LITERATURE REVIEW OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT PRODUCTS

DongPing Zheng*, Pei Feng, JinFu Huang

School of Business Administration, Guangxi University, Nanning 530004, Guangxi, China. Corresponding Author: DongPing Zheng, Email: zdpgxu@163.com

Abstract: The rise of self-improvement products is closely related to lifelong learning, skill iteration, and mental health needs in modern society. This paper integrates the theories of evolutionary psychology and sociology to reveal that they drive individual development through the dual path of compensatory psychological compensation and developmental multidimensional optimization. Products cover physical, cognitive, economic and spiritual categories, and consumption behavior is influenced by emotional perception (e.g., guilt triggers immediate consumption, and awe reinforces long-term commitment), cognitive motivation (goal setting and social comparison), and social environment (resource competition and group norms). Although technological empowerment has eased class anxiety, it has led to digital exclusion and ethical risks. In the future, it is necessary to strengthen interdisciplinary integration and long-term evaluation, and to balance technological rationality and humanistic care at the practical level in order to promote sustainable development.

Keywords: Self-improvement; Self-improvement products; Compensatory motivation; Emotional perception; Social structure

1 INTRODUCTION

The rise of Self-Improvement Products (SIPs) in the 21st century is closely related to structural changes in modern society. Increased global competition and the transformation of the knowledge economy have created a need for lifelong learning, skill iteration, and mental health[1]. In postmodern values, individuals have shifted from "collective attachment" to "self-empowerment", and the pursuit of individualized growth has become the mainstream ideology[2]. Self-improvement products have become an important growth pole of the new consumer economy, but their rapid expansion has also triggered controversy in the academic community: on the one hand, research has confirmed that such products promote individual class mobility and social equity by lowering the threshold of knowledge acquisition and providing psychological adjustment tools; on the other hand, over-marketing may exacerbate anxiety (e.g., the "knowledge payment trap"), and technology-enabled products have become the most popular form of consumer products in the world. On the other hand, excessive marketing may exacerbate anxiety (e.g., the "knowledge payment trap"), and the ethical risks of data behind technological empowerment (e.g., self-objectification triggered by face recognition) are gradually emerging. Currently, the fields of psychology, sociology and economics have conducted research from the perspectives of consumption motivation, social context and technological intervention, etc. However, the lack of interdisciplinary dialogues, the absence of long-term impact assessment, and the comparative weakness of cultural differences still constrain the deepening of theories. The purpose of this paper is to systematically review the research results at home and abroad, to reveal the dual influence mechanism of self-improvement products on individual behavior and social structure, and to provide theoretical references for optimizing product design, avoiding technological alienation, and promoting sustainable development.

2 SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Self-improvement mechanisms, as an important area of research in evolutionary psychology, reveal the psychological regulatory systems that humans have developed in the process of adapting to their natural and social environments. Evolutionary psychologists point out that this adaptive mechanism prompts individuals to respond to environmental challenges through continuous self-optimization, thus ensuring the continuation of survival advantages[3]. Existing theoretical systems mainly present a dichotomous divide: compensatory self-enhancement (CSE) refers to the psychological compensatory mechanism by which individuals compensate for negative self-evaluations through positive feedback, while basic self-improvement (BSE) emphasizes the process of self-improvement driven by purely developmental motivations[4]. Despite the differences in their paths of action, both are rooted in the fundamental human motivation to pursue self-worth enhancement, which essentially consists of three core dimensions: enhancing personal value perceptions, maintaining a positive self-schema, and averting the threat of negative evaluations.

At the level of theoretical constructs, the Self-Concept Enhancement Strategies Model (SCENT) provides an integrative framework for understanding this mechanism[5]. The model distinguishes two paths of action: direct self-enhancement achieves enhancement by reinforcing positive self-perceptions, while strategic self-improvement encompasses the secondary dimensions of self-improvement, self-validation, and self-assessment. Given the structural complexity of broad self-improvement theory, this article focuses on the narrower dimension of self-improvement, which is the process by which an individual systematically strives to achieve multidimensional development in key areas such as skill refinement, image management, health optimization, and wealth accumulation[5].

Research in developmental psychology suggests that self-improvement motivation shows significant activation during adolescence to early adulthood (18-25 years old). Individuals at this age are faced with critical developmental tasks such as independent development, career exploration, and social relationship building, and their future time perspective is characterized by significant stretching, a cognitive trait that forms a two-way reinforcement mechanism with self-enhancement motivation[6]. Notably, the level of achievement motivation has a significant moderating effect on self-improvement efficacy-individuals with high achievement motivation are more likely to develop goal-directed, sustained improvement behaviors. Evidence from localized studies suggests that when individuals activate self-improvement motivation, they systematically optimize core dimensions such as personality traits, health status, and subjective well-being, thereby building a virtuous psychological ecosystem[7].

3 SELF-IMPROVEMENT PRODUCTS

The concept of self-improvement products is based on the idea of self-improvement and specifically refers to goods and services that can help individuals advance in self-related dimensions such as physical functions (like enhanced physical fitness), psychological capital (such as cognitive improvement), economic capabilities (such as financial intelligence development), or spiritual realms (like spiritual growth)[8]. According to their functional orientation, self-improvement products can be classified into four major types: the first type is physical function enhancement, including fitness equipment and health monitoring devices; the second type is cognitive ability development, such as professional books and educational applications; the third type is economic capital accumulation, for instance, financial intelligence training courses; and the fourth type is spiritual realm improvement, represented by meditation aids[9]. This classification system not only clearly reflects the functional positioning of the products but also profoundly reveals their intrinsic connection with human self-perfection motives. According to evolutionary psychology theory, consuming such products is essentially a modern manifestation of an adaptive behavior - individuals enhance their survival competitiveness through resource investment, a mechanism that can be traced back to the psychological ecological balance theory [5], where product consumption becomes an important strategy for maintaining the self-esteem system. In the development of teenagers, the core functions of self-improvement products focus on the orientation of ability breakthrough, especially emphasizing the assistance in academic competition and career preparation through skill enhancement (such as intelligent learning devices) and physical optimization (such as sports monitoring equipment)[8]. Its mechanism of action is manifested in a three-stage path: knowledge internalization (skill acquisition), task efficiency optimization (performance improvement), and resource accumulation to break through bottlenecks (development empowerment), thereby building a closed-loop improvement model of "input - transformation - output"[10].

4 INFLUENCES OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT PRODUCTS

4.1 Emotion Perception

The driving effect of emotions on the consumption of self-improvement products shows significant compensatory and reinforcing characteristics. Negative emotions (such as guilt and shame) drive consumption by stimulating compensatory needs, while positive emotions (such as awe) enhance the persistence of behavior by strengthening self-control resources.

4.1.1 Compensatory mechanism of negative emotions

Guilt, as a core emotion for cross-domain behavioral regulation, significantly drives consumers to repair their self-concept through the consumption of self-improvement products. For instance, Allard and White found that guilt resulting from failed healthy eating prompts individuals to purchase self-improvement books to alleviate cognitive dissonance[8]. Similarly, research on Chinese high school students indicates that guilt significantly enhances the preference for self-improvement products such as English courses by triggering self-improvement motivation, while shame, due to its self-deprecating tendency, does not have the same effect[11]. Further research shows that rejection-type social exclusion (such as workplace ostracism) drives compensatory consumption by lowering self-esteem, and independent self-construal individuals are more sensitive to this[12]. This suggests that the effect of negative emotions is moderated by the structure of an individual's self-concept.

4.1.2 Reinforcement of self-control by positive emotions

Positive emotions promote the long-term use of self-improvement products by enhancing self-efficacy. Zhao Jianbin's experimental study shows that awe (such as watching nature documentaries) activates the "small self" cognition, significantly enhancing an individual's self-control resources and thereby increasing the preference for self-improvement products like fitness courses. This effect is more pronounced among incremental theory individuals (who believe abilities are malleable)[13]. Additionally, technological means can enhance the effect of positive emotions by increasing self-focus. For example, facial recognition technology, by providing real-time feedback on facial features, activates self-focus and thereby increases consumers' willingness to pay for self-improvement products such as beauty devices[14].

4.1.3 Cultural heterogeneity

Gregg and Sedikides cross-cultural study found that East Asian consumers are more likely to view the consumption of self-improvement products as fulfilling social obligations (such as "improving abilities for the family"), while Western

consumers emphasize personal growth[15]. This difference leads to the differentiation of the driving effects of the same emotions in different cultures. For example, guilt is more likely to trigger the consumption of self-improvement products for social obligations in collectivist cultures.

4.2 Cognitive Motivation

The cognitive motivation system of consumers regulates the adoption and continuous use of self-improvement products through goal-oriented mechanisms and social comparison strategies, and its effect is complexly influenced by ability beliefs and political ideologies.

4.2.1 Goal setting and feedback mechanism

The difficulty of goals and the design of feedback mechanisms are key factors affecting the utility of self-improvement products. Diefenbach found that smart devices (such as water-saving timers) enhance users' self-control motivation by providing immediate behavioral feedback, but their long-term effects depend on the degree of goal internalization[16]. Xiao et al. further pointed out that time cues (such as "limited-time offers") promote the consumption of self-improvement products by activating a locomotion orientation, but overly difficult goals may trigger self-efficacy doubts, leading to behavioral reversals[17]. Therefore, dynamic adaptation algorithms (such as adjusting course difficulty based on user ability) have become technical solutions for optimizing goal setting.

4.2.2 Bidirectional effects of social comparison

The application of social comparison strategies in the marketing of self-improvement products has directional differences. Ma Pu and Li Ji demonstrated through experiments in the Chinese market that positive comparisons (such as "surpass 80% of users") significantly increase the willingness to use fitness apps by stimulating competitive awareness, while negative comparisons (such as "avoid falling behind") may trigger defensive avoidance. However, low self-esteem groups are prone to falling into a negative comparison cycle[18]. Johnson and Angelo found that low self-esteem consumers tend to choose low-quality self-improvement products due to self-verification needs and need to break this cycle through identity reconstruction interventions (such as reinforcing the "quality consumer" label)[19].

4.3 Social Environment

The social environment shapes the collective logic of the consumption of self-improvement products through the pressure of resource competition and group norms. While technological empowerment alleviates class anxiety, it also gives rise to new ethical risks.

4.3.1 Social congestion and status threats

The competition for resources in the process of urbanization has intensified the demand for self-improvement. Social congestion is perceived as a "territorial invasion threat", prompting individuals to obtain class mobility capital through the consumption of self-improvement products, and this effect is more significant in areas with low employment rates and high perception of social equity. Due to the dual high characteristics of resource competition intensity and perception of social equity, first-tier cities in China have become the core scenarios for the consumption of self-improvement products, and the population density is significantly positively correlated with self-improvement motivation[9]. When consumers are faced with status threats, they will perceive loss of control and then purchase self-improvement products to compensate for the sense of loss of control[20].

4.3.2 Group pressure and identity

Group pressure drives compensatory consumption through the identity mechanism. The sense of financial limitation prompts consumers to choose career development and self-improvement products such as MBA courses by triggering self-identity threats (such as "devaluation of professional identity")[21]. Self-identity threats (such as midlife career crises) promote the consumption of self-improvement products by activating problem-focused coping strategies, and the sense of social fairness positively moderates this path[22].

4.3.3 Ethical dilemmas of technology empowerment

Although technologies such as AR and big data have enhanced the personalization level of self-improvement products, excessive technicalization may exacerbate social inequality. AR technology enhances user engagement through immersive experiences (such as virtual language environments), but low-income groups face new digital exclusion due to device access restrictions[23]. Furthermore, the immediate feedback from smart devices may give rise to "clock-in self-improvement", leading users to fall into a false sense of achievement[24], and weakening the sustainability of intrinsic motivation.

5 CONCLUSION

This study systematizes the theoretical connotation, mechanism of action and influencing factors of self-improvement products, revealing their dual impact in individual development and social structure. At the theoretical level, the self-improvement mechanism is rooted in the framework of evolutionary psychology's explanation of adaptive behavior, and constructs a theoretical spectrum of psychological compensation and self-improvement through the dichotomy of compensatory and developmental motivation. The study confirms that emotional perception, cognitive motivation,

social environment and technological empowerment constitute a multidimensional driving system: negative emotions trigger immediate consumption through compensatory demand, while positive emotions promote long-term commitment through self-control reinforcement; the two-way regulation mechanism of goal-setting and social comparison is influenced by the interaction between beliefs about competence and ideology; the pressure of competition for resources and group norms shape the collective logic of consumption, and technological empowerment both alleviates class anxiety and generates digital exclusion. Technological empowerment both relieves class anxiety and creates ethical risks such as digital exclusion.

In practice, the design of self-improvement products needs to balance instrumental rationality and humanistic concern. Technical means such as dynamic adaptation algorithms and immersive experiences can optimize user participation, but the tendency of self-objectification triggered by technological dominance should be avoided. Marketing strategies need to emphasize cultural heterogeneity, such as strengthening the social obligation narrative in collectivist cultures and highlighting the value of personal growth in individualist cultures. Policymakers need to pay attention to the inequality behind technological empowerment, and lower the barriers to participation for disadvantaged groups through the popularization of digital infrastructure and the regulation of data ethics.

Existing research still has three limitations: first, interdisciplinary integration is insufficient, and the research on behavioral mechanisms from the perspective of psychology and the social criticism of technology ethics have not yet formed an effective dialogue; second, long-term impact assessment is missing, and the existing conclusions are mostly based on cross-sectional data, which makes it difficult to reveal the dynamic evolution law of consumption behaviors; and third, the research on cultural differences is weak, and the localized theoretical construction in non-Western contexts still needs to be deepened. Future research can focus on the following directions: (1) constructing an integrated model of emotion-cognition-environment to analyze the mechanism of multifactorial synergy; (2) conducting tracking studies to assess the long-term effects of technological interventions, especially the potential depletion effect on intrinsic motivation; and (3) strengthening cross-cultural comparative analyses to explore the interaction patterns between traditional values and consumerism in the process of modernization. These explorations will provide theoretical support for the construction of a responsible self-improvement ecosystem and promote the transformation of consumption practices from instrumental rationality to sustainable development paradigm.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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