

A Study on the Impact of the Traffic Economy on College Students' Consumption Psychology from a Positive Psychology Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In the platform-dominated traffic economy, attention is organized as a tradable scarce resource, shifting consumption from "utility calculation" to a psychological process of "being seen—being recognized—being converted." College students, highly digitally adapted, exhibit consumption motivations characterized by a composite structure of emotional regulation, identity construction, and belonging-seeking. Existing research primarily focuses on marketing, platform governance, and financial risks, yet lacks systematic explanations for "how traffic shapes consumption through psychological mechanisms" and "how positive psychology achieves developmental guidance." This paper proposes a dual-pathway model of risk and gain within the positive psychology framework of "Strengths-Meaning-Thriving": On one hand, traffic mechanisms trigger impulsive consumption, competitive anxiety, and credit overextension through instant feedback, symbolic meaning, and social comparison. On the other hand, leveraging psychological capital and self-determination needs, the traffic field can also be transformed into a resource arena for interest development, social connection, and self-efficacy growth. It further proposes a "positive governance" strategy: enhancing autonomy through attention/algorithm literacy, elevating consumption purposefulness via strengths identification and meaning education, and strengthening delayed gratification and risk recognition through financial and media literacy training—thus shifting consumption motivation from external control to intrinsic value-driven.

KEYWORDS

Traffic economy; Positive psychology; College students; Consumer psychology; Psychological capital; Attention governance

1 Problem Statement and Theoretical Position: From "Traffic Logic" to "Positive Development"

1.1 Structural Characteristics of the Traffic Economy and Shifts in University Students' Consumption Contexts

The traffic economy transcends mere "internet traffic" metrics, evolving into a resource organization model centered on the division of labor within economic activity: platforms aggregate attention to "pool traffic," then employ innovative narratives and content production to "channel traffic," ultimately implementing "traffic governance" through institutional mechanisms—forming a sustainable traffic management logic ^[1].

Within this structure, college student consumption no longer primarily occurs in offline physical spaces but is embedded within a platform-based content-social-transaction closed loop: the trigger point for consumption decisions shifts to "content encounters," decision-making criteria expand to include "peer evaluations and platform ratings," and consumption outcomes are recoded as displayable social symbols. Consequently, consumer psychology research must shift from traditional linear "need-purchase" models to process models emphasizing "attention-emotion-meaning-action," highlighting the mediating role of psychological mechanisms in traffic conversion.

1.2 The Positive Psychology Perspective: A "Developmental Consumption View" Centered on Psychological Capital

Positive psychology emphasizes understanding individual development through human strengths and positive qualities. "Psychological capital," as a cultivable positive psychological resource, encompasses dimensions such as self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience, providing an internal motivational structure for adaptation and growth under stress ^[2].

Within the flow economy context, college students' consumption psychology may either be driven by external stimuli toward impulsivity and dependency, or, with proper guidance, become a practice ground for developing self-efficacy, aesthetic discernment, social engagement, and meaning-making. This paper therefore shifts its research focus from "consumption risk control" to "positive development of consumption psychology," employing psychological capital and self-regulation as key explanatory variables.

1.3 Core Conceptual Definitions and Research Approach

The term "college students' consumption psychology" in this paper refers to the stable tendencies and situational responses individuals exhibit in processing consumption-related information, making value judgments, experiencing emotions, and selecting behaviors. This encompasses both social psychological characteristics such as conformity,

novelty-seeking, and peer comparison, as well as self-regulation abilities like delayed gratification, self-control, and risk perception. This study adopts a speculative research approach: by examining the key mechanisms of the traffic economy and consumer psychology, it proposes a risk-gain dual-pathway framework. Based on this framework, it derives governance and educational strategies for higher education institutions, thereby forming a theoretical response to consumer education in the era of the traffic economy.

2 The Mechanism of Traffic Economy's Influence on College Students' Consumption Psychology: The Psychological Chain from Attention to Meaning

2.1 Attention Competition and Instant Rewards: The "Passive Generation" of Consumption Impulses

The traffic economy fundamentally alters the "rules governing attention allocation." Platform algorithms construct instant feedback systems through visual metrics (clicks, likes, comments, shares, saves), fostering a "preference for instant gratification" among users. For college students, this mechanism reshapes consumption psychology across three dimensions: 1) Accelerated Time Discounting: As emotions are continuously amplified by instant feedback, consumption increasingly functions as an immediate emotional regulator—a means of "instant relief" or "instant possession." 2) Self-control depletion: High-frequency stimuli continuously deplete cognitive resources needed to inhibit impulses, reducing delayed gratification capacity; 3) Rising choice anxiety: Information overload makes consumption decisions more reliant on heuristic cues (trends, rankings, matching items), thereby weakening rational evaluation.

Thus, impulse buying isn't always a matter of "personal weakness," but a predictable outcome within the attention economy: consumer psychology is shaped by "external frameworks" in platform-driven contexts.

2.2 Symbolization and Meaning Construction: The Key Psychological Channel for Converting Traffic into Consumption

The core of the traffic economy lies not in "exposure itself," but in converting attention into traffic and further directing it toward offline or actual consumption. Its operational logic can be summarized as: "attract public attention—convert attention into actual traffic—drive online traffic to offline consumption," with symbolization permeating the entire chain^[3].

Applying this logic to college students' consumption psychology yields more explanatory insights: students often purchase not just product functionality, but the displayable meanings the product carries (taste, social circles, identity, lifestyle). Symbolization operates through at least two psychological pathways:

Emotional Anchoring Pathway: Symbols offer emotional solace through "being understood/accepted," making consumption a substitute remedy for stress and emptiness. **Identity Confirmation Pathway:** Symbols help individuals rapidly acquire narrative materials for "who I am" during uncertain developmental stages, thereby granting consumption a self-affirming function. From a positive psychology perspective, this mechanism is dual-natured: if symbolic consumption is guided by higher-level meaning goals (such as growth, aesthetics, responsibility, and social contribution), it can become a tool for constructing a "positive identity"; conversely, it may slide into dependence on external validation and outsourcing of self-worth.

2.3 Conformity, Novelty-Seeking, and Competitive Comparison: The Amplification Effect of Social Comparison in Traffic-Driven Spaces

College students' consumption psychology exhibits pronounced group characteristics, often manifesting as conformity, novelty-seeking, and competitive comparison tendencies. Simultaneously, their consumption decision-making capacity does not always align with their decision-making authority, making their consumption more susceptible to environmental cues^[4].

Within the traffic economy context, these tendencies undergo further "institutional amplification": platforms leverage rankings, trending topics, "same-item" comparisons, and "recommend-purchase" narratives to make conformity a "rational choice" for reducing decision-making costs; By continuously manufacturing rhythms of novelty-scarcity-limited editions, novelty-seeking becomes solidified as a persistent psychological expectation; through visible consumption displays and peer comparisons, envy transforms from an implicit mindset into an explicit competition. Thus, consumer psychology shifts from "individual preference" to "structurally driven social comparison," forming a self-reinforcing cycle within group interactions.

2.4 Credit Consumption and Delayed Gratification: The Psychological Bridge from Consumer Psychology to Financial Risk

The traffic economy is deeply intertwined with convenient payments, installment tools, and credit products, significantly enhancing "consumption accessibility." When college students lack sufficient credit awareness, credit

consumption may transform into repayment crises. Simultaneously, herd mentality and insufficient delayed gratification abilities make individuals more prone to irrational choices under consumption temptations ^[5].

The key here lies not in moralizing student consumption, but in revealing underlying psychological mechanisms: When "instant gratification" dominates, the emotional rewards of consumption are overestimated while future costs are underestimated; when "social recognition" becomes a strong need, consumption is more likely used as a social currency; and when "self-efficacy" is low, individuals are more prone to rely on external symbols to compensate for self-esteem deficits. Positive psychology thus suggests: rather than merely emphasizing "avoid debt," it is more effective to strengthen psychological capital such as hope, efficacy, and resilience. This enhances individuals' ability to persevere toward long-term goals and resist short-term temptations.

2.5 Contextual Triggers in Digital E-commerce: Novelty, Exclusivity, Convenience, and the "Herd Effect"

In the digital e-commerce environment, college students' consumption psychology exhibits a pursuit of novelty accompanied by conformity ("herd mentality"), a reverence for individuality with an element of exclusivity, a drive for convenience and cost control, and a tendency to compare prices and select the best value for money ^[6]. This description reveals the "everyday entry points" through which the traffic economy influences consumer psychology: college students are not always chasing luxury or ostentation. More often, they develop fragmented consumption habits under conditions of convenience, low cost, and high accessibility. The issue arises when platforms continuously stimulate "novelty" through traffic mechanisms and embed consumption choices into group norms via social transmission. Originally neutral consumption tendencies may be pushed toward high frequency and dependency. When universities lack systematic education on attention management, media literacy, and financial intelligence, students become more susceptible to losing their sense of purpose and restraint within a "see-it-get-it" mechanism.

3 Risks in Positive Psychology—The Dual-Path Model of Gain: From "Traffic-Driven" to "Value-Anchored"

3.1 Proposing the Dual-Path Model: Two Psychological Outcomes from the Same Traffic Mechanism

Based on the above analysis, this paper proposes that the impact of the traffic economy on college students' consumption psychology can be summarized as the risk erosion pathway and the gain development pathway. Both pathways share the same external conditions (platforming, symbolization, algorithmization, instant gratification) but diverge due to differences in individual psychological capital and situational support.

Risk-Erosion Path: Attention becomes externally controlled → Emotions are driven by instant gratification → Meaning is replaced by external validation → Consumption becomes compensatory behavior → Leading to impulsivity, peer pressure, anxiety, and credit overextension.

Gain Development Path: Attention becomes self-regulated (selective content engagement) → Emotions are positively modulated (gratitude, delayed gratification) → Meaning is internalized (values and goals) → Consumption becomes a growth-oriented practice → Cultivates aesthetic discernment, social connections, responsibility awareness, and self-efficacy.

3.2 The Mediating Role of Psychological Capital: Transforming "Stimulus-Response" into "Choice-Construction"

Psychological capital is crucial because it equips individuals with the psychological capacity to "transform external stimuli into internal choices": 1) Hope enables individuals to align present choices with future goals, reducing the appeal of instant gratification; 2) Self-efficacy makes individuals more inclined to gain self-esteem through capability enhancement rather than symbolic compensation; 3) Resilience enables individuals to maintain a stable self-concept amid setbacks and comparative pressures, reducing the urge to seek emotional relief through consumption; 4) Optimism allows individuals to interpret life's uncertainties constructively, diminishing the impulse to "buy certainty."

Thus, positive psychology does not deny the risks of the traffic economy but offers a more productive governance approach: rather than opposing traffic, it uses psychological capital to transform traffic from a "manipulative force" into a "resource field."

3.3 The Normative Implications of "Positive Governance": Shifting Consumer Education from Discipline to Empowerment

In terms of governance logic, positive governance emphasizes three shifts: - From moral judgment to capacity building: Transforming "buy less" into "learning self-regulation and long-term planning"; - From risk disclosure to meaning education: Transforming "avoid scams" into "clarifying life goals and value priorities"; - From individual correction to environmental optimization: Expanding "student self-discipline" to "jointly shaping through platform rules, university

curricula, and peer culture."

Accordingly, universities' task is not to simply reject traffic-driven consumption, but to help students develop autonomous, competent, and connected structures for positive growth within this environment—restoring consumption to its instrumental role in serving life and growth.

4 Implementation Strategies for Universities and Platforms: Cultivating "Resilient Rational Consumer Psychology"

4.1 Attention Literacy and Algorithm Literacy: Rebuilding Autonomy in Consumption Psychology

Colleges should integrate "attention literacy" into a combined module of freshman orientation, general education courses, and mental health education: teaching students to recognize platforms' attention-grabbing mechanisms (rankings, push notifications, continuous playback, limited-time offers); training "delayed response" strategies (cooling-off periods for shopping cart additions, budget caps, impulse-trigger logs); incorporating algorithm literacy and media ethics into course discussions so students understand that "what I see is not the world itself, but a curated version of it." The goal of these trainings is not to oppose consumption, but to shift consumption from "stimulus-response" back to "autonomous choice."

4.2 Strength Identification and Meaning Education: Aligning Consumption with Growth Narratives

The strengths perspective of positive psychology can be applied to "value rewriting" in consumption education: Use strengths identification tools to help students build self-narratives around "What am I good at? What kind of person do I want to become?" thereby reducing reliance on external symbols. Employ meaning education to guide students in distinguishing between "experiential consumption, relational consumption, conspicuous consumption, and compensatory consumption," encouraging consumption structures centered on experiences, learning, and relationships. Transform "moderation" from moral admonition into a positive quality of "choosing for greater goals," strengthening students' commitment to long-term objectives.

4.3 Financial Literacy Education and Credit Risk Prevention: Cultivating "Delayed Gratification" as a Trainable Skill

Financial literacy education should synergize with mental health education: Incorporate credit, installment plans, interest rates, and risk scenarios into curricula, emphasizing the psychological discounting mechanism of "present gratification versus future costs"; Train students in risk identification and refusal skills through scenario simulations (peer pressure, time-limited discounts, emotional manipulation in livestreams); Provide supportive resources (work-study programs, temporary assistance, counseling) for students facing significant financial pressure to prevent high-risk borrowing as their sole coping mechanism. The core objective is to transform delayed gratification from a "volitional trait" into a "learnable psychological skill."

4.4 Campus Culture and Peer Norms: Transforming "Comparative Anxiety" into "Collective Growth"

The traffic economy intensifies social comparison. Universities must use cultural development to weaken the "consumption hierarchy": Provide non-consumption-based avenues for value acquisition through clubs, project-based learning, and volunteer services; Replace a competitive culture of "mutual display" with a peer culture of "shared growth" to reduce self-esteem threats from comparison; Integrate peer support and relationship skills training into mental health education, enabling students to gain belonging through relational connections rather than material symbols.

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