A Study of Paid Self-study from the Perspective of Critical Theory

Peng Li

Zhengzhou University, Zhengzhou, China

614032317@qq.com

Abstract. In recent years, many urban youth have chosen to pay for self-study. They provide themselves with an immersive learning atmosphere by purchasing time and space. This study takes a critical theory perspective and adopts participatory observation and in-depth methods to study the phenomenon of paid self-study among urban youth. Research has found that paid self-study rooms have created their unique media landscape by combining consumer behavior with symbols through both online and offline means; The active choice of this form of consumption by paid self-study students is mainly due to the demand for self-discipline and performance in the meritorious society; In the process of paid self-study, learners experience alienation in terms of learning behavior, learning data, and learning subjects.

Keywords: Critical theory; Paid self-study; Self quantification; alienation.

1   Introduction

"2019 is considered the first year of paid self-study rooms, with 157 online recorded paid self-study room stores in that year. In the following years, the industry developed rapidly, and as of November 2022, the number of stores reached 4178. Some researchers believe that the surge in paid self-study reflects the self discipline, spatial needs, and learning practices of urban youth. In the context of social media, physical space and media space are further intertwined and reorganized, constructing new spatial production logic. Therefore, the emergence of the new space of paid study rooms is also accompanied by the interweaving of media space and physical space. The theory of landscape society holds that the development of mass media has led to the use value of goods not only being controlled by exchange value, but also being covered by visual images constructed by capital. The landscape composed of these visual symbols will continue to spread through developed communication media, encroaching on people's social space, and presenting the real material as a "pseudo world" controlled by cultural facilities and mass media, forming the "non realistic heart of the real society".[1]This article is based on critical theory, focusing on how capital constructs the media landscape of paid self-study rooms, how the public chooses paid self-study in the current context, and the alienation mechanism in the consumption process of this space.

2   Research Methodology

This paper searched for "self-study rooms" in Gaode, Tencent, and Meituan apps, and compared the results by collision. Using sales volume and evaluation quantity as selection criteria, the paper selected the 10 most representative paid self-study rooms in the city. Through participatory observation and in-depth interviews, the paper learned about the daily learning and life practices of urban youth in this place.

3   Analysis and Findings

3.1   Paid self-study Rooms Under Media Landscape

The Reproduction and Beautification of Material Space

The paid self-study room has produced first person realistic spaces through social media, breaking down the consumption barriers of this physical space. In this space, learning is no longer limited to specific groups with academic and employment pressures, so people can cross the gap between physics and identity and feel the learning atmosphere in the self-study room space.

Social media platforms can record and reproduce physical space.[2] The wooden tables and chairs, green plants and potted plants, and niche murals placed in the study room can all be presented in a virtual space. In daily operations, consumers from different environments, professions, and identities are in the same learning space, and this scene is recorded and presented by social media, becoming a media landscape. This media landscape created by a few people and watched by the majority has stimulated the desire of the public to go there personally.

On the other hand, in social media, photos are stored, modified, and transmitted in pixel form as a digital symbol matrix.[3] This means that electronic photos can break down, modify, and even reconstruct body symbols through pixel rewriting. The different styles of filters in the retouching software magnify the visual aesthetics of the scene image. In addition, paid study rooms under the media landscape often focus on public rest areas that are often overlooked by consumers, where sofas, coffee tables, and fruit snacks are often placed to create a monastic atmosphere. These specially selected and rewritten images have replaced the real picture of the study room, creating a simulated and embellished media space.

The Binding of Consumption and Symbols

In the early capitalist society where production was the dominant logic, consumption, as the final stage of social reproduction, was determined by the use value of goods. With the development of social productivity, the dominant logic of society gradually shifts from production to consumption. In Baudrillard's view, "people living in today's world are surrounded by constantly growing goods, services, and material wealth, forming an unprecedented landscape." [4] At this time, the symbolic value of goods has replaced the use value and played a dominant role in commodity exchange. In a consumer society, all goods that can be exchanged are endowed with a certain symbolic

value. As a paid study room in commercial space, it also presents a trend of fashion and embellishment. In the media landscape, the sanctity of knowledge is often promoted and amplified by the owners of paid study rooms. This form of promotion invisibly binds consumer behavior with learning behavior, causing consumers to unconsciously equate learning behavior with consumption behavior, thereby stimulating their desire to consume.

In addition, consumer consumption of space is actually the consumption of their body in space. As Tao Dongfeng said, "The culture in a consumer society is body culture, the economy in a consumer culture is body economy, and the aesthetics in a consumer society are body aesthetics." [5] Contemporary youth influenced by the neoliberalism trend are increasingly hoping to create a perfect socialized body through rational management of the body. This common mentality is exploited by the operators of paid study rooms, so on social media platforms, copywriting related to paid study rooms often includes words such as "independence," "self-discipline," and "investing in oneself." This autonomous language masks the commodified relationship between the body and capital, giving rise to a new type of consumption control. The public yearns to break free from the constraints of daily cycles in family and work, and gain the freedom to consume space. Under the strategy of "no matter how good investment is, it cannot compare to investing in oneself" and "making advanced choices", the public is flocking to physical consumption such as gyms, yoga studios, and even niche bookstores. f symbols by the logic of capital to reach a kind of benefit economy program.

The Alienation of Consumption in Deceleration Practice

Nowadays, speed has fully penetrated into people's temporal and spatial views and social interactions, becoming an important force in regulating and even shaping people's lives. The theory of accelerated society holds that the acceleration of technology and society is no longer a liberating force, but will lead people to become increasingly enslaved by time. Against the backdrop of accelerating society, more and more young people are choosing various ways to gain a brand new time experience, attempting to find an "oasis of deceleration" in the "accelerating desert.". Rosa pointed out five different types of "deceleration" in his book "Acceleration: Changes in Time Structure in Modern Society." [6] Domestic research has examined deceleration practices in various types such as urban roaming, bookkeeping, electronic games, and urban bookstores. However, what these studies have failed to notice is that the aforementioned deceleration practices cannot be separated from the consumption aspect, and even the public's desire for deceleration is forced to first manifest as the desire for consumption. Bauman believes that the freedom, happiness, and happiness dominated by consumer desire are all false and will gradually lead to individuals being unable to seek personal solutions to contradictory systems. Paid study rooms on social media often promote themselves as "quiet spaces in busy cities" and "spiritual meditation centers", which is clearly a utilization of slowing down the demand for the general public, especially for young people. Under the temptation of consumer aesthetics, people willingly pay the high cost of physical labor and engage in physical consumption that seems to bring what Lefebvre called a "poetic moment", [7] but they have to constantly pay attention to

time, wait for the "poetic moment" to expire, and then fall into the accelerating society of reality once again. The experience of paid self-study is like a game, and the "healing" or "deceleration" it brings cannot slow down the process of social structural acceleration.

3.2   Discipline and Performance for Paid Self learners

Quantitative Self Under the Appearance of Deceleration

Compared with consumption in other cultural venues, the consumption of paid self-study rooms presents a complex state of modern disciplined bodies yearning to escape from discipline, seek freedom and tranquility, while also having to actively self regulate and participate in social competition. Scholars have taken physical bookstores as an example to propose that physical consumption in urban cultural spaces has functional, symbolic, identity, emotional, and identity implications.[8] In terms of functionality, the direct motivation for consumers to enter physical bookstores is not to learn specific knowledge to improve social competitiveness, but more often, they are attracted by the grand narrative view of learning and have a mentality of "improving comprehensive cultural cultivation". In contrast, paid self-study is a microcosm of the "quantified self" discourse expression and spatial politics in the era of mobile internet. People who choose to pay for self-study often have learning needs and urgently need sufficient learning time and space resources. At the same time, they are tired of the busy urban work and life and eager to find a place for their souls to live in the city. Under the conflict and negotiation between these two attitudes, they chose the form of paid self-study as their consumption.

However, from Han Bingzhe's perspective, the practice of paid self-study, which appears to be both self-improvement and seeking tranquility, cannot solve the anxiety and fatigue of individuals in an achievement oriented society. The working class, which was originally able to unite in the factories of the producer society, has now become white-collar workers in enterprises, and their relationships have thus become competitive. Meritorious subjects study in paid self-study rooms, seemingly isolated from the distractions of the outside world, but their learning content is all related to the skills and tools required for their work. In addition, in paid study rooms, time has become an available resource. Self learners usually use time management apps to effectively track and control their learning time. However, the sociality of time indicates that time order is the result of social construction, and time management apps actually presuppose the ideology of self quantification and control of time. Self learners use instrumental rationality to place time within technology, forming a "data-driven time self.". The time of essential flow has been restored to data and integrated with humans. Self learners usually associate the recorded data on apps with themselves, equating "beautiful data" with "responsible self", thus falling into an infinite pursuit of "parameter optimization".

The practice of paid self-study, which appears to be self charging, is essentially a form of self exploitation. In this process, the exhausted and depressed subject of achievement is constantly consuming themselves. In the battle with themselves, they are struggling because of themselves. Through paid self-study, even if people successfully build their once established ideal self, they cannot eliminate the current sense of

dissatisfaction and anxiety. In the late modern era, there is always a gap between the ideal self and the true self, and each individual is driven by the absolute command of "achieving themselves", carrying the fantasy of freedom and consuming themselves to the maximum extent.

Self Performance Under the Dual Effects of Quantified Self and Technological Empowerment

Another important dimension of quantifying oneself is that it is placed in a mediating context.[9] Its media often manifests in two forms. The first form is collective. Although the learners in the study room are in the same physical space, there is often a significant identity gap between them. Managers often use cloud self-study platforms to build virtual competitive environments, in order to connect learners. On the platform, learners can see the learning time of others and also see the learning content they share when they have something to do. At this point, learners will experience peer pressure. Peng Lan believes that the composition of a scene requires four elements, namely the situation and limited geographical location, the current state, lifestyle habits, and the atmosphere of interacting with others. With the support of the cloud self-study platform, a group of learners present in both physical and virtual spaces have gathered together in an unprecedented way, constructing a learning scene that is both real and virtual. In this scene, the state of each learner is exposed, which creates pressure for individuals to be watched and forces them to shape their self-image, in order to cater to the audience's imagination of others in the virtual scene.

In addition to collective performances, individuals often engage in individual performances on social media platforms. It is far from enough for learners to only showcase their learning process. Han Bingzhe proposed that the life politics of contemporary society has evolved into a special phenomenon - the meritorious society. [10]Almost every activity related to human life ultimately needs to be assessed. In order to fully showcase their learning achievements, many learners will clock in and summarize their daily learning content and achievements on social media platforms. People often share their beautiful learning environment, task lists, and handwritten words in the form of photos, while also sharing their learning duration, content, and motivational words in the form of text. Scholars have divided this type of check-in behavior into competitive online learning check-in and interest oriented online learning check-in. Through such check-in behaviors, learners hope to gain more recognition from platform users and gain social support. During this process, individuals prioritize their subjective feelings over feedback from other users in evaluating learning outcomes. Behind the deep connection between paid self-study and this type of check-in culture is the ideological soil of learning worship. Since ancient China, learning behavior has been not only about acquiring knowledge, but also linked to personal cultivation, fame and fortune, and shining family ties. Learning itself means power, and in modern society, the worship of learning has evolved into the worship of education and career, which helps learners to exhibit their learning behavior on social platforms.

3.3   The Alienation Mechanism of Paid Self learners

Learning Behavior Alienation: Pursuing Data

Operators usually promote study rooms as tranquil places in busy cities, but from the moment learners pay, they are forced into a pursuit of efficiency. If learners realize that consumption in the workplace is ineffective, they will stop continuing to consume. To prevent this situation from happening, operators will digitize the learning process of learners. The application of data tracking technology can have a motivating effect on the learning behavior of learners. The dependence of learners on data tracking technology is actually the evaluation of learning effectiveness entrusted to technical algorithms. The value rationality of "learning process" gives way to the instrumental rationality of "accumulation of learning time". Learners are addicted to watching their study time, appreciating their beautiful learning environment, and displaying their study notes, but they overlook the process and purpose of learning itself. In this process, learning behavior undergoes alienation, becoming a performance of learning and an accumulation of data.

Alienation of Learning Subjects: Reproduction of Perfect Self

FBeck and Baumann have both used reflexivity and fluid modernity to describe the phenomenon of individuals actively seeking information and making choices about life.[11] An important feature of late modern society is the individualism that focuses on oneself and the body, and innovative concepts and practices have become the center of personal life and organization. Self management is a transformation carried out for personal growth, career success, and health and well-being. Self management and consumerism are bound together. In the context of consumerism, body consumption has multiple meanings such as alienation, confusion, and disorder. Self learners, under the promotion of capital, on the one hand, pay to shape a "perfect self" to boost capital, and on the other hand, strive to meet the requirements of a "rational persona" under the work ethics of capital construction. In the blueprint for a "happy life" created by digital capitalism, the power of capital utilizes user self anxiety to force users to follow a unified digital standard. The truth is concealed, and it is precisely because of this that people willingly "force themselves to approach the" ideal life picture "prescribed by capital rationality, ultimately leading to the complete materialization of life."[12]

Learning Data Alienation: Free Digital Labor

The collusion between digital technology and commercial capital calls for new productive forces, changes the production mode of the digital era, and also gives birth to new forms of labor, thus giving rise to digital labor. While paying self learners consume their bodies, the real-time learning data calculated by their mobile phones and their self-expression are also adding momentum to digital capital. Self learners immersed in joyful emotions constantly produce various learning data, enrich platform content, attract new users to join, without realizing that they have fallen into the false illusion fabricated by platform capital ideology. They cannot think independently and are alienated from their own brains. Their thoughts and actions can only obey the platform's production

system, voluntarily and continuously produce data results, achieving self driven self exploitation, that is, exploiting their own production results, exploiting their emotional contributions, exploiting their social abilities, and contributing them to the platform in a data-driven form. On the surface, the platform provides a cheap and free leisure experience, but in essence, it attracts users to voluntarily contribute their learning content and social relationships, making them conscious of becoming data workers and contributing the remaining value of data to the platform's capital free of charge.

4   Conclusion

This article is based on critical theory and employs participatory observation and in-depth interviews to study the phenomenon of paid self-study among urban youth. The collusion between information technology and capital is constantly rewriting the production and lifestyle of modern society in an unprecedented way. The phenomenon of paid self-study has revealed people's hidden concerns about survival in the era of accelerating society and risk society. People's understanding of self subjectivity has deviated, and they constantly train themselves under the dual supervision of themselves and others, investing their faith in digital fetishism into the creation of a perfect self, and falling into the trap of self alienation.

Reference

1. Shi Siwei. The "implosion" of the technological era: from McLuhan, Baudrillard to Harawi [J]. Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China), 2023,45 (05): 21-29+36. DOI: 10.19997/j.cnki. xdcb.2023.05.012.
2. Shao Peng, Wang Jinting. Intervention, Connection, and Communication: Digital Revitalization of Online Popular Scenic Spots Check ins and Locality [J]. Youth Journalist, 2023 (22): 48-51. DOI: 10.15997/j.cnki. qnjz.2023.22.010.
3. Wang Yilin, Xu Yingqi, Dong Chenyu. Manipulating "Beauty": Beauty Tools and Their Relational Use in Chinese Live Show Platforms [J]. Women's Research Journal, 2023 (04): 116-128.
4. Consumer society [M] Jean Baudrillard,2014.
5. Tao Dongfeng. Body Aesthetics in the Context of Consumer Culture [J]. Marxism and Reality, 2010 (02): 27-34. DOI: 10.15894/j.cnki.cn11-3040/a2010.02.001.
6. The Birth of New Alienation [M] Hartmut Rosa.
7. Lefebvre on the Situationists: An Interview[J]. Kristin Ross; Henri Lefebvre.October,1997.
8. Jiang Ling. Physical Consumption of Urban Cultural Space: Centered on Physical Bookstore Space [J]. Journal of Shenzhen University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition), 2023,40 (05): 57-66.
9. Liu Yijun, Zhou Yipei, Wang Yanlong. Quantifying Health in Life: Two Way Domestication and Order Writing in Time Management Media [J]. Journalism, 2022 (12): 53-64. DOI: 10.15897/j.cnki.cn51-1046/g2.2022.12.002.
10. Burnout Society [M] Han Bingzhe. CITIC Publishing House. 2019.

11. Hao Zhichang. Further Exploration of Modernity Issues: The Logic and Reasonable Forms of "Accelerating Modernity" [J/OL]. Journal of Southwest University (Social Sciences Edition): 1-11 [2024-03-10] http: //hp.kns.cnki.net.libproxy.v.zzu.edu.cn/kcms/detail/ 50. 1188.C.20240306.1037.007.html.
12. Liu Danling. Image Anxiety: Digital Beauty, Self objectification, and Post Human Drama [J]. Journal of Northwest Normal University (Social Science Edition), 2019,56 (04): 48-55. DOI: 10.16783/j.cnki. nwnus. 2019. 04.006.