# A Study on Symbolic Consumption of Gifting Behavior in Pan-Entertainment PK Live Streaming on Douyin

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**Abstract:** With the rapid popularization of digital media, Douyin's pan-entertainment PK live streaming has formed intense interactive competition and a mature gifting consumption ecosystem. Virtual gifts, fan hierarchy systems and streamer performances in live rooms jointly construct a complete symbolic system. Based on Baudrillard's symbolic consumption theory and Collins' interaction ritual chains theory, this paper analyzes the symbolic consumption characteristics of live-stream gifting behavior from three dimensions: commercial operation logic, bodily performance and hierarchical symbolism. It further interprets the dual symbolic values of emotional comfort and identity recognition carried by audience gifting practices. The research finds that symbolic production is jointly shaped by platform capital mechanisms and streamer hierarchical operation. Audience gifting is not merely recreational consumption, but a behavioral practice to obtain emotional sustenance, community belonging and real-life identity compensation through virtual symbols. Nevertheless, the symbolic carnival brings about prevalent problems such as irrational overdraft consumption, vulgar PK performances, virtual identity alienation and platform symbolic involution, which require standardized industrial governance. Accordingly, this paper proposes a collaborative governance path covering platforms, streamers, audiences and regulatory authorities, aiming to eliminate the negative effects of symbolic consumption and promote the healthy development of pan-entertainment live streaming on short-video platforms.
**Key words:** pan-entertainment live streaming; live streaming gifting; consumerism; symbolic consumption

## Introduction

The China Online Audiovisual Development Research Report (2024) shows that, as of December 2023, the number of professional streamers had reached 15.08 million, the average daily update volume of short videos on major short-video platforms was nearly 80 million, and the number of daily live streaming sessions exceeded 3.5 million [1]. Watching online live streaming has become a new entertainment mode for the whole population, and PK-style pan-entertainment live streaming, relying on strong competitiveness and high interactivity, has given rise to a huge gifting consumption market. But live-room gifting has long transcended simple online interaction and evolved into a typical symbolic consumption behavior in the digital age. At present, chaos occurs frequently in the short-video live streaming industry, and problems such as large irrational gifting by netizens, gift comparison in live rooms and vicious PK performances continue to arouse heated social discussion. Relying on theories of symbolic consumption, this paper sorts out the complete chain of symbolic production in live rooms, interprets the psychological logic behind fan gifting behavior, reflects on the practical problems brought by symbolic consumption, and proposes corresponding optimization and governance paths.

# Core Concepts and Theoretical Basis

## 2.1 Definition of Core Concepts

Pan-entertainment PK live streaming is a form of short-video live streaming based on diverse talent displays such as singing, dancing and chatting, combined with streamers' random co-hosted battles. Live-streaming gifting is a paid interaction mechanism constructed by platforms: users recharge real currency to exchange for platform-specific virtual currency, then use the virtual currency to purchase virtual gifts of different prices and special effects and give them to streamers, and the platform and the streamer share the gift revenue in a fixed proportion. It is the most core and most direct commercial monetization means for entertainment streamers on short-video platforms.

## 2.2 Core Supporting Theories

First, Baudrillard's theory of symbolic consumption in The Consumer Society. Baudrillard proposed that modern consumer society has completed a comprehensive commodification transformation: all people, objects and relationships can be endowed with commodity attributes and symbolic value, and the symbolic value of objects thoroughly overrides use value [2]. In Douyin live rooms, the streamer's bodily image, talent performance and emotional response are no longer simply free entertainment content, but commodified symbols that can be exchanged and priced; fans complete their identity distinction from ordinary viewers by purchasing and displaying various live-room symbols, and the symbol itself becomes the core object of consumption behavior.

Second, Collins' interaction ritual chains theory. Building on Durkheim's ritual theory, Collins constructed the interaction ritual chain and pointed out that a complete interaction ritual contains four elements: group assembly, a common focus of attention, shared emotion and the generation of group symbols [3]. Live rooms naturally satisfy the conditions for ritual generation: a large number of viewers gather online simultaneously, and the whole audience focuses attention uniformly on the streamer and the PK battle process. Behaviors such as gifting, flooding the screen with bullet comments, collective cheering and unified thanks to the top donor continuously transmit and amplify shared emotion, forming a strong collective emotional resonance. Long-term stable ritual interaction produces exclusive group symbols, such as fan badges and community logos, and continuously strengthens the sense of group belonging.

# 2. Symbolic Consumption Characteristics of Gifting Behavior in Douyin PK Live Streaming

"A symbol is a perception regarded as carrying meaning, and meaning must be expressed through symbols" [4]. In consumer society the symbol becomes a characteristic; symbols can be clothes, cars, residences, flowers on a screen, or even a person himself, and all symbols are endowed with commodified attributes and carry deeper meanings.

## 2.1 Commercialization of Symbolic Consumption

"Baudrillard explicitly declared: 'We are in a situation where consumption controls the whole of life'" [5]. After passing through the stage of consumption of objects, the stage of consumption alienation and now the stage of symbolic consumption, what we pay more attention to is the symbol behind the commodity and the meaning people give to this symbol. "Consumer society" thoroughly commercializes daily life.

The commercialization of symbolic consumption is becoming more and more common and integrated into our daily life. Live streaming itself is a commercialized behavior; the monetization logic of Douyin live streaming is to realize platform profit through virtual gift gifting. In terms of the way of gifting, fans first recharge money on the live streaming platform to purchase virtual currency, then use the virtual currency to buy virtual gifts and give them to the streamer at an opportune moment, and finally the streamer converts the virtual gifts into real income according to the platform's revenue-sharing ratio. In order to promote fan consumption, Douyin offers gifts with different meanings and effects; fans at different levels can unlock different gifts and have exclusive markers when appearing in the live room.

## 2.2 The Body as a Consumed Symbol

In The Consumer Society, Baudrillard holds that "consumer society" makes human sexuality and the body consume themselves. On the one hand, sexuality and the body are operated as capital; on the other hand, they are consumed as objects of consumption [6].

In cyberspace, new social relations and meanings are created. The streamer's self-presentation mainly relies on the body and language, using the body as a symbol to interact with fans and establish emotional connection. Streamers all aim at gaining likes, follows and gifts, so their bodily image is inevitably displayed in accordance with fans' requirements, aesthetics and currently popular topics, presenting a front-stage body and constantly revising the performance form according to fans' demands. Streamers differentiate their ways of thanking fans according to the size of the gifts: a fan who sends sunglasses receives only verbal thanks, while a fan who sends a Carnival can ask the streamer to sing or dance. When a fan's badge level reaches a higher tier, the streamer holds a special congratulation event in the live room to give the fan a full sense of ritual; the internet breaks the boundaries of time and space, and when celebrating for a fan it creates the feeling that the celebration is prepared for her alone — in reality, through the marketing persona, other fans are made to continue gifting, so that the body becomes a beautiful consumer good; amplified by the mass media, fans are induced, forming a group carnival. At this point the body is already regarded as a consumer good, and bodily consumption acquires symbolic attributes.

# 3. Symbolic Value in Gifting Consumption in Douyin PK Live Streaming

In Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, Baudrillard discusses symbolic value specifically: "symbolic value is priced according to the social status and power it represents and other factors" [7].

## 3.1 Emotional Meaning in Gifting Consumption

In real life it is difficult for viewers to establish contact with streamers at the outset; therefore gifts become the medium through which viewers and streamers maintain close contact, and the value of the gifts becomes the measure of a viewer's importance to the streamer. The emotional guidance, mutual encouragement and companionate listening that streamers provide to viewers are to a large extent built on gifting behavior.

The rhythm and interactive feedback of live-streaming gifting endow live streaming with ritual significance; "emotions that are gathered together tend to become more intense" [8]. Giving gifts to the streamer is an indispensable link in integrating into the group: through gifting, viewers achieve a certain form of bodily presence in virtual space and directly or potentially influence the situational interaction of the live room, guiding the attention of those present to focus on the common object of concern. For audiences who follow the same streamer, gifting not only enhances mutual group trust but also stimulates emotional resonance. This emotional resonance, as a feedback mechanism, further promotes the recurrence and repetition of gifting, forming a positive cycle. In other words, gifts construct in the virtual community an interaction model based on a common focus of attention, which, by enhancing group trust and emotional resonance, strengthens the cohesion within the community and the continuity of gifting behavior.

## 3.2 Identity Recognition in Gifting Consumption

The Consumer Society mentions that "consumer society" creates an appearance of "equality". But Baudrillard holds that this is only an illusion of "equality", and that it is extremely difficult for people at the lower levels of society to enter the upper class through the consumption of the same goods.

As a highly differentiated consumption symbol, "gifting" and the amount of gifts symbolize a fan's personal economic strength. In live rooms, consumption has become a basis for dividing people's social levels. Class crossing, which is difficult to realize in real life, can be easily achieved in the live room by simply tapping to send a gift. In real society, buying a "rocket" or a "castle" requires tens of millions or even hundreds of millions of RMB, whereas in the live room it costs only a few hundred or a few thousand RMB; in this process the user's awareness of money is diluted. Because bullet comments refresh quickly in online live streaming, users' comments do not stay on the screen for long. But those

"big brothers" who can send the streamer high-value gifts such as "Carnival" and "Super Rocket" more easily receive the streamer's "roll call" and "personal thanks" than fans who merely watch or cheer in the live room. The streamer will stop the live content to express thanks. A person who may be marginalized in real-life social relations and develops inferiority feelings owing to a lack of emotional satisfaction can, by spending only a few hundred to a few thousand RMB in online live streaming, obtain the attention of thousands or tens of thousands of people in the live room, as well as the respect and praise rarely obtained in daily life. This undoubtedly lowers the cost of attention while magnifying the vanity brought by being noticed and by consumption. Therefore, in order to maintain their image in the live room, "big brothers and big sisters" send high symbolic-value gifts every time they gift. In this context, what consumers pursue is no longer the commodity itself but the status in a certain relational sequence brought by the commodity. People no longer focus on the practical function of goods but on the identity recognition that purchasing goods can bring. Fans obtain exclusive badges or nicknames by gifting to the streamer, strengthening their group identity and sense of belonging in the live-streaming community.

# 4. Practical Dilemmas and Governance Paths in Douyin Pan-Entertainment PK Live Streaming

On the visual-cultural "stage" permeated with consumerism, online live streaming has become a conspicuous fashion. It is worth noting, however, that excessive entertainment tends to make people lose their sense of direction in the flood of consumerism.

## 4.1 Multiple Practical Dilemmas Derived from Symbolic Consumption

First, irrational consumption by audiences and alienation of values. Virtual symbols weaken the perception of money, and some adults engage inadvance consumption and overdraft consumption. Some adolescents have not yet formed mature consumption concepts and are highly susceptible to the enthusiastic atmosphere of live rooms, producing large and unrestrained gifting. Long-term pursuit of virtual rankings and badge privileges makes audiences overvalue the virtual status brought by money, distorting normal views of money and value judgments.

Second, vicious competition in live rooms and the proliferation of vulgar performances. To compete for traffic and stimulate fan gifting, some streamers use extreme rhetoric in PK battles, maliciously set themselves against opponents, and even deliberately create vulgar and spoof performances, seeking audience gifts through dishevelled and conflict-ridden images. Such content caters to shallow sensory stimulation, pollutes the online audiovisual ecology and conveys a bad entertainment orientation.

Third, virtual identity alienation causing psychological imbalance. There is a huge gap between virtual status in the live room and real identity; some fans continue large-scale consumption to maintain a high ranking and high-tier badges, and once they lose the streamer's attention or their ranking falls, they easily develop feelings of loss and anxiety. The model of gaining recognition through money in the virtual world also affects individuals' real social mentality in return.

Fourth, the continuous intensification of symbolic involution under the capital orientation of platforms. Platforms profit from gift revenue sharing, and traffic algorithms take gift data as the core criterion, forcing streamers to continuously design various hierarchical feedback and consumption-stimulating symbolic mechanisms, and fans are forced into endless competition over levels and rankings, forming a consumption involution from which it is hard to escape.

## 4.2 Multi-Subject Collaborative Governance Optimization Paths

First, at the platform level, rule design should be improved and inducing symbolic mechanisms weakened. Platforms should optimize the virtual gift and badge systems, set gifting limits for minors and daily consumption caps for adults, and moderately simplify the pop-up effects of high-value gifts to reduce visual stimulation. Refund mechanisms should be improved, and convenient refund channels opened for irrational large gifting by adolescents.

Second, at the streamer level, industry self-discipline should be strengthened and healthy fan interaction models established. Streamers need to proactively abandon traffic tactics such as vulgar PK and confrontational hype, and

reduce rhetoric that deliberately induces fans to gift. They should design fan-reward forms reasonably, offer more free interaction and online communication benefits, and weaken the binding between money consumption and exclusive privileges. They should proactively guide fans to consume rationally and remind student groups and low-income people to act within their means.

Third, at the audience level, media literacy should be improved and virtual symbolic consumption viewed rationally. Viewers should distinguish virtual symbols from real life and recognize that badge levels and ranking positions are merely online entertainment markers and do not represent real social status. They should establish healthy consumption concepts, avoidadvance and overdraft live-streaming gifting, and avoid continuous large consumption in pursuit of temporary virtual recognition.

Fourth, at the regulatory level, industry norms should be refined and supervision of live-streaming content strengthened. Regulatory authorities should continuously improve laws and regulations on online live streaming and intensify the investigation and punishment of accounts engaged in vulgar PK and malicious gifting inducement. Regular special rectification of the live-streaming industry should be carried out, the main responsibility of platforms consolidated, and the spread of symbolic consumption chaos curbed at the institutional level.

## Conclusion

As an emerging form of entertainment and competition, Douyin PK live streaming is the product of the collusion of consumption, entertainment and media driven by commercial interests. Gifting is not merely a simple economic transaction; it is, more importantly, an important means for viewers to express themselves, project emotions, seek recognition and construct virtual social status in live rooms. However, excessive entertainment often makes people lose their way in consumer society, and a series of social problems and ethical challenges are gradually emerging, such as excessive consumption, the authenticity of virtual identity and the standardized management of gifting behavior, all of which require our continued attention and reasonable solutions.

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