

# Accelerated Society and Time Alienation: A Sociological Analysis of “Military-style” Travel

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**Abstract:** The acceleration of science and technology provides a solid social and material basis for “Military-style” travel; the acceleration of social change makes people rethink the meaning of life and reconstruct social relations by using “Military-style” travel; the acceleration of life rhythm intensifies people's anxiety about death, thus making people more eager to get instant satisfaction. “Military-style” travel is the product of the transformation of accelerated social time structure. The logic of capital growth penetrates into individual time perception through mass media and creates a new time structure, which deliberately creates the “time anxiety” of the whole society, and at the same time uses the “time anxiety” to tie the value of people and consumption together, forming the alienation of people.

**Keywords:** “Military-style” travel; Accelerated society; Alienation

## 1. Introduction

The phrase “Youth has no price, go straight to Lhasa on a hard seat” fired the first shot in the trend of “Military-style” travel among college students. The recent popular cultural and tourism IPs such as “Zibo Barbecue” and “Harbin Ice and Snow World” all have the footprints of college student “specials.” In 2023, according to conventional monitoring, Harbin received a total of 135 million tourist visits, a year-on-year increase of 145.78%, and a 41.4% increase compared to 2019. The city's total tourism revenue reached 169.245 billion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 239.03%, and a 7.4% increase compared to 2019. Among them, college student “specials force” have emerged as an important force driving the development of cultural tourism. As an emerging trend in tourism consumption, “Military-style” travel has attracted the attention of scholars in fields such as economics, statistics, advertising, and marketing.

Overall, academic research on the “Military-style” travel tourism consumption phenomenon is quite limited. Existing studies discuss and analyze “Military-style” travel solely at the micro-behavioral level, predominantly treating it as an individual behavior and examining the psychological motivations behind it. While some scholars have attempted to analyze this phenomenon from the perspective of an accelerating society, their discussions remain superficial, failing to articulate the underlying causes of acceleration and the inherent nature of alienation. As an emerging social phenomenon, the popularity of college student “Military-style” travel is fueled by macro-level social structural forces. As a ubiquitous “social fact,” “Military-style” travel can only be comprehensively and profoundly interpreted within the context of the macro-social structure. This paper aims to theoretically analyze the consumption phenomenon of college student “Military-style” travel from the theoretical perspective of an accelerating society, to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon.

“Military-style” travel is essentially a travel pattern pursued by university students for temporal and spatial experiences, with its “acceleration” characteristic being particularly prominent. German sociologist Hartmut Rosa once described, “We live in an era of pressing time and rapid social operation, so fast that it is difficult to keep up. We are swept up by social acceleration, like running tirelessly on a treadmill, striving to adapt to the chaotic pace of this accelerating age.” [7] In the context of rapid socio-economic development and increasingly rich cultural diversity, “special forces-style tourism,” favored by university students, vividly reflects the phenomenon of social acceleration described by Rosa through its high-speed and efficiency—technological advancements have shortened temporal and spatial distances, the updating of information flows has accelerated the pace of life, and the rapid integration of society and culture has reshaped the lifestyles of youth. Tourism is no longer an exclusive enjoyment limited to the “wealthy and leisurely” class; university students have also eagerly jumped into the trend

of "special forces-style tourism." Some argue that "lifestyle" is an indispensable perspective for insight into contemporary youth culture. [9] "Military-style" travel is precisely a concrete manifestation of this lifestyle, serving as a catalyst to ignite the consumption enthusiasm of university students and, at the same time, a means for them to shape their self-identity and social identity through travel experiences.

## **2. Analysis of the Concept of "Military-style" travel**

Tourism is a unique form of social practice in human society. From a historical perspective, tourism exists in both traditional and modern societies. However, in traditional societies, tourism was a sporadic and incidental event, primarily an activity for aristocratic pleasure, which was not universally accepted by the masses. In contrast, in modern societies, tourism has become a necessity for the general public, a widely accepted and practiced lifestyle, and a mass consumer product. Wang Ning believes that tourism is a social phenomenon that emerged on a large scale in modern society, an objective "social fact" arising from the backdrop of a modern social structure. The interplay of modernity and its conditions of existence, both positive and negative, is one of the social conditions that give rise to modern tourism.

So, what is modernity? For Rosa, modernity is centered on ourselves as individuals. When choosing our own lives, we should not be subject to the interference of political or religious authorities; all choices should be returned to the individual. Initially, the project of modernity aimed to empower individuals with autonomy, but in its implementation, individuals were domesticated into "common" entities by the temporal norms of modern society. Faced with the various challenges and distresses brought about by modernity, people have chosen tourism as a means of seeking temporary "liberation." "Military-style" travel, as an intense and efficient mode of travel, offers modern individuals an alternative lifestyle and pace that differs from their daily routines.

The uniqueness of "Military-style" travel lies in its high efficiency and intensity, enabling tourists to visit as many different attractions and experience various local customs and practices within a limited time. This form of travel encourages tourists to step out of the framework of their daily lives and feel, experience, and engage with things that are usually inaccessible. Through "Military-style" travel, people can temporarily forget the pressures and constraints imposed by modernity, find and discover themselves during their journeys, thereby transcending the "evils" of modernity. Modernity places the "right to choose one's life" in the hands of individuals, encouraging them to pursue a better life. With the reinforcement of this cultural belief in modernity, we desire to experience life at an accelerated pace, thereby enriching the "thickness" of our lives. "Military-style" travel emerges in this modern context, characterized by maximizing the number of attractions visited within the shortest time, compressing time and energy to the extreme, and featuring high cost-effectiveness, speed, variety, and the pursuit of physical limits.

In modern societies, people seize every opportunity to experience and try new things. In fact, the emergence of new things often leads people to rush into them without much thought, leaving them unable to choose what they want to experience. Modernity shapes individual growth and development in unique ways, providing a vast stage for individuals to realize their self-worth and pursue a better life. However, it also brings challenges that cannot be ignored. [1] With the widespread dissemination of popular culture, individual uniqueness is often submerged in uniform aesthetic standards, values, and behavioral patterns, leading to the gradual emergence of "losing one's individuality." This phenomenon is not accidental but an inevitable product of modernity's development. As society accelerates and information technology develops rapidly, popular culture spreads and diffuses at an unprecedented pace, deepening its influence on individuals. Therefore, how to maintain individual uniqueness while pursuing a better life has become an urgent issue in modern societies. Modernity not only showcases the distinctive characteristics of individual development but also reveals a potential trend: individuals may gradually "lose their individuality" within the homogenized popular culture.

## **3. Accelerating Society and "Military-style" travel**

Modernity culture vigorously encourages individuals to broaden their scope of experiences to the fullest extent, thereby fostering comprehensive development of abilities and accumulation of experiences. Nevertheless, this aspiration harbors an inherent contradiction: despite the ever-growing urgency in people's pursuit of experiences, the total amount of time available to each individual remains constant, unchanged. This contradiction underscores that while modernity culture fosters individual growth and development, it also poses challenges and dilemmas in time allocation. Life's pace accelerates relentlessly,

tasks multiply, and as time dwindles, people can only feel overwhelmed by anxiety. Even when individuals attempt to press the "pause button" through leisure and tourism, seeking to counter acceleration and reconnect with their authentic selves, the effectiveness of this resistance dwindles. As the accelerating societal process deepens, tourism—once a means of rebellion against the accelerating society—is forcibly incorporated into the acceleration process by societal structural forces, transforming into a new force of acceleration. [2]

In "Military-style" travel, people no longer prioritize deep, sustained travel experiences but rather emphasize fast-paced, superficial emotional encounters. "30,000 steps a day, visiting 8 attractions" becomes the norm for "special forces travelers." The defining features of "Military-style" travel are "quantity" and "speed." However, as individuals rush to accumulate experiences, they inevitably find themselves trapped in an illusion of busyness. Hartmut Rosa, in his book "Accelerate: The Changing Time Structures of Modern Society," notes that technological acceleration, social change acceleration, and the acceleration of life rhythms have contributed to an accelerating trend in modern society. These three accelerative forces have collectively propelled the popularity of "Military-style" travel, transforming it into a societal phenomenon that ultimately points to the core issue of the accelerating society—time, specifically the social time structure and human conceptions of time.

### ***3.1. Technological Acceleration: Enhancements in Transportation, Communication, and Production Systems***

With the continuous progress and development of society, the transportation network, including highways, railways, aviation, and more, has become increasingly sophisticated, not only enhancing transportation efficiency but also providing more convenient options for people's travel. The improvement of the transportation network has significantly boosted transportation efficiency. The rapid development of highways, railways, and aviation has enabled people to travel from one place to another more quickly and conveniently, drastically reducing travel time and creating the temporal feasibility for "Military-style" travel. Tourists can now visit more attractions within a shorter period, achieving a highly efficient travel experience. [3]

The refinement of the transportation network has also expanded people's travel options. Whether choosing self-driving tours, taking high-speed trains, or flying, tourists can select the most suitable mode of transportation based on their needs and budgets. This diverse range of travel options makes "Military-style" travel more flexible and personalized. [5]

The rapid advancement of communication technology has drastically accelerated the speed of information transmission. Nowadays, people can access tourism information, including attraction introductions, transportation guides, accommodation recommendations, and more, anytime, anywhere, through mobile phones, the internet, and other channels. This facilitates the planning of "Military-style" travel, enabling tourists to obtain a vast amount of information in a short time, formulate detailed travel plans, and better arrange their itineraries to achieve the goal of visiting multiple attractions within a short period. [4]

Concurrently, the continuous improvement of social labor productivity has significantly increased people's income levels and living standards. Moreover, with the enhancement of work systems and the perfection of vacation systems, people now have more leisure time, providing the necessary time guarantee for tourism activities. The rapid development of the tourism industry has brought a diverse array of tourism products to the market. [2] The combined factors of societal progress, the improvement of transportation and communication infrastructure, the enhancement of labor productivity, and the booming tourism industry have jointly laid the essential material foundation and social conditions for the emergence of "Military-style" travel.

### ***3.2. Accelerated Social Change: Reflection on the Meaning of Life and Reconstruction of Social Relationships***

Zygmunt Bauman, in his book *Liquid Modernity*, introduced the concept of "liquid society." A "liquid society" implies that society is no longer a stable and unchanging state; rather, the pace of social change will accelerate rapidly, and it also means that what people once firmly believed in will dissipate, and everything upon which we relied in pre-modern society has dissipated. The acceleration of social change prompts people to rethink the meaning of life. The cultural ideals of modernity guide people to pursue their idealized good life. Upholding such cultural ideals, we pay more attention to the present experience of life. "Living in the moment" and "carpe diem" are the most admired life philosophies of modern people.

"Military-style" travel suddenly gained popularity overnight against the backdrop of the dissipation of the pandemic, the lifting of mobility restrictions in various regions, and the recovery of the tourism market. Those who have experienced significant social changes, like "special forces," begin to redefine the value and meaning of life, with people paying more attention to present happiness and experiences rather than worrying about the distant future. [8]

As the world around individuals gradually accelerates, the relationship between individuals and the world becomes fragile and unstable, and people increasingly lack sufficient time to establish stable social relationships with others. In a rapidly changing society, people increasingly yearn for stable emotional connections. "Military-style" travel is often undertaken by groups of three or five friends, who choose this form of travel to adapt to the rapidly changing society. [7] Through shared travel experiences, they gain common perceptions and experiences, which serve as fertile soil for the growth of collective consciousness. During the sharing of these common experiences, individuals rebuild social relationships, strengthening the bonds between "special forces" members and providing individuals with emotional connections and a sense of belonging within the collective activities. [6] The collective activities of travel unite people in unified social endeavors, continuously reinforcing collective consciousness and emotions, functioning as a means of social integration.

### ***3.3. Accelerated Pace of Life: Society's Overall Time Anxiety***

In contemporary society, the maintenance and efficient operation of social order are achieved through a sophisticated mechanism of time regulation, akin to a massive clock that rigorously governs everyone's physical time. However, as society rapidly evolves, this clock seems to have been pressed with an acceleration button, swiftly hastening people's experience of life time. In this context, individuals often find themselves trapped in a temporal dilemma, perpetually chasing an ever-speeding clock while feeling that "plans never keep pace with changes." We no longer merely perceive time as an objective entity but rather as a social resource, a crucial factor driving social progress and individual development. Nevertheless, this excessive pursuit and compression of time have also led to psychological stress and anxiety. We attempt to control life through precise time management, often neglecting the inherent rhythm and cadence of life itself.

The rapid acceleration and intricate entanglements of daily life plunge us into a risky scenario of "loss." This risk does not emerge out of thin air but stems from two fundamental logics of social acceleration: the logic of growth and the logic of enhancement. They are like double-edged swords, advancing society and development on one hand while subtly shaping people's desires and anxieties on the other. The logic of growth propels us to relentlessly seek material abundance and accumulation, yearning for more to demonstrate our value and status. However, this relentless pursuit often leaves us exhausted and empty, neglecting the essence and meaning of life. Meanwhile, the logic of enhancement urges us towards excellence and perfection, striving for faster speeds and higher efficiency. Fearful of missing a moment of life, we grasp at every potential opportunity, yet this overzealous pursuit often deprives us of savoring and appreciating life, making us hurried and restless.

The phrase "youth has no price" emphasizes "immediacy," aimed at eliminating waiting and urging people to fulfill their desires prematurely. Every instantly gratified desire is continually reinforced, and this entanglement in immediacy plunges people into anxiety about time. As individuals strive to enrich their "life's depth," they simultaneously experience unprecedented time anxiety, a sentiment that permeates society and becomes a prevalent psychological state among moderns. We live in an era of information explosion and myriad experiences, yet this abundance of experiences does not necessarily translate into profound and meaningful life experiences. In fact, we often fall into a paradox: as experiences multiply, the depth of our life experiences dwindles. This phenomenon stems from our inadequate absorption and appropriation of our actions and experiences. We rush through them like transients, failing to delve into their essence. This superficial approach results in our life experiences shattering into fragments, unable to form a coherent and profound inner world. This rupture between self and experience, in turn, triggers profound self-alienation. We gradually lose ourselves amidst endless experiences, oblivious to our genuine feelings and needs. Increasingly reliant on external recognition and affirmation, we neglect our internal growth and transformation. [7]

## **4. Time Acceleration and Human Alienation**

These three sources of motivation converge on a core element: time. We can broadly categorize time into three types: physical time, life time, and social time. Since the invention of clocks, modern humans

have gained a precise perception of time. Prior to the widespread use of clocks, people's perception of time was often vague and subjective. However, with the advent of clocks, the precision of time allowed every event to be tagged with a definitive timestamp, enabling individuals to clearly understand the intervals and sequences between events, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of the world and themselves. This is what we call physical time. Life time, as a profound and unique temporal concept, depicts the continuous life experiences and journeys undergone by individuals throughout their lengthy lifespan. Meanwhile, social time, based on the objectivity of physical time, is a unique temporal structure of modern society formed through external social construction. The standardized time system represented by clocks has not only driven the rapid modernization process in production and consumption but also profoundly shaped a modern temporal structure distinct from physical time. This novel temporal structure, like an invisible net, gradually permeates individuals' inner depths, profoundly altering our perception and understanding of time. In this process, individuals' temporal perception is reshaped by the social time of modernity. We no longer rely solely on natural light and shadow changes or our body's biological rhythms to perceive time; instead, we are increasingly influenced by the standardized time system. Our daily lives, work rhythms, and even leisure and entertainment gradually align with this new temporal structure, forming a brand-new mode of temporal perception. This new temporal perception structure differs from the naturally occurring physical time; it is essentially social time manipulated by capital. In modern society, time manipulation technology has evolved into a social media-oriented technology, profoundly impacting social structures and people's daily lives. Whether at work or in life, individuals strive to maximize "time density," accomplishing more with less time to adapt to the accelerated social pace. In the historical context of digital capitalism and platform capitalism, work time continuously encroaches on "my" time, making it seem more challenging than ever to gain sovereignty over time.

#### ***4.1. Media Constructs a New Social Time Structure***

With the rapid development and popularization of modern mass media, it has deeply penetrated into people's perception of time and the formation of their concepts, especially playing a vital role in shaping new conceptions of time. The extensive use of electronic media has made people unconsciously follow the logic of "media time" when planning their daily lives. Media imperceptibly fills the gaps in people's time, leading to an increasing dependence on and sense of control over media. When an individual's time is dominated and alienated by media, they fall into continuous busyness. At the same time, the resonance between media technology and time is also reshaping people's perception of space and time amidst social acceleration. The dissemination and promotion of modern tourism have benefited from the material media provided by advanced media communication technology and the Internet, breaking down the boundaries of time and space and fundamentally transforming people's communication methods in the process of deeply mediated society. [6] With the continuous updating and development of location media and technology, material individuals can frequently switch and move at high speed in modern society. In this process, media, with its powerful reshaping power, profoundly reconstructs people's perception of time, creating a brand-new temporal structure. This new structure, in the traditional dimensions of cyclical and linear time, presents a unique landscape of distributed movement. [6]

This distributed movement landscape resembles a scroll composed of dotted, scattered elements, lacking the continuity and stability of traditional temporal structures. Each temporal node seems independent of the whole, creating a fragmented, jump-cut time experience. Under this temporal structure, people's daily lives, work rhythms, and even psychological feelings are profoundly affected. More importantly, this new temporal structure leads to a significant deviation between people's subjective experience of time and objective measurement of time. Subjectively, individuals may feel that time passes more quickly and the pace of life is more intense; objectively, however, the passage of time remains constant. This deviation makes an individual's time seem to "shrink" invisibly, as if consumed by the acceleration of modern society. [2]

The rapid development of mass media has provided people with a broader range of options for using and consuming time. However, it has also reconstructed people's daily perception of time, profoundly altering their existential state. With the disintegration of the traditional linear temporal order, time in the information age becomes increasingly fragmented, akin to montage editing in films. This change necessitates individuals to continually adjust and transform their identities and roles amidst social acceleration, in order to address increasingly complex and diverse issues and challenges.

#### ***4.2. Bundling Human Value and Consumption to Enhance Social Reproduction Rates***

The comprehensive acceleration of social production and consumption is indeed the inevitable

consequence of modern society's relentless quest for advancement and expansion. Within this logical construct, the seamless circulation of capital emerges as the cornerstone for generating substantial profits. In a thoroughly industrialized modern society, the rationale behind capital adeptly employs media instruments like advertising and cinema, subtly crafting people's value systems, aspirations, and lifestyles towards an aspiration for material prosperity and heightened consumption. Advertising, particularly, occupies a pivotal position in this narrative. Through relentless infiltration and persuasion, it meticulously transforms mundane products into embodiments of value and identity, bestowing them with deeper meanings while subtly altering consumption ideologies and behaviors. Individuals find themselves pursuing commodities portrayed as "ideal" by advertising to assert their social standing and individuality. This surge of non-genuine desires and compulsive spending stems from the meticulous orchestration and manipulation of advertising strategies. Here, consumer needs transcend mere utilitarian value, evolving into quests for the symbolic meanings embedded within products. These transformations elevate commodities from mere necessities to vessels imbued with abstract, symbolic qualities. Capitalists, astutely recognizing this shift, seamlessly integrate products with specific identities and values, further fueling advertising and marketing endeavors.

As we progressively evolve towards an information-driven society, digital media technologies have ingrained themselves into the fabric of daily life, revolutionizing information access, interaction dynamics, and, to a degree, even cognitive frameworks and value systems. They facilitate the seamless dissemination and cultivation of commodity meanings, fostering wider acceptance and recognition of these concepts.

The mantra "Youth is invaluable; embark on a hard-seat journey to Lhasa" ignited a nationwide travel frenzy among college students, akin to a prairie fire sweeping through their ranks. Media has imbued consumer behavior with unique symbols and symbolic significances, intimately linking tourism with personal identity. Tourists engage in leisurely pursuits, fulfilling material desires before delving into a deeper quest for self-identity, finding fleeting moments of belonging and anticipation. [4]This psychological allure underpins the allure of the "special forces" tourism phenomenon. [10]Consumerism shrewdly exploits the fear of missing out by fostering internet sensations, inciting tourists to race against time to visit these destinations, thereby intensifying their mobility and contributing to the tourism boom. All these transformations are justified within the capital-driven logic of the digital era, where growth, acceleration, and innovation, fueled by capital, continually exacerbate human alienation in the relentless pursuit of profit. In this relentless race, individuals risk becoming mere cogs in the machinery of capital logic, reduced to instruments in the acceleration of society.

## 5. Conclusions

Amidst the dual backdrop of an increasingly accelerated social operation and a growing scarcity of time resources, immediacy has emerged as a salient feature of modern life, rendering the phenomenon of "plans falling behind changes" increasingly prevalent. In today's fast-paced daily life environment, we risk "losing" all the excitement. Although death serves as the natural boundary for fulfilling desires, the accelerated pace of life offers potential possibilities for achieving more in the present. This paradoxical tension, where people pursue more and faster, also intensifies their sense of urgency and anxiety about time. This accelerated living scenario not only alters our lifestyles but profoundly influences our psychological experience and cognitive structure of time. Thus, we need to reexamine this accelerated pace of life to seek a balance between pursuing more and faster while maintaining inner peace and contentment.

The increase in free time brought about by technological advancements was originally meant to provide people with more opportunities to enjoy life and develop their individuality. However, reality has shown that under the drive of capital, these free moments are constantly compressed and deprived, leading to a heightened sense of time pressure. This phenomenon not only contradicts the original intention of technological progress but also exposes the alienation and materialization of human beings in capitalist societies. Hence, we must reevaluate the relationship between technological progress and social development, as well as the role of capital in it. While pursuing social progress, we should prioritize human comprehensive development and liberation, ensuring that societal advancement genuinely serves human well-being. Rosa, in his book "The Birth of New Alienation," insightfully analyzes the profound transformation of temporal norms amidst the acceleration of modern society. He points out that these norms have gradually transformed into collective norms under new totalitarianism in the current social context. This new totalitarianism differs from the traditional political authoritarianism in its roots and manifestations, appearing more subtle and complex. It does not exercise control through overt political means but instead silently permeates every corner of the social structure,

influencing people's lifestyles and thought patterns. [9]

The three driving forces converge on a core element: time. The standardized time system represented by clocks and watches not only accelerates the modernization process in the fields of production and consumption but also profoundly shapes a social time structure vastly different from physical time. This new social time structure, like an invisible net, gradually penetrates into the depths of individuals' hearts and minds. In this process, individuals' perception of time is reshaped by the modern social time. We no longer rely solely on natural changes in light and shadow or our body's biological clock to perceive time. Instead, we are increasingly influenced by the standardized time system, thereby forming a brand-new mode of time perception. Essentially, this is a social time manipulated by capital. In modern society, the technology of manipulating time has evolved into a social mediatization technology, profoundly impacting social structures and people's daily lives.

By implementing meticulous time management, intense life rhythms, and ubiquitous efficiency requirements, this new totalitarianism confines individuals within a seemingly rational yet oppressive temporal framework. Within this framework, individuals' free will and creativity are significantly restricted, and daily life becomes highly standardized. This new totalitarianism not only deprives people of their right to enjoy life but also subtly erodes their critical spirit and resistance consciousness. Although unrecognized, it is universally accepted as the norm. Today, people clearly perceive that the force of acceleration is not liberating but rather a heavy oppression. The phenomenon of time acceleration in the digital age further confirms the existence of this "new alienation." [10]

In summary, this paper argues that technological advancements rapidly provide a solid social and material foundation for "Military-style" travel; accelerated social changes prompt people to reevaluate the meaning of life and adopt "Military-style" travel as a means to reconstruct social relationships; and the speeding up of life's pace intensifies people's anxiety about death, leading to a stronger desire for immediate gratification. "Military-style" travel is a product of the accelerated transformation of society's temporal structure. [10]The logic of capital growth permeates individuals' perception of time through mass media and creates a new temporal structure, deliberately fostering a collective "time anxiety" across society. Meanwhile, it exploits this "time anxiety" to bind human value to consumption, resulting in alienation. From a humanistic perspective, this paper adopts a critical stance towards this type of travel. However, objectively speaking, "Military-style" travel, as a personalized and diversified travel experience, has become an important outlet for college students and young people to relieve life pressures, allowing them to temporarily escape difficulties in daily life and studies through such travel. In this sense, "Military-style" travel can also be seen as a practical strategy employed by college students to cope with the dilemma of time compression in an accelerated society.

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