 ± 1.09	3.00 ± 1.19	3.00 ± 1.07	3.51 ± 1.20	1.268	0.288

Note: Values are mean ± standard deviation. Usage-time groups retain the questionnaire coding used in the analysis.

A one-way ANOVA examined whether financial behaviour differed across five daily social media usage-time groups. The outcomes were the proportion of allowance spent (Question 17), use of instalment payments or overspending (Question 18), and financial planning (Question 19).

No statistically significant group differences were found for the proportion of allowance spent, $F(4, 95) = 1.284$, $p = 0.282$; use of instalment payments or overspending, $F(4, 95) = 0.797$, $p = 0.530$; or financial planning, $F(4, 95) = 1.268$, $p = 0.288$. Heavier and lighter users therefore reported broadly similar financial behaviour despite the observed correlations between usage time and the three consumption measures.

5. Discussion

5.1. Why gender differences were not detected

The results showed no statistically significant gender differences in symbolic consumption, impulse buying, or comparison consumption among respondents aged 15-19. Previous research has suggested that emotional regulation and social pressures may contribute to stronger impulse purchasing among women [9], but much of that evidence comes from adult or Western samples and may not generalise to Chinese teenagers.

Several factors may explain the null findings. First, most respondents were still in secondary education and had limited disposable income. In this study, 43.8% reported monthly pocket money below RMB 500 and 59.0% reported less than RMB 1,000. Restricted spending power and parental control may limit opportunities for gender-specific preferences to appear in actual purchasing. Chaplin and John [16] found that parental socialisation can strongly shape adolescent materialism, which supports the possibility that family practices may outweigh gender differences in this age group.

Second, a collectivist cultural context may produce more similar consumption experiences for boys and girls because family expectations and contextual information receive greater weight [17]. Third, both genders encounter similar platform designs, influencer content, comparison cues, and scarcity messages. Social network use can affect conspicuous consumption through upward comparison [3, 11], while live-streaming commerce can create fear of missing out without necessarily operating differently by gender [14]. Finally, the analytic sample of 100 respondents may have lacked sufficient statistical power to detect small gender effects.

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5.2. Platform-specific associations

The platform results require careful interpretation. The ANOVA detected differences in Xiaohongshu and Bilibili use across symbolic-consumption score groups, whereas Pearson correlation identified a significant positive linear relationship only for Bilibili. The Xiaohongshu result may therefore reflect non-linear group variation rather than a consistent increase in use as symbolic consumption rises.

Xiaohongshu commonly presents curated images, reviews, and lifestyle recommendations. Repeated exposure to similar lifestyle and product content may reinforce preferences and connect products with identity or status. Bilibili contains longer product reviews, unboxing videos, collection showcases, and communities organised around shared interests. Within such communities, particular brands or products may signal membership in a subculture. This interpretation is consistent with the concept of sign value, in which products communicate social meaning beyond utility [18].

Douyin is heavily oriented towards short entertainment content and viral trends. Although commercial content is present, respondents may use the platform primarily for entertainment rather than identity construction. This could help explain the absence of a statistically significant association with symbolic consumption. These explanations remain tentative because the questionnaire measured self-reported platform use rather than exposure to specific content or recommendation algorithms.

5.3. Why usage time was associated with consumption

Daily social media use was positively correlated with all three consumption measures. One explanation is that frequent exposure to curated portrayals of peers and influencers increases opportunities for upward social comparison. Social comparison can contribute to materialistic values [11], while social network use can support conspicuous consumption through the same mechanism [3]. Luxury brands and aspirational products are also common in young people's social media content [12].

Influencers may intensify these effects by acting as trusted models for consumption. Lajnef [19] found that influencer trustworthiness was an important feature shaping teenagers' responses, including imitation and the search for belonging. Djafarova and Rushworth [20] likewise found that the perceived credibility, attractiveness, and expertise of online celebrities influenced purchase decisions among young female users. Greater usage time can increase exposure to these persuasive cues.

A second explanation concerns value formation. Repeated exposure to consumer content may normalise the idea that products express identity, social position, or emotional well-being [1]. This process may support symbolic consumption and increase sensitivity to what peers appear to own. A third explanation concerns platform design. Live-streaming commerce and promotional posts often use countdowns, limited-time offers, and fear-of-missing-out cues that reduce deliberation and can encourage impulse purchasing [14].

These mechanisms are consistent with the observed correlations, but they should not be interpreted as proven causal pathways. Teenagers with stronger consumption tendencies may also choose to spend more time on particular platforms, and unmeasured factors may influence both usage time and consumption.

Although usage time was positively associated with consumption tendencies, it was not significantly associated with the three financial-behaviour measures. Limited spending power may constrain the conversion of attitudes or impulses into serious financial consequences. The

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questionnaire reported that 24.76% of respondents received less than RMB 200 per month, while 23.81% received more than RMB 2,000.

Parental supervision may also serve as a protective factor. A total of 78.1% of respondents reported that they did not use instalment payments or overspend. Family expectations concerning moderation and self-control may limit access to credit and discourage excessive spending, particularly among minors. The role of culture in directing attention to social context may also shape these practices [17].

Respondents reported a mean financial-planning score of 3.3 out of 5, indicating a moderate level of planning. Parental guidance and limited resources may therefore provide some control even when social media increases symbolic or impulsive purchasing tendencies. However, the survey's self-report measures may understate socially undesirable behaviour, and the cross-sectional design cannot determine whether financial consequences emerge over time.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how social media relates to symbolic consumption, impulse buying, and comparison consumption among Chinese teenagers. Daily usage time was positively correlated with all three measures, with the strongest association found for impulse buying. Symbolic consumption also showed platform-specific variation, although only Bilibili use had a significant positive linear correlation with the symbolic-consumption score.

No statistically significant gender differences were found for any of the three consumption measures. In addition, usage time was not significantly associated with the proportion of allowance spent, instalment use or overspending, or financial planning. The findings therefore suggest that social media exposure is linked more clearly to consumption attitudes and tendencies than to problematic financial behaviour in this sample. The results should be interpreted in light of the small, self-reported, cross-sectional sample. Even so, they indicate that parents, educators, and researchers should consider both platform-specific content and time spent on social media when examining adolescent consumer behaviour.

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