

DIFFERENCES IN HAPPINESS OF CONSUMPTION TYPES IN SOCIAL SCENES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTION: THEORETICAL DEBATE AND INTEGRATION OF SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION AND EXPERIENTIAL CONSUMPTION

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Abstract: In the context of consumption upgrade, happiness has become a core issue in consumer behavior research. Existing studies emphasize the positive effects of experiential consumption on happiness but overlook the value of symbolic consumption in identity construction and social recognition through symbolic transmission, and lack an examination of the dynamics of real social scenarios. This paper, based on symbolic interactionism, integrates perspectives from psychology, sociology, and marketing to compare the mechanisms by which symbolic consumption and experiential consumption affect happiness, revealing the moderating effects of social scenarios, cultural norms, and individual traits. The study finds that symbolic consumption achieves a "silent declaration of identity" through the visibility of material symbols (such as luxury goods), but its happiness is easily constrained by "vanity stigma" and cultural norms; experiential consumption relies on narrative sharing and emotional resonance, offering advantages in high-social-interaction settings, yet it is limited by individual expression capabilities and opportunities for sharing. The effects of these two types of consumption are complementary in online-offline integrated scenarios, with cultural differences (such as collectivism versus individualism) and self-construction types (independent versus dependent) further moderating their happiness output. The study calls for attention to the complexity of symbolic interactions in consumer behavior and proposes a three-dimensional integrated model of "consumption type—symbolic interaction—happiness," providing a theoretical framework for future exploration of virtual-real integration scenarios, deepening the classification of symbolic consumption, and optimizing paradigms for measuring happiness.

Keywords: Symbolic interactionism; Symbolic consumption; Experiential consumption; Happiness

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Definition of core concepts

1.1.1 Symbolic consumption

Symbolic consumption refers to the act of consumers conveying symbolic information such as identity, status, and values through the purchase and use of goods or services with specific social significance [1]. For example, luxury items, branded clothing, or limited-edition products not only meet functional needs but also serve as tools for representing social identity. The core characteristic lies in the symbolic value carried by these goods (such as social recognition and class distinction), rather than their mere utility.

1.1.2 Experience consumption

Experiential consumption refers to consumer behavior oriented towards fulfilling emotional, memory, or spiritual needs, with its value stemming from the subjective experience during participation (such as travel, concerts, course learning) [2]. Unlike symbolic consumption, the core of experiential consumption lies in satisfying intrinsic motivations (such as personal growth, social connections), and reinforcing its social value through narrative sharing (such as travel stories) [3].

1.1.3 Happiness

Happiness in consumption research usually includes two dimensions of subjective happiness (life satisfaction, positive emotion) and social happiness (sense of belonging, social identity) [4]. Its formation not only depends on the satisfaction of personal needs, but also is influenced by the feedback of others in social interaction.

1.1.4 Symbolic interaction characteristics of social scenes

In social scenarios, consumer behavior is essentially a process of symbolic interaction: Identity Display: conveying self-concepts (such as "who I am") through consumption symbols (like brands, behaviors); Social Recognition: interpretations of these symbols form social evaluations of consumers (such as respect, jealousy); Dynamic Negotiation: the meaning of symbols is reconstructed in response to changing interactive contexts (online/offline) and cultural backgrounds (collectivism/individualism).

2 THEORETICAL DIVERGENCE BETWEEN CONSUMPTION TYPES AND HAPPINESS

2.1 Consensus on the advantages of experiential consumption

There is a broad consensus on the positive impact of experience consumption on happiness, and its mechanism can be unfolded from the following dimensions:

2.1.1 Satisfaction of intrinsic motivation

Based on self-determination theory [5], experiential consumption stimulates lasting happiness by satisfying three psychological needs: autonomy (such as free exploration during travel), competence (such as the sense of achievement in learning new skills), and belonging (such as spending time with friends and family)[6].

Emotional connection effect: Experiential consumption is often accompanied by strong emotional memories (such as wedding, graduation trip), and through the time discounting effect, its positive emotions are continuously strengthened over time [7].

2.1.2 High conversation value and social sharing effect

Conversation Value: Experiential consumption, due to its narrative nature (such as "I saw the aurora at the South Pole"), naturally serves as a social topic, facilitating interpersonal interaction [8]. Studies show that participants who share their experiences of experiential consumption are more likely to be perceived as "interesting" and "trustworthy" by others [3].

Social bonding enhancement: Sharing behaviors in experiential consumption can trigger empathetic responses (such as emotional resonance in listeners), thereby strengthening consumers' sense of social belonging [2]. For example, participants in concerts who shared live videos on social media experienced significantly greater increases in happiness compared to those who did not share [9].

2.2 Controversy of Symbolic Consumption

There are significant theoretical differences on the impact of symbolic consumption on happiness, and the core of the controversy lies in the "double-edged sword effect" of symbolic value:

2.2.1 Positive propositions of symbolic value theory

Identity construction tools: Belk proposed the theory of "extended self", which believed that symbolic consumption (such as wearing a Rolex watch) helped consumers to construct social identity (such as "successful people") through the materialization of identity symbols (materialized identity), so as to enhance self-esteem and social identity[10].

Class segregation function: Bourdieu's "cultural capital" theory points out that luxury goods or niche cultural symbols (such as limited edition sneakers) can be used as class markers, which strengthen the sense of belonging within the group through symbolic exclusion and indirectly improve happiness.

2.2.2 Critical view: the trap of materialistic happiness

The negative impact of materialism: Kasser's empirical research shows that consumers who overly rely on material symbols to define their self-worth (such as "gaining recognition from others through luxury goods") have lower subjective well-being. This tendency is closely related to social comparison anxiety (such as "others have more than me") and goal alienation (such as "being in debt for symbolic consumption").

2.2.3 Social risks and stigmatization

Showy Stigmatization: In collectivist culture, the explicit display of symbolic consumption (such as luxury cars) is easily seen as "showy", which can lead to jealousy or negative evaluation from others and weaken consumers' social happiness [11].

Symbolic rigidity: The symbolic meaning of symbolic consumption is scene-dependent. For example, wearing a famous watch in the workplace may convey a "professional" image, but it may be regarded as "out of place" in public welfare activities, leading to identity conflict[12].

3 THE EXPLANATORY PATH OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

3.1 Symbolic Transmission Mechanism

Symbolic interactionism holds that consumption behavior is essentially a process of the production and exchange of symbolic meanings. Consumers convey their self-concept and social identity to others by selecting specific goods or services, while receivers interpret and respond to these choices based on the symbolic meanings. There are significant differences in the symbolic transmission mechanisms of the two types of consumption:

3.1.1 Symbolic consumption: silent declaration of identity

The Directness of Symbols: Symbolic consumption (such as luxury goods, famous cars, limited-edition sneakers) achieves immediate identity transmission through the visibility of material symbols (such as brand logos, unique designs). For example, wearing a Rolex watch requires no verbal explanation; its symbolic value (wealth, success) has been solidified in social consensus, forming a "silent declaration of identity".

Stability and class segregation of symbols: Such symbols are often bound to specific social classes, and their meanings

are institutionalized in long-term cultural practices. For example, Hermes platinum bag is not only a luxury product, but also regarded as an identity symbol of "elite class", whose symbolic meaning has low interpretation ambiguity.

3.1.2 Experiential consumption: narrative social dependence

The necessity of language sharing: The symbolic value of experience consumption (such as travel, concerts) needs to be conveyed through narrative language. For example, consumers need to actively describe "the experience of chasing the aurora in Iceland" so that others can understand the meaning behind it (such as the spirit of adventure, aesthetic taste) [13].

Limitations of social opportunities:

Sharing threshold: The symbolic transmission of experience consumption depends on the opportunity of dialogue in social scenes. If there is no opportunity to share (such as the solitary person has no social object), its symbolic value may not be fully realized [3].

Differences in narrative ability: Individuals' expression skills affect the effect of symbolic transmission. Those who are not good at speaking may be unable to effectively convey the deep meaning of experience, which weakens the happiness effect [8].

3.2 The Moderating Effect of Social Scenarios

The social scene significantly moderates the happiness effect of the two types of consumption through the difference of symbolic visibility and interaction opportunities:

3.2.1 No sharing scenario: the symbolic visibility of consumption is dominant

Passive Display of Symbols: In scenarios lacking opportunities for active sharing (such as daily commuting and public settings), visible symbols of symbolic consumption (like wearing luxury brands) can still convey identity information through non-verbal interactions. For example, wearing a high-end watch in the workplace can silently communicate professionalism and economic strength without verbal explanation.

Low interaction cost: In this kind of scenario, the symbolic transmission efficiency of symbolic consumption is higher because it depends on the persistence of material carriers (such as clothing and accessories are always visible), while experiential consumption depends on the chance of occasional dialogue.

3.2.2 High sharing scenario: the narrative advantage of experience consumption is highlighted

Empathy Connection Reinforcement: In social-dense settings (such as friend gatherings, social media), sharing narratives about experiential consumption can trigger empathetic responses from listeners, fostering emotional resonance. For example, recounting the experience of "hiking alone in Tibet" might elicit admiration for courage and freedom, enhancing consumers' sense of social identity [2].

Accumulation of social capital: Experiential consumption stories are more likely to be forwarded or liked, and then converted into digital social capital (such as weibo likes and circle of friends interaction). Studies show that users who share experiential consumption on social media have a 1.5 times increase in happiness compared with those who share symbolic consumption [9].

3.2.3 Scene hybridity: symbolic interaction between online and offline

The complementarity of online visibility and offline narrative: for example, after consumers buy trendy clothing (symbolic consumption), they post photos of their outfits on social media (online symbol display), and tell the brand story in offline parties (experiential narrative), forming cross-scene symbol reinforcement.

Online scenes may amplify the risk of "showing off" symbolic consumption (such as negative comments from anonymous users); the narrative of experiential consumption can reduce language dependence and expand the scope of symbol transmission through visual expression on short video platforms (such as TikTok).

3.3 The Moderating Effect of Cultural Differences

The cultural sensitivity of the interactive path of symbols further intensifies the effect difference between the two types of consumption:

3.3.1 Collectivist culture (e.g., China, Japan)

Symbolic consumption is more likely to trigger "face competition", and symbolic display should conform to group norms (such as "low-key luxury"); sharing of experiential consumption should avoid "ego-centered" narrative, and emphasize collective values (such as "family travel" is more acceptable than "personal adventure").

3.3.2 Individualistic culture (such as the United States and Germany):

Symbolic consumption, characterized by individual expression (such as tattoos and niche brands), is more encouraged; the narrative of "unique experiences" in experiential consumption (like extreme sports) tends to receive positive feedback [14]. Symbolic consumption relies on the visibility and institutionalized meaning of material symbols, which holds an advantage in non-sharing scenarios but is constrained by cultural norms and the purity of motives. Experiential consumption achieves symbolic transmission through narrative sharing and emotional resonance, showing significant effects in high-sharing scenarios, yet it depends on individuals' social skills and platform characteristics.

4 THEORETICAL DEBATE AND INTEGRATION

4.1 Key Points of Contention

There are three core controversies in the existing research on the influence mechanism of symbolic consumption and experiential consumption on happiness, which essentially reflects the complexity and context-dependence of consumer behavior from the perspective of symbolic interactionism:

Controversy 1: The persistence of symbols — the difference between "time discounting" of substances and experiences

Supporters argue that symbolic consumption (such as luxury goods and collectibles) continuously conveys identity value through the enduring presence of material symbols (like wearing branded watches or displaying artworks), with its happiness effect decaying more slowly over time [15]. For example, a tracking study found that consumers' self-esteem after purchasing luxury goods remained stable for six months [16]. The visibility and social consensus of material symbols (such as the institutionalization of brand status) make their significance less likely to fade over time. Critics point out that the happiness derived from experiential consumption (such as travel and concerts) relies on the narrative reconstruction of emotional memories. Although memories may be "rosy-filtered" (rosy retrospection) over time, their effects are influenced by sharing frequency — if there is a lack of subsequent social interaction, the rate of happiness decay may be faster than that of symbolic consumption [7]. Which is more enduring: the "material solidification" of symbols or the "narrative fluidity" of memories?

Controversy 2: Cultural differences — The "show-off stigma" trap in collectivism

In collectivist cultures such as East Asia and Latin America, symbolic consumption is often stigmatized as "showboating," challenging the norms of group harmony [14]. For instance, Chinese consumers must carefully balance the desire for status enhancement with the risk of jealousy when purchasing luxury cars [16]. In collectivist cultures, the happiness effect of symbolic consumption may be offset by social risks, while experiential consumption (such as family trips) is more readily accepted due to its alignment with the narrative of "collective interest." In individualist cultures like those in Europe and America, symbolic consumption is seen as a right to express personal identity, and society has a higher tolerance for "showboating" [12]. For example, buying a niche designer brand in the United States is viewed as an extension of one's unique self rather than a tool for comparison. Does the cultural construction of symbolic meaning determine the priority of happiness derived from different types of consumption?

Controversy 3: The moderating effect of individual traits — self-construction

Independent individuals (such as North American consumers) highlight their uniqueness through differentiated symbols (such as limited editions and niche brands), with their happiness often stemming from symbolic consumption as an identity statement. Experiments show that after purchasing symbolic products, the clarity of self-concept significantly increases for such consumers [17]. Dependent individuals (such as East Asian consumers) tend to strengthen relational bonds through experiential consumption (such as family gatherings and group travel), with their happiness relying on social recognition rather than personal expression. Research indicates that after sharing experiential experiences, dependent consumers experience twice the increase in a sense of belonging compared to independent individuals [9]. Does self-construction type serve as a prerequisite for consumption choices?

4.2 Integration Framework: Three-Dimensional Model of "Consumption Type-Symbolic Interaction-Happiness"

In order to solve the above disputes, this paper puts forward an integrative theoretical framework (see Table 1), which emphasizes that the impact of consumption type on happiness needs to be realized through the process of symbolic interaction, and is subject to the triple regulation of scene, culture and individual characteristics:

Table 1 Integrated Model of Consumption Type, Symbolic Interaction and Happiness

Core dimensions of the model	
Consumer type dimension	
Symbolic consumption	dependence on the visibility and institutionalized meaning of material symbols;
Experience consumption	convey symbolic value through narrative sharing and emotional resonance.
The interactive process of symbols	
Identity display	visibility of symbols (such as luxury Logo) or narrative (such as travel story);
Social feedback	the interpretation of symbols by others (such as respect, jealousy) and interactive behaviors (such as likes, avoidance).
Happiness output	
Subjective well-being	self-worth, positive emotions;
Social well-being	a sense of belonging, social identity.
Mechanism of adjustment variable	
Scene adjustment	
No sharing scenario	the symbolic visibility of consumption leads to happiness (such as the display of famous watches in the workplace);
High sharing scenarios	Experiences that are more narrative are more likely to receive positive feedback (such as social media travel logs).

Cultural regulation	
Collectivism culture	the social risk of symbolic consumption increases, and the collective narrative advantage of experiential consumption is highlighted
Individualistic culture	the expression of individuality in symbolic consumption is more free, and the unique narrative of experience consumption is more highly valued.
Individual trait regulation	
Independent self-construction	symbolic consumption enhances the clarity of self-concept through differentiated symbols
Interdependent self-construction	experiential consumption enhances social belonging through relational connection.

5 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Explore the New Form of Symbol Interaction in the Online and Offline Integration Scenario

With the penetration of digital technology, the integration of virtual and real consumption scenarios is reconstructing the path of symbolic interaction. Future research needs to focus on the following issues:

Visibility and identity construction of virtual symbols

Social Media Check-in Mechanism: When users share their consumption experiences on online platforms (such as Instagram, Xiaohongshu), they convey identity through visual symbols (like filters, tags) and narrative labels (such as "MinimalistLife" "LuxuryTravel"). How can this behavior integrate the "material symbols" of symbolic consumption with the "narrative symbols" of experiential consumption to form a composite identity display?

How do the consumption behaviors of virtual goods in the metaverse (such as NFTs, such as virtual clothing and digital art) and the metaverse space (such as Decentraland) redefine "identity declaration" through cross-scene symbol liquidity (such as wearing a virtual image Gucci NFT to enter offline activities)? Does such a symbol weaken the necessity of material carriers?

5.2 Deepen the Classification Study of Symbolic Consumption

Symbolic consumption is not a single category, and the internal differences of its impact on happiness need to be refined:

The Contrast Between Luxury Goods and Subcultural Symbols: Relying on brand history and class consensus (such as Hermes' "elite symbol"), their happiness effects are more stable but vulnerable to materialism criticism. For subcultural groups like trendy brands and figurines, their symbolic meanings stem from internal group codes (such as the term "otaku"), which may enhance group happiness by resisting mainstream culture. It needs to be verified: Do niche symbols better meet the "rebellious identity" needs of Generation Z?

The Moral Symbolization of Sustainable Consumption: Purchasing eco-friendly products (such as organic food and recycled material clothing) is seen as a symbol of "moral identity." However, the symbolic transmission faces dual challenges: Greenwashing Risk: False advertising by companies can distort the symbolic meaning, eroding consumer trust (e.g., "greenwashing"); Moral Superiority Trap: Sustainable consumption may be interpreted as "moral preaching," causing others to feel repulsed (e.g., "the arrogance of vegetarians") [18].

Symbolic Upgrade of Functional Products: Traditional functional products (such as home appliances and stationery) are endowed with "lifestyle symbols" through design upgrades (like Muji's minimalist aesthetics). The research needs to address: How do these "de-branding" symbols balance function and meaning? Does their happiness effect depend on specific cultural contexts (such as Japanese "wabi-sabi" aesthetics vs. Western pragmatism)?

5.3 Critical Reflection on the Measurement Paradigm of "Happiness"

Most existing studies rely on subjective well-being scales (such as SWLS), but their limitations call for a multidimensional measurement framework:

5.3.1 The tension between short-term sentiment and long-term well-being

Immediate bias of subjective evaluation: Questionnaire survey is easily disturbed by recent emotions (such as the short-term pleasure after buying luxury goods), and ignores long-term psychological well-being (such as self-realization). Longitudinal tracking research should be introduced to compare the decline curve of happiness after consumption[7].

Cultural differences blind spot: Western scales (such as PANAS) emphasize individual emotions, while happiness in East Asian culture may depend more on social harmony (such as "satisfaction with others"). Cultural adaptation indicators (such as "face satisfaction scale") need to be developed.

5.3.2 The paradigm shift from "happiness" to "meaning"

The Inspiration from Positive Psychology: Drawing on the PERMA model [19], well-being is broken down into five dimensions—positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and achievement (A)—to evaluate the differential contributions of consumption behavior to each dimension. For example, symbolic consumption may be more associated with "achievement," experiential consumption with "relationships," and

sustainable consumption may enhance long-term well-being through the "meaning" dimension.

5.3.3 The involvement of physiology and neuroscience

Biomarker measurement: cortisol levels and heart rate variability (HRV) were used to quantify the stress-relieving effect of consumption behavior; Exploration of neural mechanisms: Using fMRI to compare the differences in brain activation between symbolic consumption (e.g., seeing luxury Logo) and experiential consumption (e.g., recalling travel) (e.g., reward system vs. default mode network).

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

FUNDING

The research was supported by Guangdong Provincial Philosophy and Social Science Planning Project (GD24XGL030); Guangzhou Philosophy and Social Science Development 14th Five-Year Plan regular project in 2024 (2024GZGJ211).

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