

# Spectacle Construction and Consumption Alienation of Cultural Livestreaming E-commerce

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**Abstract:** Purpose - Although suffering from a crackdown on after-school tutoring in China, the New Oriental education giant has found new life in livestreaming e-commerce. With their new pattern of livestreaming, New Oriental has shown a special kind of spectacle in cultural communication. Design/methodology/approach – Based on the theory of spectacle and the perspective of case analysis, this study examines the spectacle construction and consumption alienation of New Oriental’s livestreaming. Findings - This study finds that the spectacle of New Oriental’s livestreaming consists of three aspects. “People” in livestream are divided into livestreamers and viewers, they are the main constructors of the livestreaming spectacle; “Commodities” are endowed with symbolic value; and during the livestreaming, self-identification and emotional resonance will be completed in two-way interactions and become a specific “field”. This kind of cultural livestreaming also caused alienation phenomenon in consuming behavior, purposes and objects. Originality/value - This paper extends existing research by examining spectacle construction divided into three aspects, which are the essential construction of the retail industry as well as the core of livestreaming e-commerce. By revealing the consumption alienation and potential problems in this media spectacle, suggestions will be proposed for consumers to promote sustainable consumption.

**Keywords:** Media Spectacle, Consumption Alienation, Sustainable Consumption, livestreaming.

## 1. Introduction

As consumer demand grew and the mobile internet popularized, the livestream industry developed rapidly. As of June 2021, the number of livestreaming viewers has reached 638 million, accounting for 63.1% of the total Internet users in China (iMedia Consulting, 2022). In December 2021, New Oriental was trying to reinvent itself as an agricultural marketing company on livestream in the wake of a crackdown on after-school tutoring. Unlike most livestreaming focusing on dumping, fierce marketing, and fake performances, New Oriental meets consumers’ ever-growing intellectual and cultural needs through bilingual livestreaming and knowledge sharing. This new livestreaming pattern is known as “cultural live streaming.” Besides, on Singles’ Day in 2022, New Oriental’s livestreaming generated 720 million Yuan in collective sales. These reflect spectacle effects and how they are produced, constructed, circulated, and function in cultural communication worth attending.

Previous studies of livestreaming e-commerce mainly focus on marketing and regulation. For example, Si (2021) proposed possible solutions to the existing problems, advocating new systems and legislation should be the priority; many researchers pay attention to consumer insights and discover livestreamers’ expertise and credibility can improve brand image and consumers’ purchase intention (Zhang et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2022); From sellers’ perspective, Wongkitrungrueng (2020) and Zheng et al. (2022) identified sales approaches and strategies adopted in acquiring and retaining customers. Chen et al. (2023) proposed strategies livestreamers can use to cope with failures and influence viewers’ word of mouth. In a word, the prevalence of live streaming has triggered research from many disciplines and aspects. However, the existing studies are limited to the economic and regulatory perspective, lacking observation and critical thinking on cultural communication and the alienation of live streaming. This study focuses on the “production-

influence” mechanism of the cultural livestreaming spectacle; by revealing its consumption alienation and potentially negative impacts, suggestions of sustainable consumption will be proposed to consumers.

## 2. Spectacle and Media Spectacle

The term “spectacle” originated from an important geographical concept, and it was generally defined as the scene presented by a specific area. Guy Debord puts forward the spectacle theory for the first time in his book “The Society of the Spectacle”. The spectacle initially refers to a visual scene and, by extension, a subjective and conscious show and performance (Debord, 1967). “In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.” Besides, Debord (1967) emphasizes that the spectacle is a social relation between people that is mediated by images. People are fascinated by the spectacle and likely to lose their desire and requirements for an authentic life, while capitalists manipulate the entire social life by controlling the generation and transformation of the spectacle. The spectacle is therefore seen as “the autocratic rule of the market economy”—the social control of contemporary capitalism is no longer an external force but a cultural hegemony based on identity (ibid).

Debord’s interpretation of spectacle has influenced many subsequent scholars, including Baudrillard, Harvey, Fields, and Best, who provided different illustrations. Fields and Best (1986) divided spectacle into three specific dimensions: the difference between the majority and the minority. The spectacle is a performance performed by a few people; most watch silently. The “minority” represents those in power with capital control and the creators of the spectacle, while the “majority” is controlled. Second, the function of the spectacle is not an external compulsory means but a subtly exerted control day after day. Third, it is difficult for most people to

resist the “pan-entertainment” confusion caused by the spectacle and become enslaved people. Thus, Baudrillard(1970) named the audience of the spectacle as the melancholy and the silent majority.

With the rapid development of mass media and its popularity in society, Debord (1967) made a profound analysis of the monolithic and image substitution characteristics of mass media in communication; he pointed out: “Mass media has become the driving force of the society of the spectacle, and it is the most prominent expression of the spectacle.” Thus, “media spectacle” has become an essential existence for the society of the spectacle. Based on the new media culture, Kellner (2002) concertized the spectacle as a “media spectacle”, interpreting it as “those can embody the basic values of contemporary society and guide individuals to adapt to modern lifestyles...including various media extravaganzas, sports events, and political events produced by the media.” “Spectacle” has a distinct subjectivity, created by the media and ruled by various political or commercial forces. Different from the critical attitude of Debord and other scholars, the concept of media spectacle proposed by Kellner regards spectacle as a neutral phenomenon, largely focusing on explaining and questioning the phenomenon of spectacle in a specific social context; and analyzing the production, meaning and influence of media spectacle. Therefore, this article uses the production-influence path in Douglas Kellner’s media spectacle theory as the analytical perspective to further explain the spectacle construction and the alienation of consumption in cultural livestreaming.

### **3. Spectacle Construction of the Cultural Livestreaming**

As a media spectacle, livestreaming cannot develop spontaneously but is shaped deliberately by influential technology, capital and operators (Rein&Venturini, 2018). Operators of New Oriental designed a specific spectacle, which constructed interaction and recognition by three basic dimensions of the retail industry- people, commodities and field. The ultimate goal is to lure viewers into the livestream and improve their purchase intentions.

#### **3.1. “People”: mutual interaction between livestreamers and viewers**

Livestreamers, as performers, play a significant role in spectacle construction. Goffman(1949) developed the concept of dramaturgy and proposed that social life is a big stage, which is divided into the “front stage” and “Backstage”. Goffman makes an important distinction between front stage behavior, which are actions that are visible to the audience and are part of the performance, and backstage behavior, which are actions that people engage in when the audience is absent.” In the past, New Oriental’s teachers often showed a serious and professional “front stage” image due to their professional needs. After becoming livestreamers, their actual characters hidden in the “backstage” gradually reveal to the audience. For instance, Dong Yuhui, the first breakout star for New Oriental, illustrated his childhood memories while selling corn. He prefers to share thoughts of life and quote the classics anytime he wants; Another livestreamer Dun Dun is a gentle young man who can link hot pot ingredients with ancient diet in Chinese poetry, as well as teach relative vocabulary in French and Japanese; Livestreamer Yoyo is

proficient in playing various musical instruments, singing and performing. Knowledgeable livestreamers and oftentimes amusing approach has become a refreshing spectacle material, which also makes them stand out from ordinary livestreamers who just promote commodities. As a part of the gazed spectacle, livestreamers were designed with carefully staged and scripted performances. The seemingly real scenery is a reprocessing of real information, which is more attractive than reality. The images through mobile phone screens appeal to the audience to a large extent(Li & Yan, 2022).

In addition, the viewers are the target audiences of livestreaming and the co-builders of the media spectacle. Production in modern capitalism is no longer limited to physical products but includes different forms of content, such as information and knowledge. This hidden mode of production blurs the boundaries between leisure and labor, and audiences perform as digital laborers for free while watching livestreaming—consuming their attention and time. Moreover, the viewers in front of the screen can engage in participatory interaction. They express their group identification through instant comments and interactions on livestream and participate in the construction of cultural spectacles unconsciously. The audiences’ attitudes change from recognition to adaptation, trust to dependence, and spectacle unconsciously influences people in media communication. By receiving feedback from the audiences, the operators keep gaining insight into the inner needs of audiences and optimize and iterate the content and form of the livestreaming. Operators introduce audiences into the simulation environment and please them, paving the way for further output of values and recognition.

#### **3.2. “Commodities”: Commodities endowed with symbolic value**

With the rise of mass media, the commodity society transformed into a society of the spectacle, and people’s consumption of objects turned to the consumption of spectacle or symbolic consumption (Zhang, 2013). For consumers, what attracts them is not only the use value of the products but the meaning of the symbolic code attached to them. On the one hand, many infamous products sell fast on livestream result of the endorsement of the New Oriental brand and consumers’ recognition of knowledgeable livestreamers. Viewers commented, “It is a good way to spend money where you get products and extra knowledge.” When selling rice, the livestreamer Dong said: “I did not take you to see the white snow in Changbai Mountain, I did not take you to feel the breeze blowing across my field in October, and I did not take you to see the grain bent down like a wise man, I did not take you to witness all of this, but my dear, I recommend you to taste the rice like them.”; “Tang Poetry and Song Ci” that everyone memorized by rote in the student days; In Dong’s opinion, it is an inspiring spirit of Chinese History, which is worth savoring for a long time. Audiences project the admiration and recognition of knowledgeable livestreamers onto the products they promote and regard these products as signs that are close to livestreamers’ knowledge level and cultural taste, realizing emotional satisfaction and superior experience. Giving symbolic meaning to commodities and stimulating purchase intention through recognition is also the process for knowledgeable livestreamers to gradually transform their “cultural capital” into “economic capital”.

On the other hand, from the symbolic interactionism perspective, Mead (1934) emphasized the importance of

shared meanings and social interactions in shaping individuals' subjective experiences and perceptions of the world. People develop meanings and form interpretations about their environment or social realities through ongoing interactions with others. The New Oriental completes the symbolic interaction with the audience through the construction of the media spectacle and the influence of the audience as consumer feedback deserves attention. Kellner (2009) argues that the Internet-based economy has been developing high-tech spectacle as a means of promotion, reproduction, circulation, and selling of commodities, using multiple media and increasingly sophisticated technologies to dazzle consumers. The New Oriental uses drone aerial photography and steadicam to carry out immersive outdoor livestream in poverty-stricken counties in Shaanxi and Heilongjiang Province. Presented in front of the camera, New Oriental provides the audience with a more profound experience and sense of participation, and wins the trust of consumers, making consumers agree that consumption in the livestream is helping the poor farmers and purchasing agricultural products is also equated with the public welfare. The symbolic coding of agricultural products in the livestream is reflected in public welfare assistance to farmers, and the multi-visual presentation of agricultural products makes them no longer limited to the simple concept of "things", but an all-around expansion. Knowledgeable livestreamers combine personal understanding and life experience to describe the products concretely, enriching the connotation of agricultural products.

### **3.3. "Field": Emotional Resonance in Interactive Rituals**

Cultural livestreaming fits the four elements of interaction ritual chains presented by Collins(2014): more than two people gather in the same place, set boundaries for outsiders, focus on the same objects or activities, and share an emotional experience. The livestream builds a "simulated" face-to-face communication situation, and the audiences complete the multi-screen interaction at the emotional level through watching. Many consumers were impressed by the company's never-say-die attitude. "I burst into tears when I watched the livestreaming," said Kong Ling, a tech worker in Hangzhou. "I'm watching a warrior who stands up firmly despite being beaten by the iron fist of life and I wanted to buy to show my support." Besides, the livestreamer Dong usually talks about his childhood experiences: He was born in a poor village and used to fail in English examinations. He was admitted to Xi'an International Studies University through his efforts and later became an excellent English teacher. He gains a growing number of followers with emotional projection and self-identity from countless underprivileged students.

As far as the group is concerned, the livestream platform, the livestreaming, the audiences, the livestreamers and the interactive form constitute interaction ritual chains. The audiences generate emotional resonance during the process of participating in the interaction ritual, thereby promoting the integration of the emotional energy of groups and individuals and forming an inherent emotional symbol. In addition, the algorithm and big data precise recommendation of the Douyin platform will also connect individuals with the same interest across space-time, social classes, and genders, which is conducive to gathering pan-knowledge and like-minded groups in New Oriental's livestream (Ya & Li, 2020). In the

reintegrated pan-knowledge group, audiences can not only eliminate loneliness and promote social interaction but also share their insights and emotions on the knowledgeable content, gain recognition from group members, and gain satisfaction in virtual social interaction. As a result, individual consumption behaviors show the tendency of community-based "group buying" and "group shopping", and "the present" Audiences are more likely to infect by the group and buy unnecessary products to strengthen each other's identity and group belonging.

## **4. Consumption Alienation of Cultural Livestreaming**

In the modern consumerist society, symbolic consumption has become normalized, and consumption has become the opposite of human beings, becoming a force to manipulate and dominate people (Marcuse, 1976). In the production and dissemination of the spectacle in cultural livestreaming, the phenomena of consumption alienation are prominent, manifested in three aspects: behavior, purposes and objects of consumption. First of all, although not every audience will generate actual purchase behavior in the livestream, the traffic data of audience viewing shows that every single audience is a consumer. When they watch, they pay for the livestream and the platform in terms of time and attention. In a way, watching is equivalent to consuming behavior. Second, the purpose of consumption may no longer be to satisfy one's actual needs but the psychological needs for self-identification and group recognition. The purchasing power, preference and aesthetic purpose expressed by symbolic consumption are the self-expression and self-revelation of consumers, and then realize the distinction from other individuals in the society. Cultural livestreaming satisfies the emotional needs of consumers to a large extent. Except for saving shopping time and selection costs for urban consumers, it also relieves consumers' stress and adds value to knowledge through interesting and knowledgeable content. The "joint learning" atmosphere under the group identity also reflects pursuing a better life. Finally, the objects of consumption in the livestream are also alienated. After attracting favorable attention, the influence and power of livestream rooms and livestreamers have been magnified, weakening the constraints of socialization. The problems have occurred frequently: many customers complained about the moldy peaches; the high brand premium has also sparked heated discussions. All these situations exposed the drawbacks of the New Oriental in the product selection, supply chain, logistics and quality control. A majority of livestream products are low entry thresholds and fast replacement, making it difficult for relevant departments and platforms to supervise the origin, quality and price of products. There needs to be a standardized compensation system for after-sales service. Therefore, it is necessary for consumers to distinguish their actual needs and rationally treat the persuasion of spectacle in the livestream.

## **5. Suggestions for Sustainable Consumption**

Due to the fascinating spectacle and consumption Alienation, many consumers' appetites are not only seemingly insatiable, but also have adverse impacts on environmental, social, and individual well-being (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). For instance, nowadays e-commerce and social media stimulate consumers' interest and

improve their desire, over-consumption has become a major problem faced by individuals and governments. Non-essential consumption and “hedonic products” lead to resource wastage; Kasser (2003) indicated that “people with higher materialistic values face a greater risk of unhappiness, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and problems with intimacy”, and they are compelled to resolve their anxiety through distorted behaviors, such as internet-addict consumption (Sun-Woo & Ran-Do, 2002). Many scholars paid attention to this unhealthy phenomenon and the suggestions that can improve sustainable consumption and consumer rationality are as follows. First, improving mindfulness would be effective to avoid impulse purchase. The definition of mindfulness is the awareness that arises by paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn 2013, p. 11). Mindful consumption is able to help consumers self-regulate to make purchase decisions based on the priorities of their actual needs (Bahl et al., 2016). Furthermore, people can use online reviews to help make informed purchase decisions. reviews expressing regret have a positive effect on the helpfulness of e-wom (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Last but not least, the reason some audiences are addicted to purchase on livestreaming is closed to the sense of alienation measured by powerlessness, normlessness, and isolation, thus improving the communication and interaction between relatives and friends Tapscott (1998), releasing the pressure of work and life, making a consumption plan to prevent consumption alienation would be effective ways to reduce unhealthy consumption behavior.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper extends existing research by examining spectacle construction divided into three aspects, which are the essential construction of the retail industry as well as the core of livestreaming e-commerce. After analyzing the alienation phenomenon in consuming behavior, purposes and objects, we put forward corresponding suggestions to encourage sustainable consumption of cultural livestreaming.

Apart from examining livestreaming e-commerce from cultural communication and spectacle perspective, the study also presents implications for both educational and cultural industries. As a leader in the educational tutoring industry, New Oriental’s new approach to combining livestreaming e-commerce with spreading the knowledge of English learning and culture can not only provide a direction for the transformation of the education industry but also motivate other livestreams to improve their content quality. Knowledgeable livestreamers utilize the audience's fragmented leisure time to entertain and teach, reshaping the stereotype of learning. Moreover, cultural livestreaming has also brought more opportunities for the cultural industry. The public has continuously improved their cultural tastes in the process of being exposed to more knowledge and culture, and the demand for culture and related products has also increased, which will form a virtuous circle of "cultural creation-dissemination-consumption-feedback" on social media.

However, the potential problems behind the prosperity of cultural livestreaming cannot be ignored. First, the form of New Oriental’s cultural livestreaming may fail to popularize in the livestreaming industry. Cultural livestreaming are not only requires a high level of education for the livestreamers, but also sets a threshold for the audience to have basic cultural

knowledge and understanding. It is difficult to create a phenomenon-level cultural livestreaming spectacle like New Oriental’s. Second, a breakthrough is needed in the form of presentations. For now, although the combination of knowledgeable livestreaming is prevalent, it is inevitable to encounter aesthetic fatigue in the near future, and the audience needs to be continuously stimulated by novelty to maintain high loyalty to the livestream. Finally, the reconstruction of the consumption concept in the post-epidemic era. The COVID-19 epidemic has brought development opportunities to the livestream industry and changed people's consumption habits. Due to the Restrictions on supply and outdoor activities, consumers are more inclined to shop online, while watching livestream to relieve anxiety and loneliness as an emotional behavioral choice. After the lift of the city’s lockdown, trading down has become an economic buzzword and rational consumption has gradually become the mainstream. The phenomenon of paying for recognition in the pan-knowledge livestream will gradually cool down.

In the future, the integration of new technologies with e-commerce livestreams will become a general trend, and a new media spectacle will inevitably emerge. The following issues deserve attention: VR technology will further enhance the sense of participation and experience in livestream, and will the control of the spectacle be strengthened accordingly? Whether virtual livestreamers can complete the emotional interaction with the audience, thereby further expanding the scale of cultural livestreaming? Whether digital cultural and creative products be sold in livestream and complete value co-creation? Numerous questions remain to be answered in the follow-up development of Cultural livestreaming.

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