

Research on the Changes in College Students' Consumption Behavior under the Background of COVID-19

Sizhe Duan^{1,a,*}

¹*Academic of Finance, Central University of Finance and Economics, Beijing, China, 102206*

a. 18613874038@sina.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019, online consumption has grown explosively and has become the main consumption mode for modern people. As the young group who are good at using the Internet, consumption behaviors and habits of college students have undoubtedly been greatly influenced. As teenagers' behavior and economic activity are important roles in human life, this paper aims to study college students' economic behavior as influenced by the pandemic. The paper mainly uses theoretical analysis methods, combined with existing studies in the fields of behavioral economics, to analyze the consumption characteristics of college students from three aspects: the increase in online shopping, irrational consumption caused by online loans, and unnecessary consumption caused by community behavior. The epidemic does have effects on college students' online consumption behavior, such as increasing irrational consumption and unnecessary consumption, which needs the attention of relevant scholars and the society.

Keywords: COVID-19, college students, online consumer behavior, irrational consumption

1. Introduction

In December 2019, an outbreak caused by COVID-19 broke out in Wuhan, China. From the end of 2019 to the end of 2022, the global economy, culture, and other aspects have been greatly affected by the pandemic. As one of the main parts of human activities, economic activities are inevitably affected and have undergone great change. The changes in consumer behavior caused by the epidemic will indeed continue after the pandemic is over, and these new changes require close attention by economists [1]. Especially for college students who are full of economic vitality and influence the future development of society to a large extent, it is very important and necessary to pay attention to their psychology and behavior changes in consumption decisions. After the outbreak of the epidemic, the consumption decisions of college students haven't been widely studied, especially the changes caused by the epidemic.

This study analyzes the changes and characteristics of college students' consumption behavior and psychology during the epidemic from three aspects: the increase of online consumption, the promotion of irrational consumption by online payment, and the promotion of unnecessary consumption by community behavior. It mainly uses the relevant knowledge of behavioral economics and combines it with existing research to carry out the theoretical analysis.

Through the research on this topic, this paper is expected to draw relevant scholars' attention and attach importance to this topic. For the consumption behavior studied in this paper, scholars can use

it as a reference for further research. On this basis, further thinking and research will be carried out to deal with the economic problems brought by the epidemic, and effective suggestions will be put forward to ensure the steady development of the economy.

2. Impact of Increased Online Consumption

2.1. The Particularity of Online Consumption

Since the 20th century, the global Internet has developed rapidly, the number of users is very large, and the user identities come from all over the world and include all age ranges. According to the Global Digital Report, there are over 5 billion unique mobile device users, 4.5 billion internet users, and 3.5 billion social media users in the world today, a year-to-year expansion of 10% [2]. According to the Pew Research Center, 77% of Americans go online on a daily basis, 43% indicate they go online several times a day, and 11% of adults say they do not use the internet at all [3].

With the popularization of Internet use and the continuous iterative updating and upgrading, online shopping as consumption channel has also emerged as the times have required. From the perspective of enterprises, the advantage of applying the Internet to sales activities is that the company can obtain customers' consumption records comprehensively, so as to collect purchase preferences and other information to facilitate real-time adjustment and innovation of sales strategies. For consumers, online shopping allows them to have a comprehensive and objective evaluation and understanding of commodity information, making it convenient to compare commodities and merchants. In addition, more accurate consumption can be carried out based on the evaluation of others.

Online consumption has the typical characteristics of high reliability in information acquisition and increased difficulty in risk assessment, which have a great impact on consumers' decision-making. Firstly, Belanger emerged that factors like information timeliness, relevance, accuracy, understandability, completeness, and value-added information do have an impact on consumers' decision making. Information that is highly ranked, easy to understand, less technical, complete, and that presents a value-added in terms of strengths and weaknesses is more likely to lead to a purchasing decision [4]. Secondly, based on the theoretical content of risk avoidance in behavioral economics [5], consumers' attitudes and decision mechanisms towards risk are also a major factor affecting consumption. Previous studies have shown that there is a difference between the perception of risk and the degree of evasive measures [4].

2.2. Changes in Online Consumption Brought about by the Epidemic

The outbreak of the epidemic and the implementation of anti-epidemic measures, such as lockdown in China, have created great difficulties for offline sales manufacturers. At the same time, it is common to see consumers reduce offline shopping due to the fear of the virus [1]. As a result, online sales orders have significantly increased since the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019. The formation of a large number of online transactions has promoted the development of online shopping industry, promoted the improvement and innovation of functions, and thus created online shopping conditions and more online sales opportunities. Combined with the above factors, the amount of online consumption increased rapidly during the epidemic period.

The huge number of orders and the migration of orders from offline to online against the background of the epidemic make the orders very dense during this period. Meanwhile, the aggregation of trading volume will also bring consumer evaluation, that is, the aggregation of commodity related information. This provides consumers with more convenient and comprehensive information access conditions.

2.3. The Influence of the Particularity of Student Identity

College students occupy a large part of online shopping users. They are also a very important part of market economic activities. As young people, college students have a strong acceptance of the Internet and a high frequency of use, despite more skilled operation. They will also rely more on the Internet and social platforms to carry out more online shopping. Therefore, due to the phenomenon of dense orders and information caused by the increase in online shopping, and the shift in consumer behavior online, the consumption experience of college students has been affected in all aspects. In the face of a multitude of information, college students can, on the one hand, examine products more comprehensively and objectively and make decisions more in line with their own wishes by referring to others' comments. On the other hand, due to the large amount of information, it is impossible to select the appropriate content and amount of information for reference, leading to more confusion and irrational decision-making.

At the same time, differences in risk assessment are largely reflected in age differences. Studies have found that young people have lower risk aversion than older people [6]. Therefore, in the face of diverse and active online shopping, college students as young people are more likely to make hasty choices without adequate analysis and comprehensive consideration, or simply ignore a certain degree of risk and make objectively irrational decisions.

Based on the above reasons, when online consumption increases due to the epidemic, the consumption behavior of college students shows an unstable trend, as the behavior of college students is susceptible to various factors. Therefore, the feedback and results of consumption are also difficult to predict with many uncertainties.

3. Irrational Consumption Caused by Online Payments

3.1. The Trial Consumption Trap of Online Merchants

Loss aversion describes individuals' tendency to prefer reducing potential losses over obtaining equivalent gains when making decisions [7]. This theory from the field of behavioral economics is often used in sales. It is common to see goods supplied in actual stores. Many application programs, such as Photoshop, have launched a monthly trial offer. It is a common strategy that sellers are relying on consumers' aversion to the loss of the products they already own, even though it is a trial, to increase sales. A free service trials is more likely to be accepted than a paid or full price [8]. Even if those items are free, consumers will consider losing the existing services and products a loss after getting them, and buying again or continuing to order is the way to maintain the sense of ownership and avoid the sense of loss. Therefore, people are more inclined to continue consuming these practical products and services, which makes corporate promotion strategies work. In an environment where online spending is increasing during the pandemic, it is easier for businesses to apply more loss-averse strategies to their sales.

3.2. China's Campus Loans Facilitate Irrational Consumption

After entering university, the contents of students' consumption have expanded from relatively monotonous stationery and books to various contents such as daily necessities and interpersonal communication expenses. Therefore, the requirements of college students' consumption are constantly improving. Some merchants have developed campus loan programs aimed at college students, and some e-commerce platforms have introduced pay-now functions. This makes it easier for college students to consume things they don't need or can't afford. Such advanced consumption itself also brings more happiness brought by the sense of control to college students, which further promotes advanced consumption and irrational decisions attached to it.

Campus online loans refer to the behavior of students borrowing money from various lending platforms to solve temporary consumption [9]. In recent years, campus loans have developed rapidly, which has solved the issue of students who have no living expenses left but want to spend money. Due to the single source of funds for college students, the simple and easy form of campus loans has great temptation. For campus loans, student only requires submitting personal information online and confirm that the information is accurate to complete the loan. As a result, campus loans in China have expanded rapidly in an environment where online activity has increased during the pandemic. College students who lack social experience are very vulnerable to the influence and confusion of low-threshold campus loans in their consumption choices and patterns.

In addition to the reasons for the low financial literacy of college students, the mental development of college students is not complete, which means that they are unable to clearly recognize their real needs, so they are prone to comparison and conformity. College students pay more attention to the choice of symbols when consuming. For example, Air Jordan, a brand of basketball shoes, has been very popular among college students in the past decade. Such brands of shoes are regarded as part of the trend culture. The alienation of people in the consumer society is closely related to the signification behind the consumer goods. The characteristic of consumer society is "the denial of truth on the basis of empty and abundant knowledge of symbols" [10]. This is clearly a kind of irrational consumption.

Considering the above reasons, Chinese college students' consumption behavior and concepts are easily affected by improper influence in the epidemic environment of campus loans. Their irrational consumption behavior has increased to a certain extent, and they will therefore face trouble such as usurious interest.

4. Unnecessary Consumption Caused by Community Behavior

4.1. The Social Significance of Consumption Behavior

Consumption is not only a kind of economic behavior, but also has great social significance that cannot be ignored. Many scholars have studied the social meaning of consumption around the world. Bakhtin refers to the concept of "collective carnival", that is, consumption is a kind of collective carnival for people. Consumers are involved in it, follow effective economic laws to make individual decisions, and experience self-release and liberation in the contact between people [11]. In addition, the fear of missing out (FOMO) has become a common psychological state among social media users in the Internet era [12]. People often worry that they are missing out on what others know or have, and that they will be distinguished by others. Therefore, for the goods owned by others, people tend to consume them unnecessarily out of FOMO. Then consumption becomes a kind of social behavior that has largely become a tool for consumers to find acceptance among human groups.

4.2. A Stronger Need of a Sense of Collective Identity

Interpersonal alienation is a complex negative emotion caused by changes in interpersonal relationships. During the epidemic, students are subjected to "periodic" home-based online learning in China, while international students can only take classes remotely because of customs blockades, which directly reduces or even eliminates the social connection between students and the world, and greatly reduces the social support students can obtain. The epidemic undoubtedly made college students lonelier physically and psychologically, which in turn exacerbated their sense of interpersonal alienation.

Moreover, due to epidemic prevention and control management, students' communication channels are mainly online. A UK study on the Anxiety and Depression Inventory (HADS) reported that anxiety and depression levels in adolescents were highly correlated with social media use, and

that adolescents who spent more time on social media sites tended to have higher levels of anxiety and depression [13]. Therefore, college students during the epidemic period lack and desire more of a sense of collective identity, belonging, and intimacy. This kind of emotional need will be reflected in consumer behavior to a large extent.

4.3. The Influence of the Particularity of Student Identity

In addition to the special needs for group identity during the epidemic, college students, as teenagers, also have their own particularities, which leads them to make more unnecessary consumption for the purpose of seeking identity.

First of all, Zhang came to the conclusion in his research about college students' consumption behavior that three variables that severely affect college students' purchase behavior are pleasure, risk, and social power [14]. Online shopping provides a sense of pleasure and social power that is easy for college students to obtain. Online shopping makes it easier for people to get goods and thus experience the happiness of owning things. The social meaning of owning goods and providing them to consumers, such as the "collective carnival" mentioned above, is also very attractive. This makes college students less alert to risks and addicted to the pleasure they get from shopping. Besides, buying goods with symbolic meaning or that can demonstrate people's social abilities (such as economic ability and aesthetic level) can help college students gain social power. This is undoubtedly very attractive to college students who have just entered the university and have begun to establish social relations. Therefore, the pleasure and social power brought to college students by online shopping make them fond of it and increase the use of online shopping, thus increasing the possibility of unnecessary consumption.

Secondly, college students usually lack an accurate and detailed cognition of their own economic strength and demand for luxury goods. College students may gain attention and accolades for owning a luxury item. Coupled with the advocacy and pursuit of luxury goods in the current society, it is inevitable for college students to buy luxury goods, even though such consumption is not necessary for them. At the same time, during the period from high school to university, teenagers often face their own consumption planning tasks and expense management for the first time, which also makes them have cognitive deficiencies and deviations in their own economic strength and consumption habits. These factors will also lead college students to make unnecessary consumption decisions without realizing it.

5. Conclusion

This paper mainly discusses the characteristics and changes of college students' consumption during the epidemic period from three perspectives: online consumption, an increase in irrational consumption, and an increase in non-essential consumption. For unstable online consumption, it is necessary for college students to improve risk perception and economic sensitivity. Besides, it is also important and necessary to inform and educate college students about unreasonable and unnecessary consumption.

There are some deficiencies in this paper. Relying entirely on theoretical analysis, this paper did not collect a large number of relevant data objectively and carry out summary analysis. The topic of the study is broad, without specific analysis for specific examples. It is expected that, in view of these problems, other scholars can make further achievements. According to this research, relevant scholars can put forward possible plans to guide college students' consumption in the future to ensure the shaping of consumption concepts in adolescence, give suggestions on promoting socially sustainable consumption and a stable growth of the overall economy.

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