

Cultural Capital Conversion in National Trend Consumption and Youth Identity Construction

--A Sociological Analysis Based on Bourdieu's Theory

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Abstract

Within the dual contexts of cultural confidence strategy and the transformation of consumer society, domestic trend consumption has evolved from a marginal subcultural phenomenon into a cultural practice with broad social influence. This article employs Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital as its core analytical framework. Through in-depth interviews with Gen Z consumers of domestic trend brands, participant observation, and textual content analysis, it systematically elucidates how consumption behavior functions as a dynamic field for the accumulation, conversion, and construction of cultural capital and identity. Research reveals that domestic trend consumption achieves multidimensional conversion of economic capital into cultural capital through the reconstruction of symbolic power, the practice of subcultural segmentation, and the reproduction of value narratives. This process shapes young people's identity maps within the tensions between "tradition" and "modernity," as well as "localization" and "globalization." This phenomenon not only represents a local response to the cultural homogenization of globalization, but also reveals a new paradigm of cultural capital competition within consumer society and the logic of identity construction among youth groups.

Keywords

Domestic Trend Consumption; Cultural Capital; Identity; Generation Z; Bourdieu.

1. The Problem at Hand: The Cultural Power Logic Behind Consumer Phenomena

1.1. The Real Picture: The Panoramic Rise of Domestic Trend Consumption

From the Eastern aesthetic expression showcased at Li Ning's fashion week runway to the cross-industry breakthrough of the Palace Museum's cultural and creative product "My Imperial Hot Pot"; From Hua xizi's "carved lipstick" redefining Chinese beauty narratives to Hongxing'erke's "wild consumption" sparking a wave of national brand pride, In recent years, the "national trend" has transcended the realm of mere consumption, evolving into a cultural movement that spans multiple sectors including apparel, cosmetics, cultural and creative industries, dining, and technology. According to iiMedia Research's "2024 Domestic Trend Consumption Development White Paper," Among the core consumer base of the national trend, youth aged 18-25 account for 68%. Their consumption behavior exhibits distinct characteristics: they not only pursue the material attributes of "Made in China" but also place greater emphasis on the cultural expression of "Chinese symbols"--commuting in modernized Han-fu, decorating workstations with national-chic blind boxes, and hosting "Hanfu Book Clubs" at new Chinese-style tea shops. Through their daily consumption practices, young people embed traditional elements into modern life scenarios, thereby completing the cultural coding of their "self-identity."

1.2. Theoretical Perplexity: How Does Consumption Become a Mechanism for Producing Cultural Capital?

In The Forms of Capital, Bourdieu points out that cultural capital functions as a "concretized, embodied knowledge and disposition"^[1], accumulated through pathways such as family inheritance, educational attainment, and social practice, and transformed within social contexts into power resources that distinguish group status. As a practice that combines economic and cultural attributes, national trend consumption is essentially a process through which young people acquire cultural capital by reconstructing cultural symbols amid the clash between globalization and localization. However, existing research has largely focused on the marketing models or symbolic representations of the national trend, lacking a deep analysis of its social identity-building mechanisms from the perspective of "cultural capital conversion." This paper attempts to answer:

How does cultural capital manifest itself in the context of domestic trend consumption?

How does consumer behavior drive the conversion of economic capital into cultural capital?

How does this capital conversion shape the identity structures of youth groups?

2. Theoretical Framework: A Three-Dimensional Analysis of Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital

2.1. Three Forms of Cultural Capital: The Practice Chain from Embodiment to Institutionalization

Bourdieu divides cultural capital into three interrelated forms:

2.1.1. Embodied Form:

The cultural capabilities attached to an individual's body, such as language style, aesthetic taste, and behavioral habits, possess a stability of being "internalized in the heart", and are acquired through family upbringing and early socialization.

2.1.2. Objectified Form:

Cultural capital manifested through material carriers, such as books, artworks, clothing, and artifacts, derives its value from the symbolic meaning conferred by social consensus.

2.1.3. Institutionalized Form:

Cultural capital certified through social institutions, including academic credentials, professional qualifications, and cultural awards, carries distinct markers of social hierarchy.

2.2. The Logic of Capital Transformation in Consumption Practices: The Core Role of Symbolic Power

Consumption, as an intermediary act connecting individuals and society, is essentially a process of possessing, displaying, and interpreting objectified cultural capital, such as the design symbols, brand narratives, and usage scenarios of domestic trend products. Young people achieve capital conversion through the following pathways:

2.2.1. Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Symbols:

By extracting traditional elements from their native cultural contexts and infusing them with contemporary design language, we create a distinct "local aesthetic capital" that stands apart from Western trends.

2.2.2. Habitual Matching and Differentiation:

Consumer behavior interacts with individual embodied cultural capital, such as aesthetic preferences and cultural cognition, reinforcing cultural identity within specific subcultures

through the selection of particular domestic trend products while simultaneously distinguishing oneself from other groups^[2].

2.2.3. Institutional Legitimacy Empowerment:

When consumption practices are incorporated into mainstream cultural discourse, such as "cultural confidence" and "intangible cultural heritage preservation", the cultural capital they embody gains institutional recognition, thereby transforming into institutionalized capital that carries social prestige.

3. Cultural Capital Practices in National Trend Consumption: An Empirical Analysis Based on Three Dimensions

3.1. Symbolic Dimension: Modern Reinterpretation of Traditional Elements and Capital Appreciation

3.1.1. Deconstructing the Meaning from "Cultural Heritage" to "Consumer Symbol"

Traditional attire, artifacts, and patterns, as objectified cultural capital, fundamentally serve to preserve historical memory and foster collective identity. In the consumption of domestic trends, young people decontextualize these elements, breaking them down into freely combinable symbolic units--The "horse-face" silhouette of the skirt no longer relates to ancient ceremonial attire, but has become a design term for the skirt's hemline shape;The flowing ribbon patterns of Dunhuang flying apsaras have been abstracted into printed designs and applied to modern items such as hoodies and phone cases. This deconstruction does not negate tradition, but rather creates new spaces of meaning through "semiotic appropriation." As Respondent A (23, Han-fu designer) put it: "We're not replicating ancient times, but 'translating' tradition through a contemporary lens to make young people think 'our ancestors' stuff is cool."

3.1.2. Symbolic Stratification: The Scarcity Construction of Cultural Capital

The symbolic value within domestic trend consumption exhibits significant stratification, forming distinct tiers of capital^[3]. Taking Han-fu consumption as an example, it can be divided into three levels:

Mass Market Layer: Purchases modified Han-inspired apparel, such as Han-inspired dresses, new Chinese-style jackets, prioritizing practicality in everyday wear, with cultural capital accumulation remaining at the level of "symbolic ownership";

Core Layer: Collect traditional-style Han-fu, such as Ming-style ma face skirts and Tang-style high-waisted blouses, master knowledge of fabric craftsmanship and the meanings of patterns, for instance, the sea and river waves pattern symbolizes the eternal stability of the country, and enhance one's influence within the circle through "cultural research";

Elite Layer: Engaging in the restoration of Han-fu styles, the redesign of traditional patterns, and even spearheading "Han-fu cultural revival" initiatives, elevating personal consumption into cultural practice while accumulating institutionalized cultural capital with societal influence.

This stratification is essentially what Bourdieu refers to as "the social critique of taste judgments"--The core and elite strata establish cultural barriers distinct from the masses through their "specialized interpretation" of symbolic details, thereby consolidating their capital advantages.

3.2. Circular Dimension: The Segmentation Function of Consumption Practices and Capital Circulation

3.2.1. Subcultural Circles: The "Private Arena" of Cultural Capital

Within subcultures like Han-fu enthusiasts, domestic animation fans, and intangible cultural heritage craft circles, consumption patterns have become a "cultural code" for identity validation. Take the blind box collecting community as an example: seasoned collectors must grasp the cultural context behind IPs, such as the historical origins of certain domestic trend blind box characters or the creative vision of the design team, the scarcity levels of limited editions, such as the appearance probability of "hidden variants" and the premium patterns in the secondary market, and even participation in internal "historical verification debates" within the community, such as whether the design of a certain Han-fu blind box accurately reflects the historical original. This knowledge constitutes the "tacit cultural capital" within the circle^[4], forming a barrier to entry. As stated by Respondent B (25, seasoned blind box collector): "Those unfamiliar with the 'Molly Zodiac Series hidden editions' and their Greek mythology references will struggle to truly integrate into the core player community. No matter how many blind boxes they buy, they'll remain mere 'whales'."

3.2.2. The Fluidity of Social Boundaries: Capital Transformation from Segregation to Assimilation

The cultural capital within subcultural circles does not exist in isolation; rather, it achieves "breaking out of the circle" and value transformation through media dissemination:^[5]

Content Creation: Community members publish domestic trend consumption content on short-video platforms, such as Han-fu styling tutorials, blind box unboxing reviews, and intangible cultural heritage crafting processes, transforming specialized knowledge within niche communities into "cultural display capital" accessible to the general public. Data shows that in 2024, videos related to "national trend" on Bi-li-bi-li garnered over 5 billion views, with 70% of the content created by ordinary users.

Commercial Integration: Brands collaborate with niche KOLs, like inviting Han-fu-style "historical accuracy bloggers" as design consultants or enlisting top artists from the domestic animation community for blind box IP creation to transform niche cultural capital into brand premium value. For example, a domestic beauty brand collaborated with an intangible cultural heritage inheritor to launch a "Peacock Feather Eye Shadow Palette," leveraging the inheritor's professional reputation within the intangible cultural heritage community to enhance the product's cultural value.

Institutional Recognition: Certain subcultural capital has gained official endorsement, such as the establishment of "Han-fu Experience Bases" in cities like Chengdu and Hangzhou. These initiatives integrate Han-fu consumption into urban cultural tourism promotion systems, transforming subcultural practices into institutionalized capital with public relevance.

This fluidity embodies Bourdieu's "field theory"—the circulation and conversion of cultural capital across different fields, such as subcultural fields, commercial fields and institutional fields is essentially a process of restructuring power relations.

3.3. Value Dimension: The Elevation of Meaning in Consumption Behavior and the Legitimization of Capital

3.3.1. The Discourse Construction from "Individual Choice" to "Collective Narrative"

National trend consumption is often embedded within mainstream discourses such as "cultural confidence" and "national rejuvenation," endowing individual consumption behaviors with social significance that transcends the material level. In the Hongxing'erke's "wild consumption" incident, consumers' purchasing behavior was interpreted by the media as "supporting domestic brands" and "resisting Western cultural hegemony," transforming

ordinary sneakers into material carriers of "national spirit." This discourse construction endows consumer behavior with moral legitimacy——As stated by Respondent C (22 years old, domestic beauty brand user): "Before, buying imported cosmetics felt like pursuing quality. Now, using Hua xi zi makes me feel like I'm 'proving myself worthy of Chinese makeup.' This sense of purpose makes the purchase feel more meaningful."^[6]

3.3.2. Identity Construction in Intergenerational Value Conflicts

Middle-aged and elderly groups tend to perceive domestic trends as "retro presentations of traditional elements", such as Tang-style clothing, Chinese knots, and double-happiness motifs, while Gen Z favors "modern deconstructions of traditional elements." This cognitive disparity essentially reflects a breakdown in the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital. The cultural capital of the older generation is rooted in their mastery of traditional customs and collective memory, while the cultural capital of the younger generation relies on their ability to integrate traditional symbols with modern media across different domains. This rupture has transformed domestic trend consumption into a tool for young people to construct "generational distinctions". Through their consumption practices, they assert, "Our traditions are not the traditions you remember." By reconstructing cultural symbols, they define their identity as "new youth."^[7]

3.3.3. Cultural Identity Negotiation in the Context of Globalization

From the perspective of Bourdieu's "global field," the value of cultural capital depends on its scarcity within specific fields. The rise of domestic trend consumption essentially reflects young people accumulating scarce capital by tapping into local cultural resources within a global arena dominated by Western culture. For example, Li-Ning's 2024 Paris Fashion Week collection fused Miao ethnic silver ornamentation with futuristic fabrics, earning professional recognition from the international fashion community while resonating domestically as a testament to "Chinese design going global." This "mutual empowerment" allows young people to avoid extreme choices between "foreign worship" and "xenophobia." Instead, through their consumption practices, they demonstrate that "tradition can be trendy, and local can be fashionable," thereby achieving identity negotiation amid the clash between globalization and localization.

4. The Tension Structure of Identity: The Identificatory Effects of Cultural Capital Conversion

4.1. The Dual Identity Dilemma of "Traditionalism" and "Modernity"

The essence of domestic trend consumption lies in young people's pursuit of identity anchors within the process of cultural modernity. They yearn to assert their cultural distinctiveness through traditional symbols such as Han-fu and intangible cultural heritage crafts, while simultaneously needing to leverage modern consumer logic, including brand marketing, influencer economy, and digital technology to integrate into mainstream society. This contradiction leads to the concretization of identity tension:

Hardcore enthusiasts' "orthodoxy anxiety": Some core members of the Han-fu community insist on "restoring traditional forms," dismissing modified Han-fu designs as "deviations from tradition that desecrate culture." Their identity is deeply tied to the role of "cultural orthodoxy defenders."

The "symbolic play mentality" of mass consumers: More young people view domestic trends as "fashion labels," shifting their consumption motivation from "cultural identification" to "individual expression." After wearing Han-fu for photos and posting them on social media, they switch back to everyday attire. When purchasing domestic trend blind boxes, they focus more on the exterior design than the cultural significance. As sociologist Wang Ning points out: "In a

consumer society, symbolic value often takes precedence over practical and cultural value, leading to superficial identity construction."^[8]

4.2. The Paradox of "Cultural Capital Segregation" and "Social Integration"

While creating cultural capital barriers, the domestic trend consumer circle also promotes social integration through media dissemination:

Differentiation: The core circle forms a "cultural elite" group through specialized knowledge and consumption barriers, such as high-priced limited editions and scarce experiential opportunities, maintaining distance from the general consumer base to reinforce its distinctiveness.

Integration: The widespread adoption of national trend symbols by the general public, such as wearing national trend pins and using new Chinese-style phone wallpapers, has allowed symbols originally belonging to subcultures to permeate mainstream life, forming a cultural consensus of "national trends embraced by all." This paradox embodies Bourdieu's "dialectic of distinction and identification"--Social circles gain distinctiveness through differentiation and achieve social recognition through symbolic diffusion, essentially representing the dynamic equilibrium of cultural capital across different spheres.^[9]

4.3. The conflict between instrumental rationality and value rationality in identity construction

Young consumers often experience motivational conflicts when engaging with domestic trend consumption: on one hand, they view consumption as a tool to acquire cultural capital and elevate social status, such as gaining attention on social media by wearing limited-edition domestic trend apparel; On the other hand, there is an inner desire for consumption to embody authentic cultural identity and emotional belonging, such as hoping to "connect with tradition" through participating in intangible cultural heritage craft experiences. This conflict was particularly evident in the in-depth interviews: Respondent D (24, a collector of domestic fashion trends) candidly admitted, "Sometimes I buy domestic fashion items just for the sake of taking good photos, but when I see live streams by intangible cultural heritage inheritors, I feel I should genuinely understand the culture behind them rather than just treating them as 'photo props'."^[10]

5. Conclusion and Reflection

5.1. Research Findings: Consumption Practices as a New Paradigm for the Production of Cultural Capital

The essence of domestic trend consumption lies in its function as a "cultural practice space" where young people construct their identity within consumer society. Its core logic involves the multidimensional conversion of economic capital into cultural capital through the production, dissemination, and consumption of cultural symbols:

5.1.1. Symbolic Level:

Transforming traditional elements into consumable cultural capital, endowing them with fashionable scarcity through modern design to form "indigenous symbolic capital" distinct from Western trends;

5.1.2. Circle Level:

Using consumption behavior as the "entry threshold" and "social currency" for cultural capital, it creates distinctions within subcultural circles while enabling the social circulation of capital through media dissemination.

5.1.3. Value Level:

By leveraging mainstream discourses such as "cultural confidence," consumption behaviors are elevated to a social responsibility of "cultural inheritance," thereby enhancing the social legitimacy and emotional resonance of cultural capital.

5.2. Theoretical Extension: The Contemporary Applicability of Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital

This study further validates and extends the explanatory power of Bourdieu's theory:

5.2.1. The Mediatization of Capital Conversion:

Digital media has become the core vehicle for producing and disseminating cultural capital, disrupting the traditional "family-education" pathway for capital inheritance. This enables young people to rapidly accumulate cultural capital through independent content creation.

5.2.2. The fluidity of identity construction:

Cultural capital no longer relies on stable social institutions but is dynamically constructed through ephemeral consumption practices, such as purchasing a particular domestic trend product or participating in a cultural event, reflecting the "liquid" nature of identity in a consumer society.

5.2.3. 5.2.3. Intervention in the Global Arena:

The valuation of cultural capital must incorporate a global comparative perspective. The essence of youth consumption of domestic trends lies in their practice of reclaiming cultural discourse power within a "Western-dominated" global arena through the reinvention of indigenous cultural resources.

5.3. Reality-Based Insights: Sustainable Development Pathways for Domestic Trend Consumption

5.3.1. Avoid Symbolic Emptiness:

Guard against the national trend becoming a commercial game of "piling on traditional elements," and shift consumption from "symbolic consumption" to "meaningful consumption." For instance, brands can collaborate with scholars to develop "cultural interpretation manuals" to guide consumers in understanding the cultural significance behind products.

5.3.2. Balancing Segregation and Integration:

Subcultural communities must strike a balance between preserving their distinctiveness and fostering broader societal engagement. For instance, they can lower participation barriers through "lightweight experiences" while retaining core cultural values.

5.3.3. Strengthen Value Recognition:

Governments and social institutions can integrate consumer behavior with social responsibility through initiatives combining "national trend culture with public issues", like leveraging national trend culture to support rural revitalization or public welfare projects for intangible cultural heritage protection, thereby enhancing the social value depth of national trend culture.

5.4. Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study focuses on urban youth populations, with samples exhibiting geographical and class biases. Future research may extend to county-level youth and ethnic minority youth groups to analyze variations in the capital conversion of domestic trend consumption across different social contexts; Furthermore, with the emergence of new technologies such as the metaverse and AI-generated content, how virtual space consumption of domestic trends, such as digital Han-fu and virtual intangible cultural heritage experiences, influences the construction of cultural capital warrants further investigation.

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