Cognitive dissonance and self-concepts under new consumption era

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Abstract

Cognitive dissonance has served as a theoretical cornerstone in consumer studies, imposing a significant impact on psychology and marketing contexts. Extensive literature has investigated consumers' decision making, behavioural pattern under the influence of dissonance at different consumption stages (e.g., buyer's remorse, anticipate guilt). However, the knowledge about the underlying mechanisms of how dissonance drive or hinders consumption pattern remains limited.

In this research, we introduce self-concepts as the footholds in luxury consumption supported by cognitive dissonance theory. This research has also addressed the moderating role of narcissism on dissonance, to see if personality trait exerts certain influence across contexts. Together three independent studies are conducted.

In the first study, starting from looking at the antecedents which causes cognitive dissonance, we drew on self-congruity theory to investigate how different self-concepts might potentially serving as the psychological underpinnings that influences sustained luxury consumption tendency (customer loyalty). Most literature suggests that dissonance is mainly caused by self-discrepancy and consumers are motivated to reduce anticipated dissonance by behaving in a self-congruent manner, namely self-congruity effect. However, previous research offers confined evidence on the underlying mechanism of such effect and is limited to single cultural context in luxury consumption. Therefore, to examine how self-congruity effects drives customer loyalty in luxury consumption across cultures, we conducted a comparative study between China and US by applying SEM analysis. The four underlying self-concepts (e.g., self-esteem, self-consistency, social consistency, social approval) are examined and how they influence customer loyalty are varied between the east and the west. We find that: luxury symbolism positively influences self-consistency, social consistency, social approval, and self-esteem, and subsequently impacts self-affirmation and customer loyalty.

However, for US consumers, self-esteem and social approval have significantly negative impacts on self-affirmation, while for Chinese consumers, social approval has no significant impact on self-affirmation. In additional, self-construal plays a significant impact on self-concepts in luxury consumption. For example, interdependent self-construal positively moderates the relationship between luxury symbolism, and social approval and social consistency. Independent self-construal positively moderates the relationship between luxury symbolism and self-consistency, and

negatively influences the relationship between luxury symbolism and self-esteem. This study helps us to uncover the underlying mechanism of self-congruity effect in luxury consumption and highlight the cultural difference. Based on these findings, we asked ourselves to what extent does luxury consumption intertwines with self-concepts and whether there are wider self-dimensions being neglected by current literature. Given the novel context of pandemic which transforms mass luxury perceptions greatly, we therefore conducted the following study to further explore luxury perceptions and cognitive dissonance theory.

In the second study, we adopt an exploratory approach to decode the mass luxury meaning and argued that traditional luxury consumption which is normally considered as dissonance-induced behaviour does no longer dominate the market. Meanwhile the major transformations of mass luxury are identified from theoretical perspectives and the important role of self-orientation is addressed. By conducting in-depth interviews covering wide demographic features, we find four self-as mass luxury dimensions: self as content, self as process, self as context, self–other and further developed masstige theory by arguing psychological consonance as the ultimate luxury under pandemic impact. In terms of cognitive dissonance theory, this study contributes to both its antecedents and coping literature, specifically advances new mass luxury as a novel process for dissonance mitigation instead of passive coping. Such process resolves the inherent dissonant backfire on the hedonic essence of the luxury experience through altering intrinsic luxury perceptions, which improves consumers' well-being. However, after acknowledging how situational factors and personal factors influences dissonance level based on the first two studies, we were interested to see if there are other individual factors potentially influence dissonance response in apart from luxury context. Given the function of personality characteristics which normally indicate consumers' regular behavioural pattern and the high theoretical relevance with cognitive dissonance, narcissism is identified as another vital variable which has long been neglected, therefore conducted the next study.

In the third study, we chose the younger segmentation in the new technology adoption context to examine the moderating effect of narcissism on cognitive dissonance and subsequent behaviour. Previous literature states that people with narcissistic tendencies like to manipulate others by creating cognitive dissonance also they are the ones who demonstrate superior valence on self-concepts through different social platforms. In this study, we seek to fin d out whether people with narcissistic trait encounters dissonance in new technology adoption and how different types of narcissism vary. To be

specific, we look at the customizability sector enabled by AI and machine learning techniques, which facilitates narcissists self-promotion motivations on social media. By developing a SEM model illustrating the antecedent and behavioural consequences of cognitive dissonance in the adoption of technology customizability, we find that vulnerable narcissism has a significant moderating effect on technology dissonance, which is specifically induced by privacy concerns, whereas the other type – grandiose narcissism does not make an impact on the dissonance level under the given context.

Through the three studies, we extend the extant literature on self-concepts and cognitive dissonance. First, we fill the literature gap by revealing the psychological underpinnings of self-congruity effect originating from cognitive dissonance theory in luxury consumption and extends the current literature by introducing self-construal as important moderators on self-congruity effect. Second, we present comprehensive self-as dimensions to redefine the meaning of mass luxury in the new era underpinned by psychological consonance and contributes to cognitive dissonance literature, which nourishes the knowledge of masstige concept. Third, we advance our knowledge of the interaction between narcissism and cognitive dissonance in new technology context and extends the trade-offs of customizability among younger generation. Importantly, we disclose the psychological myth of 'self' related to dissonance process. Besides the contributions to cognitive dissonance literature, we also advance the theories applied in the research, such as self-congruity theory, self-affirmation theory and masstige theory. Practically, we offer a few managerial implications for marketers to stand closely with what consumers' desires and come up with timely adjustment on strategy making. Taken together, we contribute to relevant fields in both theoretical and practical dimensions.

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1.Introduction

1.1 Research background

Although the Covid-19 pandemic has severely disrupted the global economy and significantly inhibited the reliably buoyant luxury goods market, this market has gained in overall value during 2020. The world's top 100 largest luxury companies achieved US$285 billion revenue in 2020, with yearly growth of 6.4% (Statista, 2021). Customers in the luxury segments are attracting increasing interest among business analysts and research scholars. Luxury consumption brings rich psychological values beyond the mere functionality provided by products or services (Dubois et al,2021; Kauppinen-Räisänen et al, 2019).

Previous research has established varies of research streams to investigate how luxury consumption facilitates or hinders psychological functions (e.g., status seeking (Dubois et al,2021), experiential hedonism (Holmqvist et al, 2020), and self-extensions (Yuksel et al,2019). Recent consumer research suggests that people who consume luxury products may hold conflicted cognitions between the desire of spending (vs the experience of pleasure) and the aspiration of doing the right thing (vs avoid post purchase guilt) (Berens, 2013). Borges (2014) also suggests consumers nowadays have shown a growing concern of both individual and social issues including mental well-being, economic decline and environmental deterioration, and they are looking for a conscious consumption pattern which provides justification for their spending and alleviates guilt, while remaining the affection of pleasure. In addition, Wong & Dhanesh (2017) states that four paradoxical discrepancies involved in luxury consumption which might potentially induce cognitive dissonance. They are contradictions between elitism–equality, hedonism–universalism, excess–moderation and emotions–rationality. Such conflict or discrepancy is also known as cognitive dissonance, which has severe marketing consequences such as buyer's remorse (Keng & Liao, 2013), complaint intension (Park et al, 2015) and decreased purchases (Sharma, 2014). The next paragraph will mainly discuss what cognitive dissonance is, the antecedents and the consequences within consumers themselves.

Originally defined as a psychological uncomfortable state caused by the inconsistency between two or more cognitive elements (Festinger, 1957), cognitive dissonance has been served as a corner stone in social psychology, sociology and consumer studies for centuries (see Brehm, 2007; Kenworthy et al, 2011; Martinie, Milland, & Olive, 2013). The theory suggests that consumers

prefer cognitive consistency over inconsistency in general and would encounter psychological discomfort when experiencing discrepancies (Cooper, 2012). Although the term 'dissonance' can be used interchangeably as cognitive discrepancy and the subsequent feelings of discomfort, we distinguish these two in this thesis (Harmon-Jones et al, 2009). Festinger (1957) and other researchers have proposed different perspectives on how oneself could affect the response of cognitive discrepancy (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). One perspective suggests that cognitions on oneself represent the expectancies which promotes dissonance arousal (e.g., Aronson & Carlsmith, 1962; Duval & Wicklund, 1972).

More recently, there are researchers suggesting that cognitions about oneself could function as the resources for dissonance mitigation (e.g., Steele et al, 1993; Aronson et al, 1999). However, there have been other counterarguments indicating cognitions related to self-domains are irrelevant to the dissonance arousal or reduction process (e.g., Cooper & Duncan, 1971; Cooper & Fazio, 1984). In fact, there has been empirical support for the propositions made under each perspective, concerning the role of 'self' in cognitive dissonance process (e.g., Steele et al., 1993; Cooper & Duncan, 1971).

It is fair to say that there is no consensus among scholars of how and what the role of self-concepts in dissonance (vs consonance) process. According to Higgins (1987), self-discrepancy is defined as the incongruity between how an individual perceives himself and how he desires to be viewed by others, otherwise named self-congruity. Sirgy (1985) further developed self-incongruity into four dimensions namely the actual self-incongruity, ideal self-incongruity, social self-incongruity, ideal social self-incongruity. For example, a person might experience dissonance between his desire (e.g., to become the leader of Fortune 500 company and actual position (e.g., a salesman at a small local retail). Discrepancy can occur when there is variance in any self-domain (e.g., social belongingness, self-esteem, power sense) and consequently leads to negative psychological response covering cognitive and affective dimensions, such as negative emotions (e.g., disappointment, regret, anxiety, shame, or guilt (see Higgins, 1987; Packard & Wooten, 2013). Per Heine et al. (2006), the experience of a self-discrepancy is considered as psychologically painful, leading to distress and negative arousal, which is especially relevant in luxury consumption context due to its extravagance, cultural insensitivity, environmental concern and etc.

Indeed, cognitive dissonance has been of curiosity and great importance in marketing field especially due to its prominent impacts (Lee, 2015). The consequences of dissonance in this context could result in negative consumer satisfaction (e.g. Keng & Liao, 2009; Sweeney et al, 1996), negative repurchase intention (e.g. Keng & Liao, 2009; Hunt, 1970), and strong complaint intention (Soutar &Sweeney, 2003). Therefore, it is of great significance to study its process from marketing perspectives. Moreover, once dissonance occurs, Festinger's (1957) further suggests that the negative psychological state of dissonance serves as motivation to alter the dissonance encountered since people are internally drived to regain psychological balance and also to achieve a more pleasant state especially when they feel threatened by cognitive conflicts. That is to say, consumers are internally motivated to alleviate the tension caused by dissonance and regain psychological consonance, they may adopt either cognitive or behavioural strategies such as changing existing cognitive elements, changing the importance of pre-existing cognitions, adding more cognitions (e.g., Harmon-Jones, 2019; Ong et al, 2017).

Based on these facts, this thesis aims to understand how individuals themselves process cognitive dissonance, which consequently influences consumption motivations and leads to an identifiable set of consumer behaviours especially in luxury consumption. In this view, under the umbrella of cognitive consistency point of view, we first introduce self-congruity effect which suggested that individuals are motivated to alleviate anticipated dissonance and avoid the discrepancy in their self-domain (Aronson, 1969). And we further discuss the psychological process under self-congruity effect which drives consumption behaviour, therefore provides preliminary support that luxury consumption behaviour is driven by different self-dimensions underlying self-congruity effect, by doing so, individuals could reduce the negative physiological consequences of self-discrepancies. The current work in study one also relates to the foundational observation from self-affirmation theory which appears as another self-approach under cognitive dissonance framework.

Although achieving the cognitive congruity in consumers' self-domain could help mitigate cognitive discrepancy/dissonance and restore cognitive balance in luxury consumption (e.g., Sirgy, 2018; Li et al, 2022), previous research has not really dealt with the inherent attributes of luxury consumption which potentially causes dissonance. Haven't said that part of the appeal in cognitive theory is that it introduces a phenomenon that people experience often and serves as a driving force in daily life (McGrath, 2017). Individuals are constantly dealing with the discomfort arising in their

mind which influences consumption, use of products and services, therefore both intentionally and unintentionally offsets the aversive affective state regularly for their well-being purposes (e.g., Woodruffe, 1997; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008).

Although previous work has only investigated the broad relationship between self-discrepancy and consumption behaviour (e.g., Heine et al, 2006), we emphasize and identify for the first time – five different self-as streams to achieve psychological consonance which drives the most updated consumption pattern. Specifically, given the importance of cognitive functioning for consumer well-being, people are motivated to resolve discrepancies within 'self' for primarily—or purely—cognitive reasons in everyday activities. But do repeat experiences of conventional consumption behaviour eventually lead a more effective mode to resolve self-discrepancies? Little research has given the answer. Taken Covid-19 as a background context, study two redefines self-oriented mass luxury as a dissonance-free process, which brings ultimate hedonism for consumers and challenges the drawbacks of the inherent attributes of conventional consumption patten.

Furthermore, yet despite decades of studies on cognitive dissonance theory, a worthy question remains unanswered is what change do individual traits make? That is to say, confronting with the psychological tension caused in consumption normal and difficult decisions, do individuals demonstrate different mode based on their personal traits such as narcissism orientation? In dissonance research generally, Matz et al (2008) suggests that there is a lack of research and an increasing importance to investigate the role of individual trait in varied dissonance production. According to another stream of researchers (e.g., Harmon-Jones & Harmon Jones, 2008; Harmon-Jones et al, 2015), the presence of cognitive inconsistency can interfere with self traits and influences the cognitive functioning. Research in the past has identified individual factors that moderates dissonance process (e.g., self-esteem (Douglass et al, 2017), self-compassion (Sastre, 2014)).

However, the identification of these individual difference hasn't resulted in sufficient progress of understanding dissonance process in a predominant context. The fact that self-incongruity or dissonance fosters negative affect is also due to the high valence a person put on their self-concepts such as self-presentation, self-promotion, therefore, we introduce the concept of narcissism which demonstrate especially salient self-perceptions and therefore determines the consumption behaviour based on that (e.g., Raskin, 1991; Moon et al, 2016). There has been limited work looking at narcissism trait in dissonance process, which merits research attention (Sobol & Darke, 2014;

Mandel et al, 2017). Therefore, in study three, we have specifically look at the moderating role of narcissism tendency beyond luxury consumption. We introduce the context of technology customizability and examines the dissonance independent of the previously measured self-concepts in study one and two. The details and overviews of all the three studies will be elaborated in the following session.

1.2 Study overview

In this thesis, we provide integrative research to identify the sequence of steps through both upstream antecedents and downstream consequences of cognitive dissonance (vs consonance) concerning self-concepts in luxury consumption. Although prior work has broadly identified the relationships between self-discrepancies and consumption behaviour (e.g., Heine et al 2006), we have specifically taken into account of the underlying mechanism surrounding self-related domains in dissonance process, as well as its coping.

We specifically look into the psychological functions which motivates congruity needs in luxury consumption in study 1, which has been published in International Marketing Review. Next, in study 2 we review the transformative streams in luxury consumption driven by consonance seeking and identify five new self-as domains that motivates consumption behaviour, also perceived as new mass luxury. This study has been published in Journal of Business Research. Subsequently, in study 3 we discuss the potential moderator- narcissism tendency in dissonance process by moving beyond luxury consumption context, which is currently under review in Psychology and Marketing journal. At the heart of this thesis, we introduce, redefine and provide empirical evidence for dissonance production, alleviation (consonance seeking) which drives luxury consumption and new technology adoption. With past research integrated to our research framework, we discuss the literature gaps in that specific domain and theorise the contributions respectively in every study with the recommendations for future research. Ultimately, this thesis is intended to offer insights in understanding the nuanced relationships between self-domains, cognitive dissonance, luxury consumption motivation and narcissism tendency.

1.2.1 Study 1: Luxury symbolism, self-congruity, self-affirmation, and luxury consumption behavior: A comparison study of China and the US

Originated from cognitive dissonance theories (Festinger 1957; Heider 1946), self-congruity effect asserts that consumers pursue consistency both in cognitions (e.g., beliefs, values, self-concepts) and in behaviors since inconsistencies create psychological tension and displeasure. For example, an individual might feel apprehension, anxiety, or dissatisfaction if there is a gap between what they should have done and what they actually did (Higgin et al., 1994), which was initially applied to study how the interaction between self-concepts and brand image (or personality) affects consumption behavior (Sirgy, 1982). It describes a matching process where the higher the level of fit between one's self-dimension and the brand image, the more likely a positive brand attitude is to be generated (Sirgy, 1985; Sirgy, et al., 2000). Therefore, self-congruity plays an important role in forming pre-purchase evaluation—e.g., brand evaluation (Kim & Thapa, 2018); perceived value (Hosany & Martin, 2012); post purchase behavior (e.g., customer loyalty (Kang et al., 2015); consumer satisfaction (Sirgy, 2018)—since the incongruity tends to cause dissonance and psychological discomfort (Sirgy, 1986). However, the underlying driving force of such effect remains unclear especially across contexts, therefore, is mainly investigated in the first study. The specific research questions are objectives are demonstrated below with details.

1.2.2 Study 2: Redefining "masstige" luxury consumption in the post-COVID era

Since traditional consumption of luxury goods and display of prestige have been associated with negative psychological dissonance. Such dissonance relates to discrepancies in definitions of luxury and prestige between the self and external audiences, conflicts between the ever-evolving social norms and consumer values, and the negative emotions (e.g., guilt or shame) associated with conspicuous consumption (Dubois et al., 2020). These negative responses have consequently backfired on the hedonic essence of luxury experiences and have largely impaired consumer well-being. Therefore, this heterogeneity in the definition of luxury (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014) requires the consideration of the nature of luxury to mitigate psychological dissonance. Thus, this study aims to answer the following research questions 1) How has the role of "self" transformed the meaning of luxury since the COVID-19 outbreak? 2) How have mass consumers adapted the

meaning of luxury during the pandemic? 3) How do mass consumers manage their cognitive dissonance in day-to-day life, and how does this influence their perceived meaning of luxury?

1.2.3 Study 3: Does technology customizability have their best interests at heart? A quantitative study of narcissists' SNS use among generation Z consumers

This study has investigated the dissonance mechanism away from luxury context. As one of the adverse outcomes of technology adoption in information system (IS) research, dissonance is generally associated with negative psychological states, such as anxiety, guilt, and regret. For example, failure in technology performance encourages withdrawal behaviour, especially in individuals who have low self-efficacy in terms of computer usage (Wilfong, 2006); or when an individual encounters inconsistency between their performance with technology and their internal norms (Vaghefi & Qahri-Saremi, 2017); or even when facing the dark side of technology which may make a user believe they should not have been using it at all (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002). However, the cognitive instigation for technology adoption and the recognition of cognitive or behavioural adjustments in the IS literature has been neglected (Marikyan et al., 2020). Besides, given that dissonance research has also long ignored consumer differences in terms of their self-related traits, this study investigates the specific interaction between cognitive dissonance and narcissist feature which is of high theoretical relevance in social media context.

1.3 Research methods and findings

Generally, we adopt literature review, questionnaire survey, and in-depth interview to achieve the research goals. Overall, we proceed as the following logic: first, by reviewing the relevant literature, we try to figure out the antecedents and internal logic of cognitive dissonance and luxury consumption behaviour; by figuring out the relevant theoretic supports, we focus on the underlying self-domains that may potentially drive the behavioural tendency and find out research gap; next, we propose our research framework, hypotheses or research questions; at last, we design our research, collect, and analyze data to examine the assumptions. Regarding the data collection and analysis, we give further explanations in the following.

Study one (Chapter two) adopts questionnaire survey to collect data from two different countries covering rich demographic features. By adopting SEM and Process model, we find that luxury symbolism positively influences self-consistency, social consistency, social approval, and self-esteem, and subsequently impacts self-affirmation and customer loyalty. For US consumers, self-esteem and social approval have significantly negative impacts on self-affirmation, while for Chinese consumers, social approval has no significant impact on self-affirmation. We also find that interdependent self-construal positively moderates the relationship between luxury symbolism, and social approval and social consistency. Independent self-construal positively moderates the relationship between luxury symbolism and self-consistency, and negatively influences the relationship between luxury symbolism and self-esteem.

Study two (Chapter three) uses interpretive approach which based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 31 participants. "NVivo" was adopted for coding process. Our iterative readings of the 165 moments or experiences that we recorded, all of which occurred during the pandemic, revealed that the perceived meaning of mass luxury has shifted from extraordinary experiences to different types of self-oriented processes embedded in everyday life. Looking into philosophical rationalizations of the different degrees of self (e.g., self as content, self as process, self as context, and self as other) enables the most flexible way of self-functioning from social, economic, and psychological perspectives, which resonates with our reflective interpretation of self-oriented mass luxury.

Study three (Chapter four) uses survey questionnaire to collect quantitative data in the US. Process model was adopted for data analysis. We found that two types of narcissism are remarkably different in determining dissonance. Grandiose narcissism is not found to have any impact on generating dissonance due to privacy concerns whereas vulnerable narcissism shows nuances of psychological dissonance induced by privacy concerns. And cognitive dissonance could negatively predict social network sites consumption behaviour.

1.4 Contributions

1.4.1 Overall contribution

Until recently, the role of self-concept (e.g., public self, private self) in predicting the nature of dissonance (vs consonance) that consumers experience remains sparse in cognitive dissonance literature. And there have been conflicting evidence on how different self-domains influences the underlying processes for consonance formation, for example, which self-dimension plays a dominant role considering cultural factors (e.g., Ahn et al. 2013; Huber et al. 2018; Zhu et al. 2019). Specifically, this thesis has advanced cognitive dissonance theory on the role of self-concepts (public self VS private self) in both consonance seeking and dissonance arousal. Yet the study concerning cognitive dissonance in marketing filed has been a topic of interest for centuries, we have developed the connections between self-concepts and cognitive congruity or consonance (vs dissonance) and uncovered the underlying mechanisms of such psychological function within one's self-domain in both the social psychology and marketing literature. Especially under different cultural contexts due to the fact that self-concepts are culturally constituted (Javornik et al, 2021).

The research pieces in this thesis also have helped us to redefine our understanding of cognitive dissonance beyond laboratory setting and provided new insights into how to deal with the recurring dissonance arousing situations in everyday consumption normal. In addition, we provided the initial evidence on the narcissism trait in dissonance process under new tech adoption, that is, the cognitions people adopt to interpret their consumption behaviour can be decided by the contextual goals or the chronic constraints on processing external resources situated within the person, such as the narc tendency.

1.4.2 Contributions from three studies

To be specific, in this thesis, we have accomplished three main contributions: first, we synthesized the literature in self-concepts around cognitive dissonance since the early stage of its introduction, we have broadened the scope of cognitive consistency theory by comprehensively and empirically testing the four underpinning psychological functions of self-congruity effect—self-consistency, self-esteem, social consistency, and social approval—in the luxury consumption context, expands

previous research and theory development by showing that self-construal serves as an important source of personal difference in self-congruity effect across cultures. Second, this thesis redefines mass luxury as dissonance-mitigation process and offers a philosophical position relating mass luxury to dimensions of self. We provided a road map and theoretical development of masstige by building on the current progress that has been made to the filed, stimulated further theory development. Lastly, this research expands the theoretical insights into cognitive dissonance in the context of new technology adoption by showing how theories drawn from the social psychological literature can enable better understanding of customizability, identifies the novel role of narcissist traits in new generation.

1.5 Thesis Overview
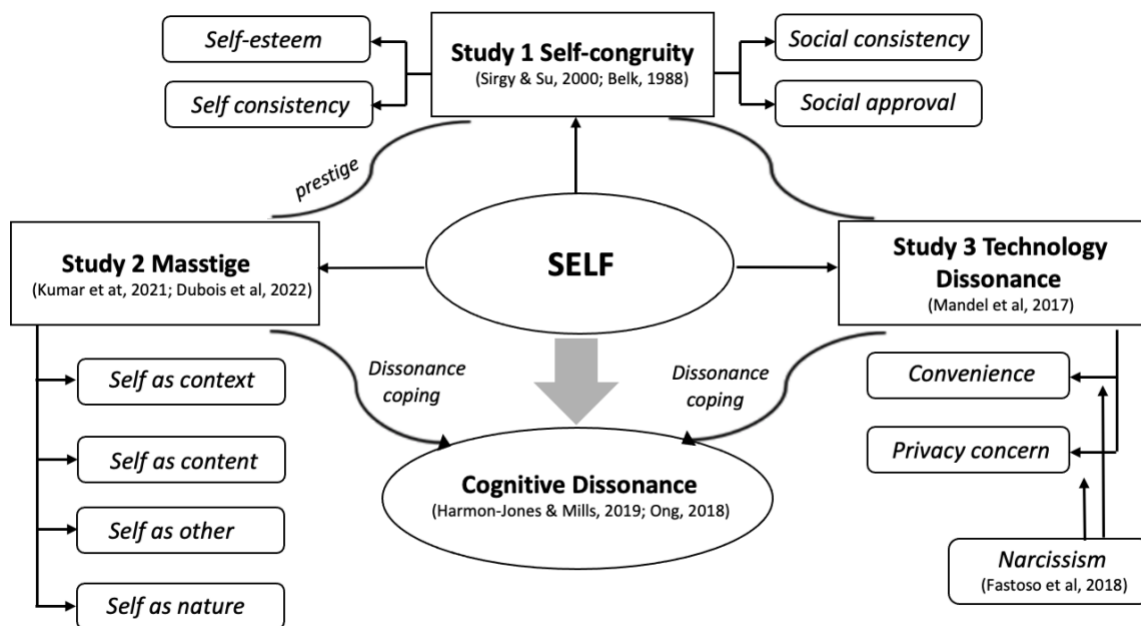
2. Study 1: Luxury symbolism, self-congruity, self-affirmation, and luxury consumption behavior: A comparison study of China and the US

2.1 Chapter introduction

Although the Covid-19 pandemic has severely disrupted the global economy and significantly inhibited the reliably buoyant luxury goods market, this market has gained in overall value during 2020. The world's top 100 largest luxury companies achieved US$285 billion revenue in 2020, with yearly growth of 6.4% (Statista, 2021). Customers in the luxury segments are attracting increasing interest among business analysts and research scholars. Despite the tremendous contributions of cross-cultural studies to marketing theory and practice (Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018; Choi et al., 2018), what constitutes luxury consumption in cross-cultural contexts remains unclear to luxury marketers and scholars.

Researchers have established that individual countries' markets differ in terms of geography, culture, demography, and luxury consumption practices (Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018; Shukla et al., 2015). For example, Shukla et al. (2015) found that Indian luxury consumers are more likely to be affected by others-directed symbolism, while their Indonesian counterparts are influenced by self-directed symbolism wherein the individual tries to promote the self through consumption. However, insights into luxury consumption patterns, which are mostly based on Western contexts, are neither sufficient nor accurate enough to apply to other markets, such as those in Asian countries (e.g., Kastanakis, and Balabanis, 2012; Ki et al, 2017). Thus, more research is needed to understand the diverse changes in the marketplace.

Over the years, researchers have devoted much attention to identifying the motivation and value in buying luxury goods; for instance, pursuing symbolic or functional values (O'Cass & Muller, 2015; Huddleston, 2017). According to Sirgy (1982), symbolism is associated with the stereotypical personality or image of an individual, which helps consumers to convey, create, and reinforce their self-image. The perceived fit, or similarity, between an individual and a 'brand' is formulated as the self-congruity effect (e.g., Malär et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2019) – the notion of 'brand' here refers to a global construct rather than a brand's object (Adnan et al., 2021). Being widely discussed in marketing and relevant literature (Japutra et al., 2019; Zogaj et al., 2020), self-congruity plays an

important role in forming pre-purchase evaluation—e.g., brand evaluation (Kim & Thapa, 2018); perceived value (Hosany & Martin, 2012); post purchase behavior (e.g., customer loyalty (Kang et al., 2015); consumer satisfaction (Sirgy, 2018)—since the incongruity tends to cause dissonance and psychological discomfort (Sirgy, 1986). Among these positive outcomes, customer loyalty continues to remain elusive for most marketers as even the most carefully designed customer centric loyalty programs have merely managed to retain customers at a superficial level (Tavsan & Duran, 2021).

As two key marketing constructs, self-congruity and loyalty have received great attention from academics. Although several studies have suggested a significant determining role of self-congruity in loyalty (e.g., Jamal & Goode, 2001; Kang et al., 2012; Kressmann et al., 2006), the relationship between them has mostly been evaluated as a direct effect (Kang et al., 2015; Frias et al., 2020; Zogaj et al., 2020), which appears to be under-investigated. Srivastava and Rai (2018) indicate the reason for the large failure rate among loyalty programs was that the progression from the first stage of self-congruity perception to the final stage of loyalty may not be a straight-forward process, which corresponds with Kang et al. (2015) who advocate that the formation of loyalty involves a series of cognitive, affective, and conative processes. However, how self-congruity effect functions within one's self-system and whether cultural factors influence such process remains under researched.

In fact, the underlying mechanism of the self-congruity effect was earlier identified by Sirgy after his original proposition of self-congruity theory (Sirgy et al., 2000; Sirgy et al., 2015), and it is suggested that the self-congruity effect facilitates consumers' self-definitional needs for verification and/or continuity through such a process (Tuskej et al., 2013). According to Sirgy's original proposition of self-congruity theory, there are four different self-dimensions within one individual: actual self, ideal self, social self and ideal social self. As stated by Sirgy (2018, p.200), "self-congruity has a significant influence on perception of value and pre-consumption and post-consumption behaviors because self-congruity leads to the satisfaction of self-concept needs: the need for self-consistency, the need for self-esteem, the need for social consistency, and the need for social approval." These four underlying functions specifically correspond to the four dimensions of the self-congruity effect, namely, actual, ideal, social, and ideal social self-congruity (Sirgy, 2000). And self-congruity effect can only be realized through the satisfaction of the underlying functions. For example, social self-congruity can only be achieved through the activation of social consistency needs. Ungarala (2021) places additional emphasis on self-concepts which could mediate the

relationship between brand experience and purchase intention and brand loyalty because, fundamentally, consumers have the innate drive to express or improve their self-concepts through consumption behavior (e.g., van der Westhuizen, 2018; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Rosenberg, 1991).

Although these four underlying needs collectively shape brand choices (Sirgy & Su, 2000), i.e., consumers prefer a brand whose image conforms to how they see themselves (representing satisfaction of self-consistency motivation), or want to be seen (representing satisfaction of self-esteem motivation), as well as situational factors (e.g., product conspicuousness (Kim, 2015), and individual differences (Boksberger et al., 2011) that can bias how they function and which are being evaluated respectively. Any perceived matching only works sometimes (e.g., Deshpande & Stayman, 1994; Forehand & Deshpande, 2001), leaving open the question of when and how the self-congruity effect matters in consumer behavior. For example, Aguirre-Rodriguez et al.'s (2012) meta-analysis has categorized the four functions into enhancement types (self-esteem and social approval), versus consistency types (self-consistency and social consistency) and found that enhancement-type motives have a stronger effect on consumer behavior than consistency-type motives. For example, Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) found the portrayal of the ideal self to be more prominent, but certainly not to the exclusion of the actual self.

Although these findings suggest that the influences of actual and ideal self-congruence depend on the considered context (Ahn et al. 2013; Huber et al. 2018; Zhu et al. 2019), and consumers can simultaneously take several types of self-congruity into account in the process of decision making or opinion formation (Sirgy, 1986; Sirgy & Johar, 1999; Sirgy & Su, 2000), there are few studies to date which involve all four effects and incorporate them as a mediating mechanism to help illuminate the extent to which the self-congruity effect varies. Specifically, there is little consensus on which one of the four functions is the superior predictor of loyalty, and under what conditions different types are activated more than others. According to McCracken's (1989) theory of meaning, the symbolic meaning is transferred from a culturally constituted world to consumers in order to substantiate and (re)produce self-concepts. That is to say, the self-concept is fluid, multiple, and can be activated at once (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Malär et al., 2011).

Consumers tend to define themselves by engaging with brands both publicly and privately depending on their cultural orientation (Unurlu & Uca, 2017). This aroused our research interest

since the four underlying functions—i.e., those which either fall into consistency type and enhancement type (as mentioned above), or the private level (self-consistency, self-esteem), or the public level (social consistency, social approval) (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012)—imply tacit significant relevance with different cultural orientations (e.g., social approval is more effective in a collectivist culture (Bakir et al., 2020), which lack research attention.

Further, it is worth mentioning that the satisfaction of the needs regarding self-esteem, self-consistency, social consistency, and social approval generate an overall positive affect and motivate consumption behavior, which is the essence of self-affirmation theory (McQueen & Klein, 2006). Self-affirmation theory suggests that the ultimate goal of a person's self-system is to maintain their overall self-integrity, to consider themselves as valuable, and to obtain evidence that provides these feelings (Steele, 1998). Most prior work has highlighted that self-affirmation occurs when people enter into a situation which threatens their ego (Ferrer & Cohen, 2019). However, how self-affirmation influences people's behavior under a non-threatening condition has received inadequate attention. The primary premise of self-affirmation theory is that people have a fundamental need to see themselves as valuable, worthy, and good (e.g., Catalina et al., 2013; Harris & Epton, 2010). This need for a positive self-image is an important motivator of behavior (e.g., Sirgy, 2018; Sirgy et al., 2018).

Therefore, this study examines how the satisfaction of different self-dimensions (e.g., self-consistency needs, self-enhancement needs) help promote the overall self-integrity, that is to enhance the one's overall affirmation feeling, and how such self-affirmation influences customer loyalty regarding luxury consumption. And this study responds to calls for studies on how cultural orientation influences the psychological functions of the self-congruity effect of self-affirmation and consequently leads to different magnitudes of customer loyalty. Taken together, considering the multi-leveled self and social motives behind luxury consumption, why customers remain loyal to a luxury brand, and the psychological processes therein, represent pertinent research concerns that warrant attention to enhance knowledge of this growing sector.

We investigate how luxury symbolism predicts customer loyalty through different psychological functions in two countries (China and the US). Specifically, our model postulates a relationship between luxury symbolism and consumers' psychological underpinnings for self-congruity theory (self-consistency, self-esteem, social consistency, and social approval), which is hypothesized to

influence self-affirmation and result in customer loyalty. Moreover, we test the extent to which self-construal modulates the impact of luxury symbolism on the underpinnings of self-congruity and compare the conceptual framework in China and the US. The findings make theoretical contributions to the luxury consumption literature and provide insights for luxury retailers regarding how to enhance customer loyalty.

The research contributes to the related literature in the following domains. First, it broadens the scope of self-congruity theory by comprehensively and empirically testing its four underpinning psychological functions—self-consistency, self-esteem, social consistency, and social approval—in the luxury consumption context. Secondly, the findings provide evidence for the importance of these functions in establishing self-affirmation, which is positively linked with customer loyalty. The findings further expand previous research and theory development by showing that self-construal serves as an important source of personal difference in its moderation of the relationship between symbolism and the psychological underpinnings thereof. Additionally, using a sample of 327 Chinese and 326 US luxury goods customers, this paper examines customer loyalty formation for luxury brands across cultures. By investigating the proposed framework, this study highlights the need to differentiate marketing strategies to address consumers' different cultural orientations in Western versus Eastern segmentations. Luxury marketers should place greater emphasis on building a connection between product image and consumers' self-concepts and develop marketing campaigns that emphasize this match.

2.2 Theoretical background and hypothesis development

2.2.1 Luxury symbolism

Influenced by sociocultural context, symbolism refers to how a product/brand resonates with consumers' self-image, personality, or personal values (Seva & Helander, 2009), and how it helps communicate status and social roles (Debevec & Iyer, 1986; Aw et al., 2021, Solomon, 1983), or signals group belongingness (Belk, 1988). Bronner (2019) suggests that brands must be consumed conspicuously or visibly to develop personality associations with consumers. Especially in the luxury context, the motivation to express oneself has long been recognized by marketing scholars as the predominant force behind luxury consumption (Aaker, 1999). People purchase luxury goods

to signal status and power to others, thus the symbolic function is the most important feature of luxury brands (Shaikh et al., 2017).

In our study, luxury symbolism is defined as the degree to which consumers associate psychological meaning with luxury goods for the purposes of self-expression and status communication via sign-value (Becker et al., 2018). In symbolic consumption, self-congruity represents a central concern in marketing research that can provide deeper understanding and interpretation of multi-faceted customer behavior (Hosany & Martin, 2012). Consumers purchase goods to express their identity, and they evaluate brands based on the perceived fit between their symbolic attributes and their self-concepts (Aaker, 1999). In terms of how luxury symbolism functions with regard to self-concepts, Mason (1981) considers self-concepts to be the central driver of symbolic consumption since people purchase, or use, value-expressive products to maintain their self-views or to fulfill self-defining purposes (Chaplin & John, 2005; Escalas, 2004; Rindfleisch et al., 2009). From a more comprehensive theoretical perspective, Bagozzi et al., (2021) suggest that the discrete and constant presence via interactions with a brand are how consumers build their self-concepts by virtue of the symbolism the brand conveys. Therefore, consumers tend to associate with entities that are congruent with their images or personalities for self-continuity, or consistency of self-concepts (Dukerich et al., 2002).

2.2.2 Self-congruity theory and underlying functions

As one of the wider categories of cognitive consistency theories (Festinger 1957; Heider 1946), brand self-congruity serves as an extension of self-concept and plays an important role in predicting consumer behavior and attitudes—an idea that has been widely adopted in psychology, marketing, and other fields (Sop & Kozak, 2019). Self-congruity theory asserts that consumers pursue consistency both in cognitions (e.g., beliefs, values, self-concepts) and in behaviors since inconsistencies create psychological tension and displeasure. For example, an individual might feel apprehension, anxiety, or dissatisfaction if there is a gap between what they should have done and what they actually did (Higgin et al., 1994). The theory was initially applied to study how the interaction between self-concepts and brand image (or personality) affects consumption behavior (Sirgy, 1982). It describes a matching process where the higher the level of fit between one's self-concept and the brand image, the more likely a positive brand attitude is to be generated (Sirgy,

1985; Sirgy, et al., 2000). This implies that in the marketplace people pursue the symbolic meaning of products more than the products themselves.

Regarding the outcomes of the self-congruity effect, extant studies have discussed its influence on brand perception (e.g., brand relationships) (Kressmann et al., 2006), event affect (Mazodier & Merunka, 2012), and brand attachment (Malar et al., 2010), and especially brand loyalty (Prentice & Loureiro, 2017; Tran et al., 2021). However, findings are inconsistent. For example, the congruence between oneself and a brand does not necessarily result in positive brand attitudes and may differ according to product category (Liu et al. 2008; Kressmann et al., 2006). Kastenholz (2004) and Murphy et al., (2007) found no significant influence of self-congruity on revisit intention.

Due to this lack of consensus, there is a need to consider the underlying functions of self-congruity theory in generating customer loyalty, specifically the underlying psychological fulfillments that arise when an individual pursues self-congruity effects. Since customer loyalty has long been considered a biased behavioral concept generated by a series of psychological processes (Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003), there is a need to understand the conditions under which the self-congruity effect may vary, and the situational factors that might be at play (Ulmerich, 2021). Mason (1981) suggests that self-concept is a central driver of symbolic consumption since consumers use value-expressive symbols to create and maintain their sense of self. In fact, Sirgy (1985) has proposed the existence and independent influence of two self-concepts as parallel mediators underlying self-congruity effects and which add to the original theory, namely self-esteem and self-consistency. Later, two further mediators, social consistency and social approval, have been added (Claiborne & Sirgy, 1990; Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Sirgy et al., 1991; Sirgy et al., 2000; Sirgy and Su, 2000). It is implied that different aspects of self-congruity effects demonstrate the variation in influencing consumer behaviors as there are four different functions to be satisfied (Šegota et al., 2021). Specifically,

1) actual self-congruity (me as I am) is mediated by the satisfaction of self-consistency needs, i.e., shoppers who experience a match between the patron image of a store and their actual self-image will be motivated to patronize that store because doing so satisfies their need for self-consistency

2) ideal self-congruity (how a person likes to view themselves) is mediated by satisfying the needs of self-esteem

3) social self-congruity (how others see the person) is achieved through the fulfilment of social consistency needs

4) ideal social self-congruity (how a person likes to be seen by others) is mediated by social approval.

In Sirgy's proposition, self-congruity effects only come into play through the activation and operation of these four self-concepts (Sirgy & Su, 2000; Sirgy, 1985). For example, it is indicated that consumers prefer brands which reinforce their conceptions of who they are, and this satisfies their need for self-consistency (e.g., Prentice et al., 1998). Furthermore, among these, consistency-type functions push the consumer towards brands that maintain their actual or social self-image; and enhancement-type functions encourage the consumer to pursue brands that enhance their ideal, or ideal social, self-image (Lecky, 1945; Sirgy, 1986; Li & Lai, 2020). Swann et al., (1987) argues that both self-consistency and self-enhancement theorists should drop the unity assumption and treat these functions independently. Hence, these four mediators have been considered in parallel when determining self-congruity effects (e.g., Sirgy, Johar, Samli & Claiborne, 1991; Claiborne & Sirgy, 1990; Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Sirgy, Grewal, & Mangelburg, 2000; Sirgy & Su, 2000).

To date, there are three empirical studies which test the corresponding mediated effect on the different dimensions of the self-congruity effect and which provide significant relevance to our study. Sirgy, Johar, Samli and Claiborne (1991) first studied self-concepts as mediators between self-image congruity and consumers' attitudinal intentions. Later, Sirgy, Grewal, & Mangleburg (2000) investigated four types of self-congruity which determine retail patronage through the activation and operation of four self-concepts, which have been further verified in Sirgy and Su's (2000) study to predict the consumer's choice of destination for their purchases. However, which mediator(s) is/are superior in predicting brand performance is lacking research attention. For example, under what conditions do individual self-dimensions, such as actual and ideal self-congruity, predict patronage better than social self-dimension—social and ideal social self-congruity is of great research significance (Sirgy et al., 2000).

More recently, Joo et al., (2020) found that self-congruity functions differently in triggering customer loyalty under the influence of emotional solidarity in hospitality settings. Other studies (e.g., Sirgy, 2018; Sirgy et al., 2018) also addressed this, given that each facet depends on a number of situational and consumer-related characteristics, such as cultural orientation. Luciana et al., (2012) found that social self-perceptions negatively influence brand attitudes in teenage groups, and Park and Yoo (2016) point out that social and individual self domains have distinctive effects on brand attitude, and that it is necessary to differentiate both domains of consumers' self-concepts in assessing customer loyalty. These factors have driven researchers to examine the underlying reasons for why self-congruity effects differ in how they stimulate customer loyalty (Moon et al., 2020). A summary of research gaps of key literature on the underlying mechanism between self-congruity effect and consumer behaviour is shown in Table I.

Table I A summary of research gaps of key literature on the underlying mechanism between self-congruity effect and consumer behaviour

Study	Theoretical foundation and findings	Sample and data approach	Implications and limitations driving our research framework
Sirgy (1985)	·Self-esteem and self-consistency theories were used to explain self-congruity theory. ·Initially proposed the underlying mechanism behind ideal and actual self-congruity effect on consumer behavior.	168 female college students at two eastern universities were recruited. The use of a convenience sample was justifiable for the theory-testing objective of this study.	The study proposed two mediators of self-congruity effect after the introduction of self-congruity theory, which built the theoretical foundation of the mediating function of self-concepts stream in the literature.
Sirgy, Grewal and Mangleburg, (2000) Sirgy and Su (2000)	·An integrative model of retail environment, self-congruity, and retail patronage was described in the retailing context. ·An integrative model of destination image, self-congruity, and travel behavior was described. Both functional and symbolic aspects were discussed regarding the self-congruity effect in the hospitality setting. ·The mediating effects of self-concept motives on the relationship between self-congruity and travel behavior were discussed.	·Literature of self-concept and self-congruity effects in the retailing context was reviewed. ·Literature of self-concept, self-congruity, and destination choice was reviewed.	These two studies contributed social congruity and ideal social congruity for consideration and raised social consistency and social approval as sequential mediators in predicting brand choice based on Sirgy's (1985) study, which left room for empirical examination of the four mediators of self-congruity effects on consumer behavior.
Sirgy, Grzeskowiak and Su (2005)	·Three mediators--self-consistency, self-esteem, and social approval--were considered, corresponding to actual self-congruity, ideal self-congruity, and social self-congruity to predict customer behavior in the housing context. ·Functional aspects of the home may be interpreted in light of the symbolic aspects.	This article introduced a theoretical framework, self-congruity theory, to elucidate the motivational determinants of the homebuyer's preference formation and housing purchase decisions in the hope of stimulating future research in this area.	There lacked a clear theoretical boundary marking the difference between functional aspects and symbolic aspects in predicting self-congruity effect.
Beerli, Meneses, and Gil (2007)	·The role of self-concept in congruity effect was identified: the greater one's self-concept, the greater the tendency of visiting. ·Repeated visit and individual involvement moderate the effect of self-congruity.	A self-administered survey was conducted comprising 552 individuals following stratified random sampling, with proportional stratification using the population census.	·This study empirically tested the underlying roles of actual and ideal self-concepts in determining self-congruity effect, without specifying what these self-concepts were (e.g., self-esteem and self-consistency, as suggested in previous literature). ·The study took both individual self and social self-concepts into consideration. However, it did not clarify how these aspects of self-concept work differently in predicting brand performance.
Kwak and Kang (2008)	Both actual and ideal self-congruity predicted customer loyalty; however, actual self-congruity explained more about attendance frequency.	Cross-sectional data (N = 284) were generated through the survey for the main study.	· Different dimensions (actual and ideal) of self-congruity have varied effects on predicting customer loyalty, which draws research attention to the underlying mechanism that determines the specific dimension of self-congruity effects beyond the façade. · Social congruity and ideal social aspects were missing in this study.

Usakli and Baloglu (2011)	· The study concluded that self-congruity is a partial mediator in the relationship between destination personality and behavioral intentions. · Both actual congruity and ideal congruity have a positive impact on behavioral intentions.	A convenience sample of 382 visitors to Las Vegas was surveyed. Both closed and open-ended questions were used to collect the required quantitative and qualitative data.	· Self-congruity itself was considered the mediator to predict consumer behavior. Two dimensions of self-congruity were examined (actual and ideal), but without exploring the underlying mechanisms of these two. ·This study did not distinguish whether, how, and why actual and ideal congruity effects vary. The social aspects were neglected.
Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012)	·The presentation of actual self does not exist in brand consumption. · How multiple selves interact to inform brand connections was revealed, as well as how and why consumers either blend or integrate their actual and ideal selves or choose one exclusively when the self-dimensions are in conflict.	Observational research, diaries, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and electronic journal entries were utilized, including 84 volunteer participants' Facebook pages.	·Ideal and actual self-concepts were elaborated on regarding how brand helps with self-expression. However, revealing the insignificant role of actual self-concept did not support the existing literature and merits further study. ·Both self-maintenance and self-enhancement motives were identified; however, under what conditions these two types of motives are triggered differently remains under researched.
Tuškej, Golob and Podnar (2013)	· Value congruity between self and brand has a positive influence on brand performance. · Consumers' identification fully mediates the impact of congruity on brand performance.	A web-based questionnaire (N = 596) was conducted in Slovenia. The sampling procedure used nonprobability snowball sampling consisting of two stages.	This study provided empirical support for the necessity of identifying the mediated psychological factor of congruity effect. The study mainly drew on identity theory; however, regarding self-identity construction these aspects were neglected.
Shamah, Mason, Moretti and Raggiotto (2018)	This study raised both the direct and indirect relationships between self-congruity and loyalty in the food consumption context. Four mediators of consumer perceptions in marketing mix were identified.	911 administered questionnaires were retrieved from the four McDonald's restaurants in North Africa using an intercept technique or convenience sample.	This study was conducted in a relatively underexplored context (North Africa). The mediators identified were contextually based to a great extent, which limits theoretical contributions to self-congruity theory.
Zhu et al (2019)	This study confirms that symbolic brand appeals not only to the consumer's actual self but also to the consumer's ideal self in relation to Chinese consumers; therefore, country of origin plays a moderating role.	An experimental study implemented by means of the SOJUMP tool and a survey were conducted, consisting of 203 participants overall.	·This study verified that consumers use symbolic value to satisfy both actual and ideal self; however, the social self and social ideal self were missing from the exploration. ·This study was limited to an eastern cultural context (China). For universal applicability, cross-cultural comparison is required.
Rabbanee, Roy, and Spence (2020)	Two of the three self-congruity types (actual, ideal, social) were found to predict brand performance in the social networking sites context.	A self-administered survey of students at a large Australian university (N = 282) and an online panel (N = 342) using a different product category were conducted.	·This study examined three types of social congruity effects, without including ideal social congruity and its underlying mechanism. ·The ideal social congruity effect failed to significantly inform brand performance; thus, the potential causes are worth investigating. ·The study was limited to the Australian context; whether cultural factors apply to the findings remains unknown.
Wu and Kim (2020)	The study identified social and personal self-congruity as mediators for economic and functional value in predicting consumer attitudes, and the interaction varies.	The study surveyed Chinese citizens who had flown via Chinese airlines and who lived mainly in the Yangtze River delta during a designated period.	·The study was constrained to examining economic and functional values for airline brands; nevertheless, the symbolic meaning to satisfy consumers' self-expression needs is highly pertinent in exploring the self-congruity effect, which is of great research significance. ·Only two of four self-congruity dimensions were examined within a single cultural context.

Li and Lai (2021)	·Actual self-image is found to be more related to perceived brand image. ·Regarding actual congruence, tourists exhibit a greater tendency to match the informal, liberal, and emotional brand image. Ideal congruence is used to match the contemporary, organized, and pleasant brand image.	A face-to-face questionnaire (N = 152) was conducted by using convenience samples in Macau across different locations at the same time.	· Probability sampling is recommended with a larger sample size ·Actual and ideal self-congruity was found to have varied effect in determining brand attitudes, implying a future research direction to explore why.
Chen et al. (2021)	·Purchase intention is directly related to brand image, which satisfies self-consistency needs, with self-motivations as moderators.	The sampling control characteristics included consumers' age, gender, education level, income, and city of residence through "Questionnaire Star" software (N = 546).	·Self-consistency was identified and examined as the mediator in predicting self-congruity effect, which lacks globality. · Other self-concepts originated from self-congruity theory have been treated as moderators, which is against Sigry's proposition (e.g., Sirgy, 1985; Sirgy and Johar, 1999; Sirgy and Su, 2000).

2.2.2.1 Self-consistency and social consistency

Individuals have views about identities, values, and lifestyles and they are highly motivated to protect such established 'self-theories' to create a favorable and consistent self-concept, both socially and individually. As Sirgy and Su (2000) claim, "self-consistency denotes the tendency to behave consistently with the view of himself (actual self), otherwise he may suffer from psychological dissonance." The psychological dynamic is particularly essential when individuals hold strong beliefs about their identity (Burke & Stets, 2009; Gregg et al, 2012; Sedikides & Strube, 1995). Marketing research on the predictiveness of actual self-congruity effects has demonstrated consistency needs as a strong predictor of brand choices (e.g., Ascher, 1985; Beerli et al., 2007; Ericksen & Sirgy, 1992; Hung & Petrick, 2011; Klenosky et al., 1993; Krishen & Sirgy, 2016; Pizam & Calantone, 1987; Sirgy et al., 2008). Self-verification theory also suggests that individuals have the inherent motivation to confirm or validate their identities through consumption behavior and the incorporation of brand meanings and images into their conception of themselves (Purzycki & Lang, 2019; Berke & Stets, 2009). The more closely an object reflects a consumer's actual self-concept, the more they will aim to engage in a self-verification process (Wallace et al., 2017). Likewise, the need for social consistency refers to the tendency to ensure that one's cognition or belief does not violate his social identity or social self-image (Baumeister, 1982). The central idea of social consistency is that an individual's cognition is influenced by their tendency to create and sustain their social or personal image (Heider, 1946), and that this drives people to consume goods or service that validate their social or personal identity (Sirgy & Samli, 1985), and therefore leads to a positive attitude towards an object.

In contrast, lack of verification of self-concepts raises negative feelings, such as anxiety and tension (Sirgy, 2018). Consumers' social identity becomes prominent when their social group becomes accessible and salient. To consolidate one's social identity through symbolic consumption could enhance the specific group identification. Conversely, lack of group identification or behavior incongruent with how others perceive them could generate psychological discomfort and negative brand attitudes (Kim & Hyun, 2013). For example, previous research has shown how reference groups and social norms influence people's brand choices (e.g., Kim & Hyun, 2013; Hung & Petrick, 2011). Following the same logic, serving as an extreme tool for self-expression (Aaker, 1999), luxury symbolism helps individuals to define and sustain distinctive self-images and social images (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014). Following this logic, symbolism that reflects the consumer's actual self can support them in

their self-maintenance activities by giving them the feeling of getting closer to meeting their desired identity (Yu et al., 2020; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967). Therefore, they may adopt luxury symbols that are consistent with their self-image or their social image to verify their identity.

2.2.2.2 Social approval

Social groups are identified as essential for fulfilling consumers' basic psychological needs (e.g., belongingness, being needed, security) (Turner et al., 1987). In social identity theory, consumers' values, beliefs, and identities are intimately connected to, and formed within, the social groups to which they belong (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), with unique sets of norms and expectations. According to social identity theory, social approval is formed through the development of attitudes or behaviours that are perceived as instrumental in pleasing others (Sirgy 1982, 1985). That is, to seek positive self-views by acting in ways that make others think highly of them (Johar & Sirgy, 1991). In this social comparison process, if individuals cannot obtain desirable self-improvement outcomes they may experience "social identity threat" (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005). The need for social approval in Sirgy's (2018, p201) proposition, refers to the "tendency to ensure that a person's cognition or behavior does not violate his ideal social image or social norms". Twenge and Im (2007) also define it as the desire to be approved of and favored by others.

According to self-congruity theory, acting in ways that help a person to achieve their ideal social-image could gain social approval, and consequently lead to positive attitudes towards an object. For example, Sirgy and Su (2000) suggest that tourists who experience a perceived match between the destination visitor image and their ideal social image are motivated to choose the same destination again because doing so satisfies their need for social approval. The mediated effect of social approval has also been found in determining major business outcomes (e.g., continued media usage (Lee et al., 2018), green consumption choices (Biswas & Roy, 2015) and especially salient in status-oriented consumption motivation, such as Veblen's commonly voiced economic aspirations of wealth display for social acceptance (Watson, 2012). That is, wherein luxury brands are used as symbols of status and prestige that enable consumers to establish strong ties with social groups (e.g., community, family). Since the desire for belongingness, acceptance, and admiration are central motivations of human actions (Steele, 1998), luxury brands that represent the consumers' ideal social self-image help them to gain approval and admiration from audiences (Sirgy & Su, 2000), such as intensifying their self-

presentation (van Gils & Horton, 2019; Rabbanee et al., 2020), or conforming with aspirational groups (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014). That is, in order to gain the recognition of their social group, people tend to consume luxury symbolic goods to help them satisfy their needs for social approval.

2.2.2.3 Self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to an individual's need to behave in ways that are instrumental in realizing or maintaining the positive self-regard (e.g., Cohen, 1959; Rosenberg, 1979), and avoid self-deflation (Cast & Burke, 2002; Sedikides & Strube, 1995; Sirgy, 1986). It is also considered to be an evaluative self-appraisal trait or mental state (Tesser, 2001; Neiss et al, 2002) which can be affected or constrained by various contextual factors. One of the most acceptable claims in social psychology is that humans are motivated to protect and boost their self-esteem (Vignoles et al., 2006). People's self-esteem means they tend to evaluate themselves more positively and feel good about themselves (Kernis 2003), and self-enhancement theory posits that one is motivated to increase feelings of self-worth and seek external resources to increase self-esteem (Ditto & Lopez 1992). Previous studies have argued that the main function of a brand is to construct one's self-concept and bolster self-esteem (Reimann & Aron 2009; Escalas & Bettman 2005). The most significant antecedent for self-esteem is ideal self-congruity (the person one aspires to be) (Sirgy, 2018; Ascher, 1985; Beerli et al., 2007). Sirgy's self-congruity theory asserts that the tendency of self-esteem manifests itself in the marketplace through ideal-self congruity. That is, consumers consider brands more favorably when such brands have images or personalities consistent with ideal self-images; and they do so to satisfy self-esteem needs.

The mediated role played by self-esteem on brand love and loyalty across contexts has also been addressed (e.g., Li, 2021; Garvey et al, 2016; Malär et al., 2011). For example, Ekinci et al., (2008) found that the ideal self can be realized by consumption of hospitality services which boosts one's self-esteem, and also by travel, especially cruises, which tend to be influenced by the same motive (e.g., Hung & Petrick, 2011). Consumers demonstrate greater brand preference to the ones associated with celebrity figures that match their ideal self (Krishen & Sirgy, 2016). On the contrary, lower self-esteem might cause anxiety and negative self-views, and this can motivate consumers to be more vigilant regarding relationship-oriented behaviors

through consumption of symbolism to enhance their self-worth (Klipfel et al., 2014; Sirgy & Johar, 1992; Swaminathan et al., 2008).

In fact, individuals have a fundamental need to improve their self-evaluation and to boost their feeling of self-satisfaction and self-worth (Singelis et al., 1999). That is, consumers build their self-esteem through activities that are consistent with, or reflect, what they value, such as personal achievement, interpersonal relationships, and individuality (Sirgy et al., 2000), Consumers receive symbolic benefits from brands because brands with a distinctive personality and image enable consumers to explain, verify, and increase their self-esteem (Roy & Rabbanee, 2015). In line with the research on antecedents of self-esteem (Brockner, 1988; Korman, 1970), luxury symbolism—which represents the desired, prestigious, self-image—displays success and conveys one's ideal self, it brings psychological competence and a feeling of being significant in front of others. Thus:

H1a. There is a significant positive relationship between luxury symbolism and social consistency.

H1b. There is a significant positive relationship between luxury symbolism and social approval.

H2a. There is a significant positive relationship between luxury symbolism and self-consistency.

H2b. There is a significant positive relationship between luxury symbolism and self-esteem.

a) **Self-affirmation theory**

Self-affirmation theory suggests that the ultimate goal of a person's self-system is to maintain their overall self-integrity, to consider themselves valuable, and hence to obtain evidence that confirms these feelings (Steele, 1998). This is especially so when ego is threatened, as an individual unconsciously attempts to repair their sense of self-worth. The self can be affirmed by the fulfillment of any domain within the system (e.g., reinforcement of identity, value) (Schumann, 2014). A systematic review of self-affirmation manipulations (McQueen & Klein, 2006) demonstrates that the most widely adopted operationalization of self-affirmation is a ranking task on a series of values attached to personal importance. In this test, individuals are asked to write a short essay about their highest ranked value accordingly. If self-affirmation ensures individuals' self-worth and self-integrity, how self-affirmation theory can be applied

to decision-making practice under nonthreat behavioral practice arouses research attention. In addition, research to date has only investigated the importance and positive outcomes of maintaining self-worth and self-integrity, with less focus on its antecedents (Harris & Epton, 2010).

Theoretically, as self-affirmation can be considered the process of endowing awareness, and determining the multiple facets of self-concept (e.g., values, goals, or personality traits), this broad definition includes myriad activities that potentially affirm an individual's sense of self. Tesser (2000), Tesser and Cornell (1991), and Tesser et al., (2000) suggest that the self-regulation mechanism can be substituted since it results in the same level of self-worth protection. Since brands serve as a form of self-extension, which provides new avenues for representing domains of self that are critical to self-worth, it is highly necessary to test self-affirmation theory in brand consumption settings.

Social identity theory posits that the display and communication of one's social status or personal identity through luxury goods generates feelings of being validated, proud, and honored, and therefore affirms the sense of self (e.g., Wu & Lin, 2016; Stathopoulou & Balabanis, 2019). In this vein, brands that better represent one's self-concepts can help to verify a global sense of self-adequacy and bolster one's self-worth, thereby serving as a pathway for self-affirmation (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). In essence, self-affirmation theory posits that people cater to the fundamental need to see themselves as worthy and valuable (Toma & Hancock, 2013). Among those needs, self-esteem is an important individual element for the prediction of positive psychological outcomes, such as personal well-being, competence (Callea et al., 2017), and other positive affectional states (Orth et al., 2012). Regarding risk-buffering propositions, as a protective resource, self-esteem buffers individuals from negative and stressful cognitive activities (Luthar et al., 2015; Thompson & Gomez, 2014). People with high levels of self-esteem demonstrate more positive psychological features and higher self-evaluations. Regarding the other enhancement-type function, i.e., social approval, this is suggested to encapsulate a flattering, socially connected, meaningful, and accurate self-portrait, consequently bringing psychological empowerment, boosting hedonic aspirations, reinforcing self-image, and thereby creating pleasure (e.g., Sherman, 2013; Bernritter et al., 2017). By contrast, people who have difficulty attaining their desired impression or validating a consistent identity may hold negative feelings of threat, distress, and anxiety, and may therefore engage in consumption activities for affirmation as a result (Briñol et al., 2007). Hence, we posit that

self-affirmation is the fundamental goal that benefits from the underlying psychological functions of self-congruity effects. Thus:

H3a. There is a significant positive relationship between social consistency and self-affirmation.

H3b. There is a significant positive relationship between social approval and self-affirmation.

H4a. There is a significant positive relationship between self-consistency and self-affirmation.

H4b. There is a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and self-affirmation.

The need to build a positive self-image is an important motivator of behavior. Self-affirmation brings positive outcomes, such as physiological responses to stress (Sherman, 2013), reduction of defensive tendencies (Schumann, 2014), and positive academic outcomes (Cohen et al., 2009). Self-affirmation can have a positive affect and lead to reflection of a positive self-image (Tesser, 2000; Sherman & Cohen, 2006) that enables consumers to experience feelings of success, competence, and happiness. This consequently encourages consumers to engage in the same purchase behaviour or can even lead to the commitment to repurchase a favored good repeatedly despite situational influences. This is known as customer loyalty (Kang & Lee, 2015). In the branding literature, Liezl-Marié (2018) proposes that one possible explanation for the association between self-concepts and loyalty is found in self-verification theory, which stipulates that there is a strong drive to maintain self-concepts; this means that affirmation of self-concepts increases self-confidence, facilitates social interactions, and generates positive product attitudes. In addition, Khamitov et al.'s (2019) meta-analysis indicates commonality in the antecedents of customer loyalty—i.e., a positive customer/brand relationship (e.g., brand attachment, brand love), and implies the importance and relevance of 'self' fulfillment in achieving loyalty. Thus:

H5. There is a significant positive relationship between self-affirmation and customer loyalty.

2.2.3 The moderating role of self-construal: Independent self vs. interdependent self

Consumers from both Western and Eastern cultures consume luxury brands to portray their individuality and social status (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Although various research has demonstrated differences between the two in terms of consumer behavior (e.g., Choi et al., 2018; Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018), self-construal is acknowledged as an explicit cultural variable by which to distinguish them. Self-construal is defined as "a constellation of ideas, feelings, and behaviors concerning the self as related to others or the self as distinct from others," (Singelis et al., 1999, p. 316) and includes both independent and interdependent self-construal.

Previous research has discussed the moderating role of self-construal on brand attitudes (Escalas & Bettman, 2003), brand extension (Aw et al., 2021), and social recognition (Kolstad & Horpestad, 2009). Wiedmann et al. (2007) suggest that the reasons for consuming luxury goods are either personally or socially oriented, and that this originates from a person's interdependent or independent self. On one hand, an independent self-construal emphasizes the importance of uniqueness, self-expression, and the promotion of personal goals (Le Monkhouse et al., 2012). People from independent self-oriented cultures (Western cultures) tend to form perceptions through their unique personality and focus more on individual initiative and self-enhancement (e.g., self-esteem, self-image), rather than on social identification (Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018). That is, consumers with an independent self-orientation pay closer attention to self-accomplishments and align symbolic benefits through luxury consumption to enhance their internal self and demonstrate individual success (Wiedmann et al., 2007). Thus:

H6a. Independent self positively moderates the relationship between luxury symbolism and self-consistency.

H6b. Independent self positively moderates the relationship between luxury symbolism and self-esteem.

On the other hand, interdependent self-construal attaches importance to belongingness, conformity to social norms, and promotion of others-oriented goals (Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005). People from interdependent self-oriented cultures (e.g., China and the East) tend to evaluate others based on social prominence and show a higher tendency towards face maintenance. Their self-concepts are built on their connections or assimilation with others

(Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018). Consumers with interdependent self-construal prefer to enhance or reaffirm their social identity and focus more on social function in luxury consumption (Monkhouse et al., 2012). They derive their motivation from the external environment and hold stronger needs in terms of seeking affirmation and approval from social groups to either maintain or improve their social self-concepts (Kolstad & Horpestad, 2009). Hence, they associate luxury symbolism with their social-oriented goals and the desire to impress others. Thus:

H7a. Interdependent self positively moderates the relationship between luxury symbolism and social consistency.

H7b. Interdependent self positively moderates the relationship between luxury symbolism and social approval.

The proposed research model is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 The proposed research model
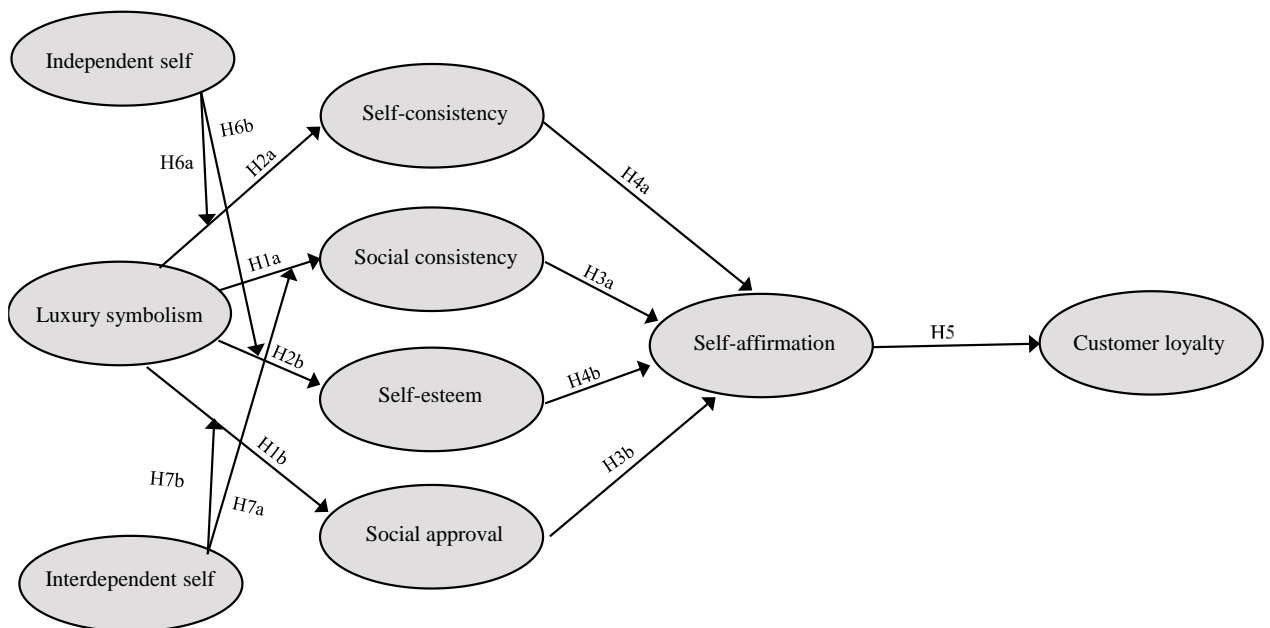
2.3 Sample and data collection

China and the US have both been major luxury economies for many decades (Bain & Company, 2020). According to a market report from Deloitte (2020), the US luxury market in 2020 was estimated to be worth US$94.5 billion, whereas in China, the world's second-largest economy, it is predicted to achieve a market share of US$79 billion by 2027. Although the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way people consume, a rebound is being observed in China. From public-health and fiscal-policy standpoints, China has indeed been more successful than the US and Europe at minimizing the destructive impact of the pandemic, which puts it on track to become the largest personal luxury market in the world by 2025 (Bain & Company, 2021). However, the continued uncertainty caused by the pandemic will increase competitive intensity, creating even bigger rewards and risks, for luxury companies in China, while uncertainty is still high in the US and could remain that way well into the coming few years (Deloitte, 2020).

Data were collected by a professional data acquisition company. The sample includes 327 Chinese participants and 326 US participants. Demographic descriptions are provided in Table II. Before being administered in full, our questionnaire was initially evaluated by a group of five UK and four Chinese academic staff. In order to encourage the authentic disclosure of perceptions by respondents, they were guaranteed that the information provided would be anonymous and confidential (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Participants were asked a screening question about the luxury categories they have consumed in the past to ensure only those with luxury consumption experience were included. During the data collection process, we have monitored the quota for gender, age, income, and educational level to ensure sample representativeness. Compared with the national statistics, our sample contained more younger (i.e., aged 34 or below) and more highly educated (i.e., undergraduate and above) participants who are found to be more likely to adopt luxury products (Liang & Shan, 2018).

It can be found that luxury consumers in China mainly comprise those belonging to upper-income households, which is defined as households earning RMB 100,000 ($15,000) to RMB 300,000 ($45,000) (Bu et al., 2017). US customers are generally perceived to have higher levels of income than Chinese customers. Our study also found that more US customers are in the $42,000-$126,000 income range. Therefore, the respondents well represent the emerging middle class in both China and the US.

The majority of the participants in the current study are females. This is based on the research that female consumers account for most consumer spending in China and the US (Granot, Russell & Brashear-Alejandro, 2013; Luo, 2021; Zhang & Kim, 2013). It also aligns with previous studies which show that women drive the new luxury market, they own luxury products to show their own style and prefer being fashionable to being unique (Kim et al., 2012; Silverstein & Fiske, 2003). A detailed ANOVA test in terms of gender comparison is also demonstrated. In addition, we did not set the age limit in our screening question. Regarding the teenaged participant, the company obtained appropriate parental consent and youth assent to participate in the study. Specifically, if the participant is under 18-year-old (the basic demographic information was registered with the company previously), the parent's consent is automatically required. Study participation required signed parental consent and individual participants' assent.

We explained that the participants could refuse to answer some questions. We also ensured that the study does not involve the discussion of sensitive topics (e.g., sexual activity, drug use, physical or mental health). As a recent McKinsey and Company report shows, the new luxury consumers — the post-80s and post-90s generations — are now emerging in the Chinese market (Luan, Kim & Zipser, 2019). It might be insightful if we can take this group of people into consideration. For example, Luciana et al. (2012) specifically looked at teens' brand attitudes due to their specific features (e.g., stronger self-presentation needs, growing spending power, growing self-perception of luxury brands). However, their study is limited to how self-concepts influence social consumption motivations and brand attitudes. Kautish, Khare and Shama (2020) and Zampetakis (2014) also include teenagers in their studies to predict luxury consumption. An ANOVA analysis for age difference is also provided as additional findings.

Table II Socio-demographic characteristics of Chinese and American participants

Variable	Chinese		American		Total	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Age						
< 18 years old	8	2.432	1	.309	9	1.378
18-24 years old	41	12.462	106	32.716	147	22.511
25-34 years old	201	61.094	80	24.691	281	43.032
35-44 years old	72	21.884	80	24.691	152	23.277
45-54 years old	5	1.520	31	9.568	36	5.513
>55 years old	2	.608	26	8.025	28	4.288
Gender						
Female	75	22.796	230	7.988	305	46.708
Male	254	77.204	93	28.704	347	53.139
Other	0	0	1	.309	1	.153
Education level						
Less than a higher school diploma	0	0	6	1.852	6	.919
High school diploma or equivalent	8	2.432	158	48.765	166	25.421
Bachelor's degree	286	86.930	106	32.716	392	6.031
Master's degree	35	1.638	45	13.889	80	12.251
Doctorate	0	0	9	2.778	9	1.378
Employment status						
Employed full-time	283	86.018	159	49.074	442	67.688
Employed part-time	5	1.520	52	16.049	57	8.729
Unemployed	20	6.079	61	18.827	81	12.404
Student	21	6.383	32	9.877	53	8.116
Self-employed	0	0	20	6.173	20	3.063
Annual income						
$31,000 or less	22	6.687	90	27.778	112	17.152
$31,000 - $42,000	191	58.055	60	18.519	251	38.438
$42,000 - $126,000	92	27.964	121	37.346	213	32.619
$126,000 - $188,000	22	6.687	37	11.420	59	9.035
$188,000 or more	2	.608	16	4.938	18	2.757
Purchase frequency						
Always	2	.608	49	15.123	51	7.810

Often	141	42.857	114	35.185	255	39.051
Sometimes	186	56.535	161	49.691	347	53.139
Proportion of monthly income spent on luxury goods						
None	1	.304	14	4.321	15	2.297
Less than one-third	269	81.763	210	64.815	479	73.354
About two-thirds	55	16.717	78	24.074	133	2.368
More than whole	4	1.216	13	4.012	13	1.991

2.3.1 Measurement items

Most items applied to operationalize the current model came from existing measurements and used seven-point Likert scales adapted to the luxury consumption context. Three steps were conducted to prepare our measurement items. First, English items from the literature were adapted and translated into Chinese, with back-translation used to ensure accuracy (following Craig & Douglas, 2005, p. 254). For example, an original item for measuring, "I will not buy another brand if this one (the luxury brand) is present," was modified to "If circumstances allow, I will not buy another brand if this one (the luxury brand) is present in the store." Secondly, a focus group comprising four researchers was conducted to refine and modify the measurement items. For instance, the items, "This luxury brand allows me to stand out in the crowd," and, "People who know me well would find it difficult to see me as a person who uses this brand," were deleted. Finally, the questionnaire was pretested with 20 Chinese undergraduates, several modifications were made based on their feedback to allow the capture of the intended meaning more precisely.

In the course of our measurement validation in the main study, items with factor loadings of less than 0.70 were deleted, (e.g., "This luxury brand makes me look stylish," and "All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure."). The luxury symbolism questions capture primary elements of the social- and self-components of symbolism (Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). We adapted Anisimova's (2016) brand symbolism scale to the luxury consumption context. In line with previous research which views self-congruity as encompassing four components (self-consistency, social consistency, social approval, and self-esteem; Sirgy, 2000), we used scales from the current self-congruity literature. Certainly, these self-concepts reflect subjective psychological experience and are influenced by various situational or contextual factors (e.g., Reicher, 2000; Swann, 1983). Our study follows Zeigler-Hill et al.'s (2011) approach to the measure of state-esteem, which is to ask participants to

complete a modified version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale designed to capture state self-esteem (i.e., how do you feel about yourself at this moment), a procedure originally developed by Kernis (2005).

The operation of the other self-related constructs (self-consistency, social consistency, social approval) are measured following the same logic. In addition to this, the items of self-consistency are an adapted version of Sirgy et al.'s (1997) self-image congruence scale. Social consistency items (e.g., "The image of people who buy this is very consistent with how I am perceived by those who know me well"), were measured according to the means of three-item seven-point Likert scales, based on Moons et al.'s (2020) social self-identity ecotourism congruity. Social approval was measured using the "need for social approval" items established by Wu and Lin (2016). An example item for social approval is, "I often change my opinion (or the way I do things) in order to please someone else". We measured self-affirmation with Mende et al.'s (2019) scale which assesses consumer motivation in romantic consumption. An example item of self-affirmation is, "Owning this brand makes me feel better about myself". In terms of the dependent variable, we assessed customer loyalty using three items adapted from measures previously used in consumer research (Aurier & de Lanauze, 2011). Finally, we measured the moderating variables independent self (e.g., "I act the same way no matter whom I am with"), and interdependent self (e.g., "I respect people who are modest about themselves"), with three items from Bahri-Ammari et al., (2020) to ensure that our measure mirrored our conceptual definition of this construct. Modifications of the scales (see Table III for final items) included rewording some statements to fit the attributes of luxury consumption (see Appendix).

Table III Confirmatory factor analysis results of measures

Factors and items	Factor loading	t value
Luxury symbolism (AVE=.681; CR=.937)		
This luxury brand enhances my personal image in the eyes of important others	.766	–
Owning this luxury brand allows me to get social approval	.838	23.084***
This luxury brand allows me to make a good impression on other people	.812	22.211***
This luxury brand allows me to display a status symbol	.850	23.492***
This luxury brand makes me look sophisticated	.786	21.366***
This luxury brand makes me look successful	.822	22.557***
Buying this luxury brand makes me feel that I have made the smart choice	.729	19.531***
Self-consistency (AVE=.664; CR=.907)		
I consume this luxury brand because it is consistent with how I see myself	.846	–
This luxury brand reflects who I really am as a person	.833	26.318***
People similar to me use luxury brands like this	.757	22.721***
The person who typically uses this luxury brand is very much like me	.750	22.412***
This luxury brand is a mirror image of me	.824	25.879***
Social consistency (AVE=.672; CR=.860)		
My family and friends see me as the typical person who prefers this brand over other brands	.733	–
The image of people who buy this is very consistent with how I am perceived by those who know me well	.841	2.415***
People who know me well, think of me as a person who would like to purchase this brand	.877	2.97***
Self-esteem (AVE=.704; CR=.877)		
On the whole, I am satisfied with myself	.811	–
I take a positive attitude toward myself	.843	22.748***
I feel that I am a person of worth	.810	21.906***
Social approval (AVE=.744; CR=.921)		
I often change my opinion (or the way I do things) in order to please someone else	.850	–
In order to get along and be liked, I tend to be what people expect of me	.883	29.084***
I am willing to argue only if I know that my friends will back me up	.826	26.05***
I usually change my position when people disagree with me	.892	29.56***
Self-affirmation (AVE=.835; CR=.910)		
Owning this brand makes me feel better about myself	.896	–
Owning this brand makes me feel more confident	.888	29.946***
Customer loyalty (AVE=.687; CR=.868)		
I am a loyal customer of this brand	.761	–
If circumstances allow, I will not buy another brand if this one is present in the store	.769	19.475***

I always try to buy this brand as it is the best choice for me	.864	21.715***
Independence self (AVE=.590; CR=.810)		
I am the same person at home that I am at work/school	.812	–
I act the same way no matter whom I am with	.822	19.28***
I prefer to be direct and forthright when dealing with people	.654	16.095***
Interdependent self (AVE=.506; CR=.752)		
It is important for me to maintain harmony within my group	.800	–
I respect people who are modest about themselves	.665	15.395***
I would offer my seat on a bus to my professor	.735	16.652***

2.4 Results

2.4.1 Measurement model

To check for common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was used (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The specific method for this is as follows: perform factor analysis on all items of the scale together and test the unrotated factor loading matrix. The size of the homology deviation can be determined according to the first principal component of the matrix. After following the above process, the first principal component of this study was 35.057% (threshold value <50%), indicating the absence of common method bias in the data.

Following Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step approach, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to estimate the measurement using AMOS 18. The original model analysis indicated a need for further improvement: CMIN = 2475.413, df = 629, CMIN/df = 3.935, p < .001, CFI = .886, GFI = .804, NFI = .853, RMSEA = .067. Following a sequence of procedures for scale purification, the final measurement model suggested a good fit: CMIN = 1169.501, df = 459, CMIN/df = 2.548, p < .001, CFI = .952, GFI = .897, NFI = .923, RMSEA = .049.

Convergent validity of all constructs was confirmed through significant path loadings of all items (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The t-values of all estimated path coefficients were significant at the p < .001 level. The AVE of all constructs surpassed the cutoff value of .50, which indicates convergent validity (Hair et al., 2006). To examine the uni-dimensionality of the latent constructs, we conducted exploratory factor analysis (Bryant & Yarnold, 1995). The results suggest a single underlying factor for each construct. Additionally, the Cronbach's alpha values (in the range .69–.91) indicated adequate reliability for each construct (Hair et al., 2006).

CFA factor loadings were all acceptable (i.e., all above .60), suggesting uni-dimensionality of all constructs (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) (See Table III). Discriminant validity was confirmed when the AVE of every pair of constructs was larger than the R^2 (i.e., the squared correlation of each of the two constructs) (Hair et al., 2006) (see Table IV). The results of EFA test also demonstrates KMO value surpassed the cut of value .70, the communality value for all items are greater than the threshold value of .40, which indicates all variables were determined to measure the listed constructs.

Table IV Discriminant validity

	LS	SEC	SOC	SEE	SOA	SEA	CL	INDS	INTDS
LS	.801								
SEC	.724**	.803							
SOC	.528**	.595**	.819						
SEE	.382**	.460**	.390**	.822					
SOA	.332**	.440**	.266**	.146**	.863				
SEA	.751**	.701**	.510**	.345**	.299**	.892			
CL	.601**	.664**	.528**	.474**	.352**	.572**	.799		
INDS	.276**	.361**	.283**	.498**	.135**	.233**	.387**	.766	
INTDS	.313**	.388**	.337**	.439**	.306**	.331**	.441**	.367**	.735

Notes: LS luxury symbolism, SEC self-consistency, SOC social consistency, SEE self-esteem, SOA social approval, SEA self-affirmation, CL customer loyalty, INDS independent self, INTDS interdependent self

2.4.2 The structural model and hypothesis testing

We examined the proposed hypotheses using structural equation modeling (SEM). The structural model indicated a good fit (CMIN =1593.304, df = 527, CMIN/df = 3.023, p < .001, CFI = .929, GFI = .871, NFI = .897, RMSEA = .056). Luxury symbolism is found to positively affect four psychological functions underpinning the self-congruity effect, in sequence, these are: self-consistency (β =.732, p < .001), social consistency (β =.53, p < .001), self-esteem (β = .206, p < .001), and social approval (β = .305, p < .001). Thus, H1a–H2b are supported; i.e., across cultures, consuming luxury symbolic goods can increase levels of self- and social consistency, self-esteem, and social approval. We also found that social consistency is positively related to self-affirmation (β = .148, p < .001). Hence, H3a is supported, showing that social consistency might be a factor in enhancing self-affirmation. Surprisingly, no significant impact is found for social approval (β = -.039, p > .05) on self-affirmation. Thus, H3b is rejected, illustrating that gaining social approval does not influence consumers' awareness of self-affirmation in general. Furthermore, self-consistency is found to significantly and positively relate to self-affirmation (β =. 804, p < .001). Thus, H4a is supported, indicating that increased self-consistency can promote feelings of self-affirmation. Meanwhile, there was no significant difference between self-esteem (β = -.016, p > .05) and self-affirmation. Therefore, H4b is rejected, suggesting that self-esteem might not be an indicator of self-affirmation in the context of luxury consumption. In addition, we find that self-affirmation (β =. 737, p < .001) is positively related to customer loyalty, which supports H5 and indicates that

consumers with strong awareness of self-affirmation tend to display loyalty in luxury brand consumption.

Additionally, the results of a series of ANOVAs, using model constructs as the dependent and gender as the independent variable, are as follows. Gender has a significant effect on self-related constructs and a nonsignificant effect on social-related concepts. For instance, the mean value of self-consistency is higher for women than for men ($M_{female} = 5.4$, $M_{male} = 5.1$, p < .01); the mean value of self-esteem is higher for women than for men ($M_{female} = 5.8$, $M_{male} = 5.6$, p<.001); and the mean value of self-affirmation is higher for women than for men ($M_{female} = 5.8$, $M_{male} = 5.5$, p < .05). Thus, luxury brands provide more self-development potential for female than for male consumers.

2.4.3 Test of moderating effects

A stepwise hierarchical regression analysis [1] was conducted to assess the continuous moderation effects of self-construal (Hayes, 2018). Following the procedures suggested by Edwards and Lambert (2007), we standardized the variables before evaluating the moderation effect. The results of the main effects of luxury symbolism (Step 1) and independent self (Step 2) on self-consistency, and the moderation effects (examined through the interaction term in Step 3) are elaborated below. In Step 1, the results demonstrate a significant positive impact of luxury symbolism on self-consistency (β = .708; p < .001). Step 2 shows a significant influence of independent self on self-consistency (β = .182; p < .001). Additionally, the influence of luxury symbolism (β = .662; p < .001) on self-consistency remains significant in Step 2.

The moderation effect of the independent self on the relationship between luxury symbolism and self-consistency was evaluated by including the regression model. Results show that H6a is confirmed, with independent self-construal (B = .081; p < .01) significantly and positively moderating the relationship between luxury symbolism and self-consistency. In addition, the moderation effect of independent self on the relationship between luxury symbolism and self-esteem was examined. Results show that independent self-construal (β = -.076; p < .01) significantly and negatively moderates the relationship between luxury symbolism and self-esteem; hence, H6b is rejected, indicating that luxury symbolism might exert less influence on

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[1] We conducted both SEM and moderated mediation analysis via PROCESS for our model. To maintain empirical and methodological coherence, we have placed SEM results in our manuscript, but also included the PROCESS (moderated mediation) analysis in the Web Appendix.

self-esteem when consumers hold a strong independent self-orientation. When testing the moderation effects of interdependent self on luxury symbolism and social consistency, interdependent self ($\beta = .061$; $p < .05$) demonstrates a significant and positive influence on social consistency; thus, H7a is supported, indicating that consumers with a strong interdependent orientation might focus more on social consistency when consuming symbolism. In addition, interdependent self ($\beta = .127$, $p < .01$) significantly and positively moderates the relationship between luxury symbolism and social approval; hence, H7b is supported, indicating that consumers with a strong interdependent self-orientation might exert more influence on social consistency in symbolic consumption. We applied simple slope analysis and plotted graphs for one standard deviation above and below the mean value of the moderators (Aiken & West, 1991), as shown in Figures 2 and 3. Overall, 10 out of 13 hypotheses are supported.

Figure 2 The moderating effect of independent self-construal
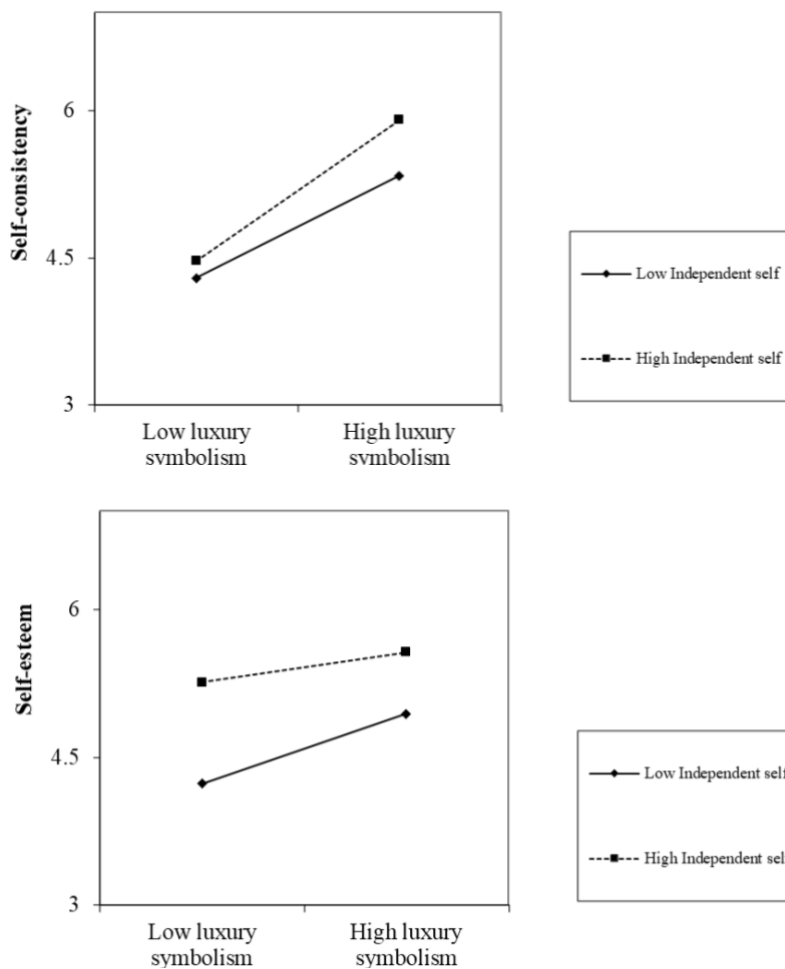
Figure 3 The moderating effect of interdependent self-construal
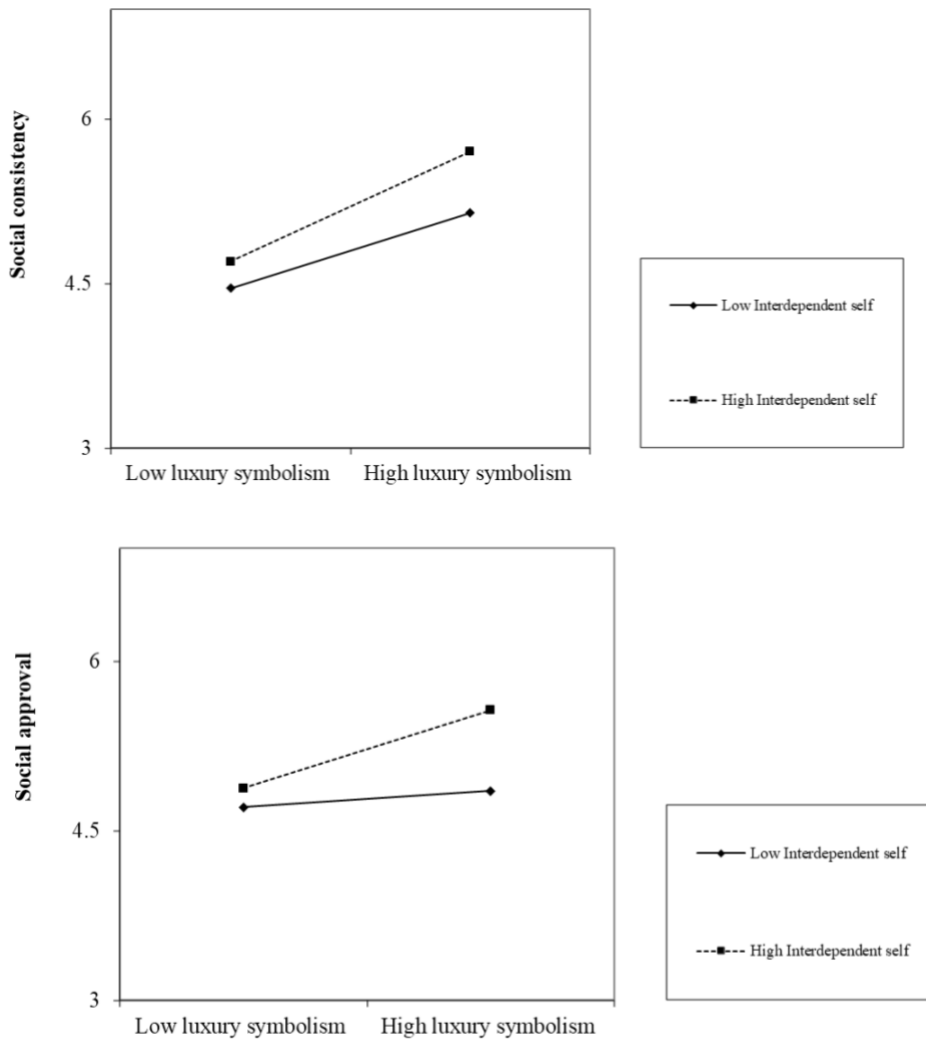
2.4.4 Moderating role of country

Multi-group SEM was performed to compare the proposed framework in China versus the US. It was necessary to examine the invariant structure between the two groups before conducting multi-group SEM. We presumed that the invariance for the two countries had the same factors and path pattern as for the non-restricted model. The fit of the non-restricted model was admissible ($\chi^2 = 2370.165$, $df = 1054$, $\chi^2/df = 2.249$, p < .001, CFI = .911, GFI = .825, NFI = .852, RMSEA = .044), with significant t-values regarding factor loadings larger than .6. The full invariance model was assessed by constraining the metric of the factor loading to be invariant in the two compared countries. The chi-square test demonstrated no significant differences ($\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df)$ =96.989, p < .001) between the non-restricted model and the

measurement weight-restricted model (χ^2 (*df*) = 2467.154 (653), CFI = .906, GFI = .818, NFI = .846, RMSEA = .044). Hence, the metric invariance was verified, and the structural models of the two countries were considered to be invariant.

Upon validation of the SEM invariance, multi-group SEM was conducted to compare the proposed relationships between Chinese and US consumer groups (see Table V). There are four interesting findings for the US group (see Figure 4). First, self-esteem is significantly and negatively related to self-affirmation (β = -.152, p < .001), indicating that symbolic meanings might generate a negative influence on US consumers with high self-esteem. Second, there is a significant and negative relationship between social approval (β = -.104, p < .01) and self-affirmation. This indicates that increasing social approval might impair the sense of self-affirmation for US consumers during symbolic consumption.

Regarding the moderation effects, independent self (β = .106, p < .01) is found to significantly and positively influence the relationships between luxury symbolism and self-consistency, suggesting that US consumers who hold a strong independent self-orientation might be more likely to consume symbolic goods for self-identity verification. Interestingly, independent self (β = -.024, p > .05) has no significant impact on the relationships between luxury symbolism and self-esteem, indicating that US customers with strong independent self-construal tend not to consume symbolic goods for self-esteem enhancement. On the other side, there appears to be no significant moderation effect of interdependent self (β =.047, p > .05) on the relationships between luxury symbolism and social consistency, suggesting that US consumers who are more interdependently oriented might not consume luxury goods for social identity maintenance purposes. However, interdependent self (β = .133, p < .01) significantly and positively moderates the relationships between luxury symbolism and social approval, indicating that US consumers who are more interdependently oriented may seek more social approval from consuming symbolic goods.

Table V Estimation of SEM results

Relationships	M1		M2			
	Overall		**China**		**United States**	
Direct paths	β	*p*	β	*p*	β	*p*
Luxury symbolism → Social consistency (H$_{1a}$)	**.53** (.05)	***	**.32** (.08)	***	**.68** (.07)	***
Luxury symbolism → Social approval (H$_{1b}$)	**.31** (.06)	***	**.20** (.08)	***	**.38** (.08)	***
Luxury symbolism → Self-consistency (H$_{2a}$)	**.73** (.05)	***	**.72** (.06)	***	**.75** (.07)	***
Luxury symbolism → Self-esteem (H$_{2b}$)	**.21** (.04)	***	**.39** (.05)	***	**.13** (.07)	***
Social consistency → Self affirmation (H$_{3a}$)	**.15** (.04)	***	**.13** (.04)	*	**.21** (.06)	*
Social approval → Self-affirmation (H$_{3b}$)	-.04 (.02)	n.s.	**.01** (.04)	**	**-.10** (.03)	**
Self-consistency → Self-affirmation	**.80** (.04)	***	**.61** (.06)	***	**.84** (.06)	***
Self-esteem → Self-affirmation	-.02 (.03)	n.s.	**.29** (.07)	***	**-.15** (.04)	***
Self-affirmation → Customer loyalty	**.74** (.03)	***	**.76** (.06)	***	**.70** (.04)	***
Interaction effects						
Luxury symbolism x interdependent self → social consistency	**.06**	*	**.11**	*	.05	n.s.
Luxury symbolism x interdependent self → social approval	**.13**	**	.06	n.s.	**.13**	**
Luxury symbolism x independent self → self-consistency	**.08**	**	.04	n.s.	**.11**	**
Luxury symbolism x independent self → self-esteem	**-.08**	**	**-.14**	**	-.02	n.s.
Model fit						
Adjusted R^2 (customer loyalty)	.428		.488		.215	
χ^2 (df)	1593.107 (527)		2370.165 (1054)			
RMSEA / CFI / GFI / NFI	.056 / .929/ .871 / .897		.044 / .911 / .825 / .852			

Notes: The reported coefficients are standardized; statistically significant coefficients (at the $p < .05$ level) are marked in bold. n.s = not significant, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Figure 4 Data results for the US group
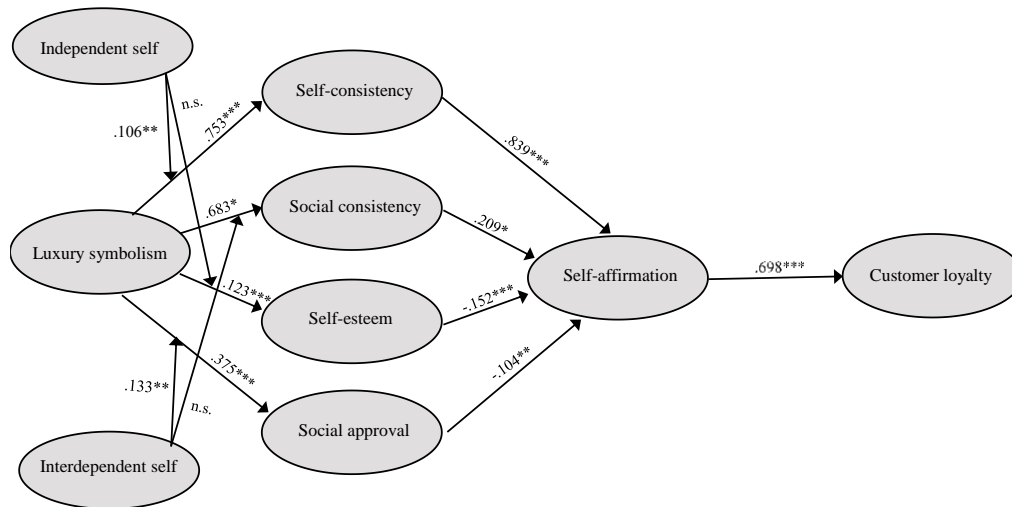
Notes: n.s = not significant, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

For the Chinese group (see Figure 5), self-esteem is found to be positively related to self-affirmation (β = .287, p < .001), indicating that enhancing self-esteem might increase feelings of self-affirmation for Chinese consumers in symbolic consumption. However, social approval is not found to be significantly related to self-affirmation for Chinese consumers (β = .006, p > .05), suggesting that purchasing luxury goods for social approval purposes might not necessarily help Chinese consumers affirm their sense of self. Regarding moderation effects, independent self (β = .041, p > .05) does not have a significant influence on the relationships between luxury symbolism and self-consistency, indicating that consuming symbolic goods might exert less influence on self-identity maintenance for Chinese consumers who are more independent.

However, independent self (β = -.139, p < .01) negatively influences the relationship between luxury symbolism and self-esteem, indicating that luxury symbolism may impact self-esteem less for Chinese consumers with a stronger independent orientation. Furthermore, interdependent self (β = .112, p < .05) demonstrates a significantly positive moderation effect on the relationship between symbolism and social consistency, suggesting that Chinese consumers who are more interdependently oriented tend to consume symbolic goods to conform their social identity. However, no significant impact of interdependent self (β = .056, p > .05) moderates the relationship between interdependent self and social approval, indicating that consuming symbolic goods might exert less impact on obtaining social approval for strongly interdependent Chinese consumers.

Figure 5 Data results for the Chinese group
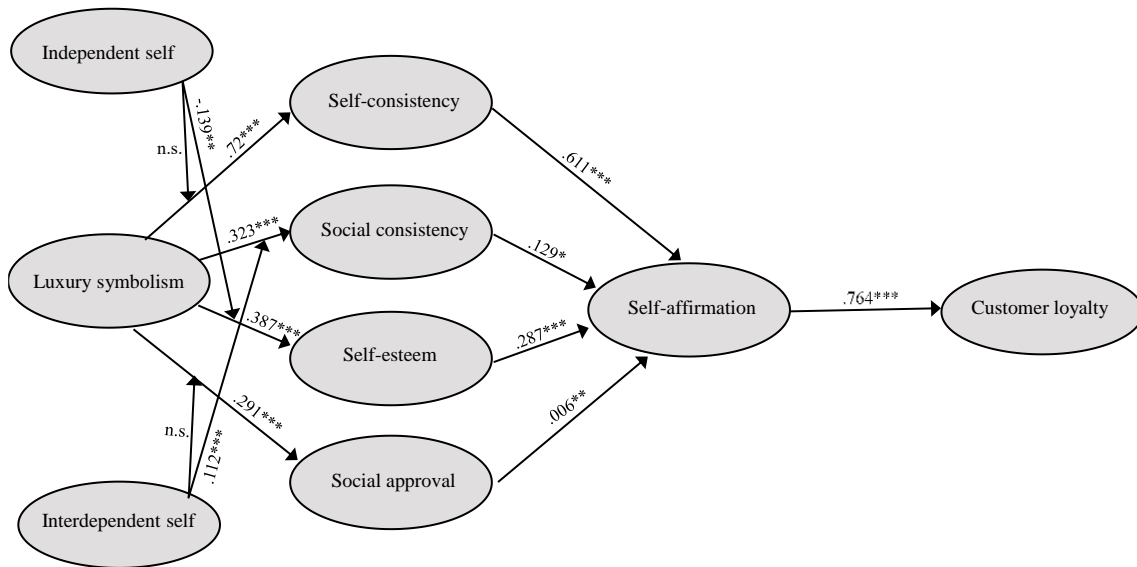
Notes: n.s = not significant, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

2.4.5 Additional findings

The results of a series of ANOVAs using model constructs as the dependent and gender as the independent variable are as follows (Table VI.). Gender has a significant effect on self-related constructs and a nonsignificant effect on social-related concepts. For instance, the mean value of self-consistency is higher for women than for men (Mfemale = 5.4, Mmale = 5.1, p < 0.01); the mean value of self-esteem is higher for women than for men (Mfemale = 5.8, Mmale = 5.6, p<0.000); and the mean value of self-affirmation is higher for women than for men (Mfemale = 5.8, Mmale = 5.5, p < 0.05). Thus, luxury brands provide more self-development potential for female than for male consumers. Besides, only the moderating role of gender on social consistency in self-affirmation is significant. The result indicates that the effect of social consistency on self-affirmation is stronger for males than females. That is, for men luxury brands that signal recognition within groups and relations with others would increase their self-confidence in buying the luxury brands. Please find the detailed results below (Table VII).

Table VI. ANOVA results of gender differences

Dependent variable	Female (n=517)	Male (n=136)	t	p
Brand symbolism	5.66 (1.01)	5.55 (1.20)	1.194	0.304
Self-consistency	5.40 (1.06)	5.10 (1.27)	5.384	0.005**
Social consistency	5.10 (1.27)	5.08 (1.33)	0.466	0.628
Self-esteem	5.76 (0.89)	5.60 (1.24)	20.010	0.000***
Social approval	4.51 (1.32)	3.80 (1.71)	2.083	0.125
Self-affirmation	5.75 (1.15)	5.48 (1.43)	4.174	0.016*
Brand loyalty	5.58 (1.07)	5.27 (1.29)	5.740	0.003**
Independent self	5.44 (1.00)	5.45 (1.24)	0.621	0.538
Interdependent self	5.72 (1.02)	5.58 (1.24)	1.728	0.178

a

Cell means.

b

Standard deviation.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table VII. Model estimation results

Predictor	Self-C	Social-C	Self-E	Social-App	Self-Aff	CL
	Dependent variable					
Main model						
LS	.77 (.03)***	.62 (.04)***	.38 (.04)***	.49 (.05)***		
Self-C					.78 (.03)***	
Social-C					.50 (.03)***	
Self-E					.45 (.05)***	
Social-App					.243(.033)***	
Self-Aff						.54 (.03)***
Demographics						
LS x GD	.06 (.06)n.s.					
LS x AG	.06 (.02)**					
LS x IC	03 (.05) n.s.					
LS x GD		-.05 (.08) n.s.				
LS x AG		.05 (.03)n.s.				
LS x IC		.16 (.06)*				
LS x GD			.02 (.07)n.s.			
LS x AG			-.03 (.03)n.s.			
LS x IC			.04 (.06)n.s.			
LS x GD				.14 (.10)n.s.		
LS x AG				.06 (.04)n.s.		
LS x IC				.23 (.08)n.s.		
Self-C x GD					.01 (.06)n.s.	
Self-C x AG					.00 (.03)n.s.	
Self-C x IC					-.05 (.05) n.s.	
Social-C x GD					-.19 (.07)**	
Social-C x AG					.03 (.03)n.s.	
Social-C x IC					.04 (.05)n.s.	
Self-E x GD					. 18 (.09)n.s.	
Self-E x AG					-.05 (.04)n.s.	
Self-E x IC					.04 (.06) n.s.	
Social-App x G					.02(.063)n.s.	

Social-App x A		.033(.028)n.s.
Social-App x IC		.009(.042)n.s.
Self-Aff x GD		
Self-Aff x AG		
Self-Aff x IC		

Notes: column entries refer to unstandardized regression coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

LS=luxury symbolism, Self-C=self-consistency, Social-C=social consistency, Self-E=self-esteem, Social-App=social approval, Self-Aff=self-affirmation, CL=customer loyalty, GD=gender, AG=age, IC=income, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001, n.s.=non-significant.

Furthermore, in order to be sure that the self-concept variables were not significantly different between the two age groups of consumers (teenagers vs. adults), a series of ANOVAs was run (please find the table below). Results showed that only the social consistency concept of teenager consumers (MTee. = 4.1, SD = 1.69) statistically differs from that of adult consumers (MAdt. = 5.1, SD = 1.29; t = 2.37, p < .05). There are no significant differences in other concepts in the study.

Table VIII. ANOVA results of age

Dependent variable	Under 18 (n=9)	Over 18 years old (n=644)	t	p
Luxury symbolism	4.41[a] (2.12[b])	5.63 (1.08)	-1.716	0.124
Self-consistency	4.56 (1.47)	5.27 (1.16)	-1.827	0.068
Social consistency	4.07 (1.69)	5.11 (1.29)	-2.371	0.018*
Self-esteem	5.89 (0.87)	5.69 (1.07)	0.563	0.573
Social approval	3.28 (1.50)	4.18 (1.56)	-1.736	0.083
Self-affirmation	5.11 (1.56)	5.64 (1.29)	-1.208	0.228
Brand loyalty	5.11 (1.27)	5.44 (1.19)	-0.827	0.409
Independent self	5.37 (1.20)	5.45 (1.11)	-0.202	0.840
Interdependent self	5.33 (1.82)	5.66 (1.11)	-0.533	0.609

a

Cell means.

b

Standard deviation.

* p<0.05

2.5 Discussion and implications

Due to the socialized characteristics of luxury products, symbolism plays a crucial role in conveying brand value to customers. The results of our study suggest that luxury symbolism has a positive influence on the four self-related functions from self-congruity theory; namely, social consistency, social approval, self-consistency, and self-esteem (Sirgy & Su, 2000). This study is the first to examine the underlying mechanism of the self-congruity effect in the context of luxury consumption by distinguishing the influence of cultural orientations. In line with Sirgy and Su (2000), consumers desire the acquisition of symbolic benefits from a luxury brand to maintain their social and self-identities, boost self-esteem, and gain social approval. Moreover, the results support the positive link between two types of consistency functions (i.e., self-consistency and social consistency) and self-affirmation, consistent with previous research (e.g., Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012). Thus, the more effectively the brand helps to verify or maintain consumers' social and self-identity, the more likely customers are to maintain their self-worth. Additionally, the study shows that self-affirmation is a strong predictor of customer loyalty toward luxury brands and an important underlying function for pursuing symbolism. This is consistent with Liao et al., (2020), who posited that the enhanced self-worth of individuals tends to overcome challenges and allows the perception of happiness and positive affective states, and results in repeated behavior.

However, no significant relationship between self-esteem and self-affirmation is found in this context. That is, consumers' positive self-evaluations do not tend to affirm themselves, contrary to prior findings of a positive relationship between self-esteem and self-affirmation (e.g., Sirgey et al., 2017; Tesser, 2000). The explanation could be that people with higher self-esteem do not engage in consumption behavior to enhance their already high self-esteem (Wallace et al., 2020). Hence, the satisfaction of self-esteem may not be a priority for this segment. Moreover, social approval might not help consumers reaffirm their self-concept in the luxury consumption context. There may be various reasons for this. As suggested by Briñol et al., (2007), self-affirmation can reduce the tendency for social comparison, particularly for those with a social identification, which means they feel no need for self-affirmation. In this case, social approval is not necessarily related to the enhancement of self-affirmation. However, this varies according to cultural orientation.

Furthermore, we find that consumers with a strong independent self-orientation might consume brands that are consistent with their self-image and personality, rather than brands

that enhance their self-esteem. This implies that consumers from independent self-oriented cultures may not typically purchase luxury products to boost their self-promotion. This is supported by Agrawal and Maheswaran's (2005) findings that show consumers with independent self-construal normally feel pride in themselves and pay more attention to self-expressive activities. However, the finding is contradictory to the idea that independent self-construal tends to drive individuals to seek self-enhancement (Kolstad & Horpestad, 2009). This may be because independent-oriented consumers who purchase luxury products already have relatively high self-esteem that does not need to be enhanced through consumption behavior, or to be prioritized in this context. We also find that consumers from an interdependent self-oriented culture tend to transfer symbolic value to the perception of social approval, which is important in winning their loyalty. They also highly value the consistency of their social image. This could relate not only to the tendency of conformity to social norms in collectivist cultures, but also to face-saving, face maintenance, and others-directed goals (Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018), as per previous findings (e.g., Monkhouse et al., 2012; Kolstad & Horpestad, 2009).

Results further reveal that luxury brands provide more self-development for female than for male consumers. These differences might result from a higher self-related value that has been more important for females than for their male counterparts. This finding contrasts with traditional studies on gender differences in consumption. Such studies suggest that males are strongly influenced by agentic goals, which involve task-oriented thinking and performance-motivated acting, while females are more strongly directed by social relationships (Prakash, 1992; Stokburger-Sauer & Teichmann, 2013). This study acknowledges the dynamics of sex-typing, which posits the increased degree of femininity over the years. More precisely, women tend to focus on their internal domain to emphasize their nonconformity and expression of personal traits over relational motives (Bahri et al., 2020; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014).

Interestingly, this study reveals cultural disparities in the proposed framework between China and the US. These discrepancies are confirmed with regard to the proposed mechanism. On one hand, self-esteem and social approval have a significant and negative influence on self-affirmation in the US group, which challenges conventional findings that both constructs are important predictors for personal values and self-worth (e.g., Van et al., 2011; Tesser, 2000; Sherman & Cohen, 2006), and raises new theoretical insights regarding how brand consumption brings satisfaction via self-domains. Indeed, a moderate and healthy enhancement of self-esteem could generally increase self-integrity and confidence; by contrast, 'fragile high

self-esteem' could undermine self-acceptance, confidence, and overall wellbeing, and is normally found in covert narcissists, who hold inferior self-views under a superior and self-absorbed façade (e.g., Grieve et al., 2020; Biolcati & Passini, 2018). Such personality factors are especially prevalent in prompting conspicuous and symbolic consumption (e.g., Rogoza et al., 2018; Fastoso et al., 2018), which might explain the increasingly adverse impacts on self-affirmation. Such narcissists also seek extreme social acceptance to cover their hidden insecurity, yet believe and persuade themselves that they are favored by social groups regardless (Leder et al., 2020; Nash et al., 2019). This might help to justify the inverse relationship between perceived social approval and actual self-worth.

In contrast, individuals from Eastern cultures, such as China, are recognized as having less ability to cope with uncertainty or change and are short on self-focus. They have lower self-esteem than their Western counterparts, and therefore benefit more from self-affirmation (Tesser, 2000), while enhanced self-esteem could help them affirm their self-view. Another potential reason for the difference may be due to the generalizability of Rosenberg's global self-esteem scale being questioned. Although we have applied the most universal scale examined by Malär and colleagues (2011), self-esteem can be a culturally specific construct (Soral & Kofta, 2020). Surprisingly, for the Chinese group, gaining social approval through consumption of luxury goods might not necessarily help them affirm their sense of self, which contrasts with existing findings that collectivist individuals tend to be other-directed (e.g., Choi et al., 2018; Cohen et al., 2009). The reason for this can be associated with how individuals perceive symbolism. In fact, an emerging research stream suggests that Chinese consumers eschew loud luxury items with striking symbols that are perceived to be in poor taste and convey lower social status (Henninger et al., 2017; Perry et al., 2020). Therefore, purchasing or using such goods may not affirm their personal values or bring internal fulfillment, which can be considered as one situational factor that weakens the proposed effect.

In addition, the respective moderation effects between both countries might provide deeper understanding of the cultural influence beyond the national level. Based on the notion that both the independent self and interdependent self coexist within an individual, albeit weighted differently (Markus and Kitayama, 1991), our findings warrant further examination in a more globalized multi-cultural environment. For example, it is unsurprising that US consumers, with a stronger independent orientation, consume symbolic goods for self-identity verification (e.g., English et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2005), whereas they may not tend to do so for self-enhancement purposes (e.g., self-esteem). The reason for this is probably that Western

consumers, with their stronger independent orientation, tend to demonstrate stronger self-esteem, and general self-confidence, which is not their prioritized focus in luxury consumption (Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018).

Moreover, US consumers with a stronger interdependent orientation tend to seek social approval rather than verification of their social identity, which contributes to settling the debate on whether Western consumers are more inclined toward self-enhancement than to seeking to maintain existing self-views (e.g., Kurman, 2001; Norasakkunkit & Kalick, 2002). This view is verified from another angle in our study, in that Eastern consumers, with their stronger interdependent orientation, are more likely to consume symbolic goods for reasons of social identity conformity than for promotional purposes (e.g., gaining social approval). In addition, it is interesting that neither boosting self-esteem nor maintaining self-identity are drivers for today's Chinese consumers, who are deeply influenced by Western culture, to purchase symbolic goods. In fact, this segmentation has become exceptionally important as a force in the global luxury market during Covid-19 (Bain & Company, 2020). The rapid development of digitalization (Qian & Park, 2021), information asymmetry, and inappropriate fit between consumers and brand influencers could undermine the clarity of self-concepts for Chinese consumers, which indicates the need to reinforce the cultural identity that is deeply rooted in consumers' minds to increase loyalty.

Besides, the gender differences in this study might result from a higher self-related value that has been more important for females than their male counterparts. This finding contrasts with traditional studies on gender differences in consumption. Such studies suggest that males are strongly influenced by agentic goals, which involve task-oriented thinking and performance-motivated acting, while females are more strongly directed by social relationships (Prakash, 1992; Stokburger-Sauer and Teichmann, 2013). This study acknowledges the dynamics of sex typing, which posits that women possess more male traits such as the increased degree of femininity over the years. More precisely, women tend to focus on their internal domain to emphasize their nonconformity and expression of personal traits over relational motives (Bahri et al., 2020; Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014).

2.6 Conclusion

2.6.1 Theoretical contributions

This study investigates the underlying psychological mechanism between luxury symbolism and consumer loyalty in cross-cultural contexts with reference to theories of self-congruity and self-affirmation. The findings reveal the moderating effect of self-construal on the relationship between luxury symbolism and four psychological functions underpinning the self-congruity effect (e.g., self-consistency, social consistency, self-esteem, and social approval). Different results for the proposed framework emerged in the two countries investigated, the US and China. Based thereon, the study offers four theoretical contributions to the literature on self–brand relationship and studies of luxury consumption.

Firstly, based on the literature gap regarding the self-congruity effect, our study examines the underlying psychological mechanism between luxury symbolism and customer loyalty via four psychological functions originating from self-congruity theory, and contrasts their cultural valence (Sirgy and Samli, 1985). Specifically, the study contributes to the literature by conceptually and empirically demonstrating the varying effects of luxury symbolism on four psychological functions (i.e., self-consistency, social consistency, social approval, and self-esteem) for both Chinese and US customers.

Secondly, the study initially addressed the significant role of self-affirmation in predicting customer loyalty and identified it as an important psychological function behind luxury symbolism; this broadens the theoretical and practical boundaries of self-affirmation theory. In particular, people consume luxury products for social and self-consistency reasons, which boosts their self-reinforcement needs. This result is consistent with the extant literature that highlights the significant impacts of self-verification and self-enhancement in brand consumption (Rindfleisch et al., 2009; Hosany & Martin, 2012).

Thirdly, this study expands the existing brand literature by introducing self-construal as an important cultural moderator to be considered when discussing luxury symbolism, it highlights the contingent effects on the relationships between luxury symbolism and the four psychological functions. In general, consumers from an interdependent self-oriented culture tend to consume symbolic goods to gain social approval and verify their social identity with the desire to promote their social standing, conform to social norms, and meet others-directed goals. Therefore, interdependent self-construal emphasizes both social maintenance and social enhancement, which augments the literature suggesting that consumers have a single goal

orientation (e.g., either enhancement or verification) (e.g., English et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2005). In contrast, people from an independent self-oriented culture use symbolic value to maintain self-consistency, rather than to boost self-esteem, since they place more emphasis on self-expression, self-accomplishment, and individuality, which challenges the view that self-enhancement is a unique individualist cultural phenomenon and byproduct (e.g., Gaertner et al., 2008; Henrich et al., 2010).

Finally, it is important to note the varying cultural effects at a national level, how self-construal interacts therewith, and how these together influence symbolic consumption behavior through consumers' self-domains. For US consumers, the enhancement-focused self-domains (self-esteem, social approval) demonstrate a negative influence on self-affirmation, which contrasts findings suggesting both constructs as predictors (e.g., Van et al., 2011; Tesser, 2000) and offers theoretical insights regarding national cultural factors as a vital moderator for self-affirmation. For Chinese consumers, social approval is no longer the driving force to affirm their self-views, which goes against the *mianzi* (i.e., face) propositions of seeking social acceptance (e.g., Filieri et al., 2019; Rashid et al., 2019). Consistency-driven psychological satisfaction fulfills them more through symbolic consumption practice. In addition, our study provides unique perspectives by combining the nations with the opposite cultural orientations (e.g., US consumers with stronger interdependent orientation, Chinese consumers with stronger independent orientation) to compare the difference when consuming luxury symbolic goods. Furthermore, social consistency becomes the prioritized purchasing drive for Eastern consumers who are hugely influenced by Western culture, this provides initial evidence of how the combined effects of both cultures influence the self domains in luxury consumption.

2.6.2 Managerial contributions

From a practical standpoint, the findings of the current study offer important implications for luxury marketers. First, managers should be aware that understanding the symbolic functions or attributes of luxury goods is crucial for unpacking the complex nature of luxury consumption behavior. Indeed, the results indicate that luxury brand symbolism has a positive impact on consumers' self-congruity. Thus, branding marketers are encouraged to exploit various ways which help consumers to match their important symbolic values (e.g., embellishments, logos, and other visible adornments) through global luxury campaigns.

An additional practical implication is that consumers who experience a match between how they see the luxury product and how they see themselves, or how they would like to be seen, are more likely to experience affirmation, which drives their loyalty. Therefore, luxury marketers should place greater emphasis on building a connection between product image and consumers' self-concept and develop marketing campaigns that emphasize this match. For example, they could simply conduct marketing activities that make consumers feel good about themselves (Sherman, 2013). In doing so, they will inspire a new starting point and objective for self–brand relationships and increase customer retention.

Furthermore, our results suggest that individual and cultural factors still affect consumers' decisions and actions toward luxury brands. The differences in consumer reactions to luxury consumption that emerged from our comparative study highlight the need to differentiate marketing strategies to address consumers' different cultural orientations in Western versus Eastern contexts. Therefore, marketing managers would benefit from categorizing status seekers and those with high self-relatedness (Semaan et al., 2019). For instance, in China Prada opts to resonate with luxury shoppers who view group opinion, harmony, and belonging as important in their daily lives, while in the US Prada promotes a sense of style and uniqueness (Wu, 2021).

2.6.3 Limitations and future research directions

The study is subject to several limitations that future research could address. Firstly, although the findings provide support for current theorizations on luxury consumption, we acknowledge a limitation regarding the representativeness of the sample used, such as the inclusion of teenagers (under 18 years old), and of relatively lower-income-level participants. We encourage future research in this area, particularly studies which use survey methods in comparative countries, to further explore and validate our findings with larger, and relatively wealthier, consumers of luxury goods.

Secondly, since the four underpinning functions of self-congruity effects could be categorized as consistency type (self-consistency, social consistency) and enhancement type (social approval, self-esteem), it might be worth investigating why one surpasses the other in predicting customer loyalty within the same category for the same cultural setting. It would also be worthwhile to enlarge the sample groups—for instance, to include European countries

and/or other Asian countries—to compare the cultural influence from a more comprehensive and national level.

Thirdly, it is important to investigate cultural variations in perceived luxury symbolism and self-concepts since consumers tend to construct themselves based on their contextual bounds and social networks (Hornsey et al., 2018). For example, the extent to which consumers conceive luxury brands or categories as symbolically significant across different cultures merits investigation. It is also worth considering a more global adaptive measurement scale for self-concepts and contrasting the expanded scale items from other relevant literature in the luxury consumption context (e.g., self-affirmation) to reduce potential bias.

Penultimately, identity diffusion may exist due to the overwhelming amount of marketing information conveyed via social media, especially in digitalized economies such as China, which indicates that identity clarity might moderate the relationship between self-verification and customer choice. There may also be identity discrepancies between the self and social domains, where the fulfillment of one would be at the expense of the other (Purzycki & Lang, 2019); this needs to be taken into consideration in future. Finally, for US consumers, the assumption of a negative relationship between self-esteem, social approval, and self-affirmation arises based on the concept of fragile self-esteem, or narcissistic traits (Rogoza et al., 2018; Fastoso et al., 2018); however, this requires systematic justification regarding its valence and whether it is restricted to the given national context. In addition, understanding why and when consumers tend to relegate their sense of self to significant group identities requires analysis at both motivational and cognitive levels. Other factors for exploration could include personality traits and situational cues, which might impact the proposed model.

It is also worth mentioning that in the data analysist presentation, we have mainly followed Jung et al (2016)'s approach in an across cultural comparison setting. First, structural equation modeling was conducted to assess the hypothesized relationships and model fit for the overall sample through AMOS 23. Followed by the multigroup structural equation modeling analysis which compares the hypothesized relationships between Chinese and US consumer groups. Specifically, the validation of the invariance of the SEM was tested beforehand. In addition, the moderation analysis of self-construal and result communication has followed Chen and Moosmayer (2018)'s as well as Kim and Johnson (2013)'s approach. Thereinto, the slopes of the moderating effects of both constructs have been modified in Figure 2 and Figure 3. Finally, a stepwise hierarchical regression analysis has been conducted for the Chinese, US and overall

samples. It is worth mentioning that Chen and Moosmayer (2018) has used AMOS for SEM analysis and SPSS for moderation analysis respectively. The combination of both software usage has been adopted by considerable number of researchers (also see Shamah et al, 2018, Journal of Business Research; Rabbanee et al, 2020, European Journal of Marketing). To maintain empirical and methodological coherence, we have placed SEM results in the main body of this chapter, but also included the PROCESS (moderated mediation) analysis in the Web Appendix. afterwards, which demonstrates the same results.

Regarding to the overall model, the author also like to clarify that self-affirmation was not suggested to serve as a mediator between self-concepts and customer loyalty in this study. Conceptually, the enhancement of self-concepts does have positive interrelations with one's self-affirming process and helps to maintain their overall self-integrity, to consider themselves valuable, which aligns with the proposition of self-affirmation theory. However, due to the inherent limitation of current method, we did not test the mediating role of self-affirmation in the proposed model apart from the interrelations between self-concepts and self-affirmation, which leaves rooms for a follow up study in this domain. In terms of the sampling, the author has applied econometric as the commonality between the US and China, namely, the middle incomes segments in both countries were selected to demonstrate the applicability of the proposed framework. However, the customer profiles do have certain variance merits considerations apart from gender and age and could potentially influences the universality of our results.

2.7 Chapter summary

Despite the growing research into luxury symbolism and its influence on consumer behavior, few studies have investigated the underlying psychological processes that occur in different cultural contexts. This study investigates the relationships among luxury symbolism, psychological underpinnings of self-congruity, self-affirmation, and customer loyalty, especially regarding how these relationships differ between consumers in China and those in the US. The results show that luxury symbolism positively influences self-consistency, social consistency, social approval, and self-esteem, and subsequently impacts self-affirmation and customer loyalty. However, for US consumers, self-esteem and social approval have significantly negative impacts on self-affirmation, while for Chinese consumers, social approval has no significant impact on self-affirmation.

We also find that interdependent self-construal positively moderates the relationship between luxury symbolism, and social approval and social consistency. Independent self-construal positively moderates the relationship between luxury symbolism and self-consistency, and negatively influences the relationship between luxury symbolism and self-esteem. Based on the theory of self-congruity and self-affirmation, this study fills a literature gap by revealing the psychological underpinnings regarding luxury symbolism and customer loyalty. It extends extant studies in luxury consumption by introducing self-construal (independent self vs. interdependent self) as an important cultural moderator in luxury symbolism. Our paper provides insights for luxury practitioners to create efficient marketing strategies by satisfying consumers' psychological needs in different cultures.

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2.7.1 Appendix A: measurement items

Appendix. Measurement items

Construct	Measurement items	Source
Luxury symbolism	● *This luxury brand allows me stand out in the crowd (deleted)* ● **This luxury brand** enhances my personal image in the eyes of important others ● Owning **this luxury brand** allows me to get social approval ● This **luxury brand** allows me to make a good impression on other people ● **This luxury brand** allows me to display a status symbol ● **This luxury brand** makes me look sophisticated ● **This luxury brand** makes me look successful ● ***This luxury brand makes me look stylish (deleted)*** ● Buying **this luxury brand** makes me feel that I have made the smart choice	Anisimova (2016)
Self-consistency	● I consume **this luxury brand** because it is consistent with how I see myself ● **This luxury brand** reflects who I really am as a person ● People similar to me use **luxury brands** like this ● The person who typically uses **this luxury brand** is very much like me ● **This luxury brand** is a mirror image of me	van Gils and Horton (2019)
Social consistency	● *People who know me well would find it difficult to see me as a person who uses this brand (deleted)* ● *People who know me well think that I am totally different from people who use this brand (deleted)* ● My family and friends see me as the typical person who prefers this brand over other brands ● The image of people who buy this brand is very consistent with how I am perceived by those who know me well ● People who know me well think of me as a person who would like to purchase this brand	Moon et al. (2020)
Self-esteem	● On the whole, I am satisfied with myself ● I take a positive attitude toward myself ● I feel that I am a person of worth ● *All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure (deleted)*	Malär et al. (2011)
Social approval	● I often change my opinion (or the way I do things) in order to please someone else ● In order to get along and be liked, I tend to be what people expect of me ● I am willing to argue only if I know that my friends will back me up ● I usually change my position when people disagree with me	Wu and Lin (2016)
Self-affirmation	● **Owning this brand** makes me feel better about myself ● **Owning this brand** makes me feel more confident	Mende et al.. (2019)
Customer loyalty	● I am a loyal customer of this brand ● If circumstances allow, I will not buy another brand if this one is present in the store ● I always try to buy this brand as it is the best choice for me	Aurier and de Lanauze (2011)
Independent self	● I am the same person at home that I am at work/school ● I act the same way no matter whom I am with ● I prefer to be direct and forthright when dealing with people	Bahri-Ammari et al. (2020)
Interdependent self	● It is important for me to maintain harmony within my group ● *My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me (deleted)* ● I respect people who are modest about themselves ● I would offer my seat on a bus to my professor ● *Even when I strongly disagree with group members, I avoid an argument (deleted)*	Bahri-Ammari et al. (2020)

Overall sample

Table 1: Results of moderated mediation analysis

	Social consistency		Social approval		Self-consistency		Self-esteem		Self-affirmation		Customer loyalty	
	Estimate	*p*-Value	Estimate	*p*-Value	Estimate	*p*-Value	Estimate	*p*-Value	Estimate	*p*-Value	Estimate	*p*-Value
Constant	5.49	.00	3.66	.00	5.16	.00	5.59	.00	4.41	.00	2.94	.00
Luxury symbolism	.50	.00	.30	.00	.66	.00	.25	.00	.85	.00	.36	.00
Social consistency									.16	.00	.22	.02
Social approval									.03	n.s.	.11	.00
Self-consistency									.37	.00	.44	.00
Self-esteem									.08	.03	.28	.00
Self-affirmation											.23	.01
Interdependent self	.23	.00	.31	.00								
Independent self					.20	.00	.40	.00				
Luxury symbolism x interdependent self	.06	.02	.13	.00								
Luxury symbolism x independent self					.08	.00	-.08	.00				
	$R^2 = .35$ $F = 28.72$ $p = .00$		$R^2 = .29$ $F = 22.08$ $p = .00$		$R^2 = .60$ $F = 78.53$ $p = .00$		$R^2 = .33$ $F = 26.58$ $p = .00$					

Table 2: Indirect effects of luxury symbolism on customer loyalty through self-concepts by self-construal effect

Moderator	Mediator	Condition	Effect	Standard error	LLCI	ULCI
Interdependent self	luxury symbolism→social consistency→brand loyalty	Low	.092	.020	.054	.131
		Medium	.107	.021	.066	.148
		High	.121	.025	.073	.171
	luxury symbolism→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	\	.140	.044	.058	.230
	luxury symbolism→social consistency→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	Low	.012	.006	.004	.025
		Medium	.014	.006	.004	.029
		High	.016	.007	.005	.033
	luxury symbolism→social approval→brand loyalty	Low	.017	.009	-.001	.035
		Medium	.033	.010	.015	.055
		High	.049	.015	.023	.081
	luxury symbolism→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	\	.192	.049	.098	.289
	luxury symbolism→social approval→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	Low	.001	.001	-.001	.004
		Medium	.002	.002	-.001	.007
		High	.003	.003	-.002	.010
Independent self	luxury symbolism→self-consistency→brand loyalty	Low	.251	.038	.180	.329
		Medium	.291	.040	.217	.373
		High	.330	.045	.248	.422
	luxury symbolism→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	\	.059	.035	-.007	.129
	luxury symbolism→self-consistency→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	Low	.021	.013	-.003	.047
		Medium	.024	.014	-.003	.054
		High	.028	.016	-.003	.061
	luxury symbolism→self-esteem→brand loyalty	Low	.093	.021	.054	.137
		Medium	.069	.016	.042	.104
		High	.045	.016	.020	.084
	luxury symbolism→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	\	.174	.046	.086	.265
	luxury symbolism→self-esteem→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	Low	.005	.004	.000	.014
		Medium	.004	.003	.000	.011
		High	.003	.002	.000	.008

Note: Effect is completely standardized; SE, standard error; CI, confidence interval at 95%.

China sample

Table 3: Results of moderated mediation analysis

	Social consistency		Social approval		Self-consistency		Self-esteem		Self-affirmation		Customer loyalty	
	Estimate	p-Value	Estimate	p-Value	Estimate	p-Value	Estimate	p-Value	Estimate	p-Value	Estimate	p-Value
Constant	4.91	.00	6.13	.00	6.28	.00	6.52	.00	4.56	.00	5.04	.00
Luxury symbolism	.25	.00	.27	.00	.61	.00	.29	.00	.72	.00	.48	.00
Social consistency									.14	.00	.09	.02
Social approval									.01	n.s.	.08	.00
Self-consistency									.30	.00	.34	.00
Self-esteem									.33	.00	.23	.00
Self-affirmation											.20	.00
Interdependent self	.28	.00	.34	.00								
Independent self					.21	.00	.28	.00				
Luxury symbolism x interdependent self	.11	.04	.06	n.s.								
Luxury symbolism x independent self					.04	n.s.	-.14	.00				
	$R^2 = .22$ $F = 7.22$ $p = .00$		$R^2 = .15$ $F = 4.73$ $p = .00$		$R^2 = .53$ $F = 29.09$ $p = .00$		$R^2 = .34$ $F = 13.36$ $p = .00$					

Table 4: Indirect effects of luxury symbolism on customer loyalty through self-concepts by self-construal effect

Moderator	Mediator	Condition	Effect	Standard error	LLCI	ULCI
Interdependent self	luxury symbolism→social consistency→brand loyalty	Low	.013	.010	-.002	.036
		Medium	.022	.012	.002	.048
		High	.030	.017	.003	.066
	luxury symbolism→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	\	.125	.045	.043	.222
	luxury symbolism→social consistency→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	Low	.004	.003	.000	.011
		Medium	.006	.004	.001	.015
		High	.008	.005	.001	.020
	luxury symbolism→social approval→brand loyalty	Low	.016	.011	-.003	.041
		Medium	.020	.012	-.001	.046
		High	.024	.015	-.001	.057
	luxury symbolism→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	\	.151	.046	.065	.246
	luxury symbolism→social approval→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	Low	.000	.002	-.004	.006
		Medium	.000	.003	-.005	.007
		High	.000	.003	-.006	.008
Independent self	luxury symbolism→self-consistency→brand loyalty	Low	.194	.053	.092	.299
		Medium	.207	.051	.109	.309
		High	.220	.054	.118	.331
	luxury symbolism→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	\	.070	.036	.005	.144
	luxury symbolism→self-consistency→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	Low	.022	.012	.002	.047
		Medium	.023	.012	.002	.049
		High	.025	.013	.002	.053
	luxury symbolism→self-esteem→brand loyalty	Low	.094	.035	.031	.166
		Medium	.065	.025	.023	.120
		High	.036	.020	.008	.086
	luxury symbolism→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	\	.087	.043	.008	.177
	luxury symbolism→self-esteem→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	Low	.019	.010	.002	.039
		Medium	.013	.007	.001	.028
		High	.007	.005	.000	.019

Note: Effect is completely standardized; SE, standard error; CI, confidence interval at 95%.

US sample

Table 5: Results of moderated mediation analysis

	Social consistency		Social approval		Self-consistency		Self-esteem		Self-affirmation		Customer loyalty	
	Estimate	*p*-Value	Estimate	*p*-Value	Estimate	*p*-Value	Estimate	*p*-Value	Estimate	*p*-Value	Estimate	*p*-Value
Constant	4.97	.00	2.84	.00	4.98	.00	5.59	.00	4.64	.00	3.00	.00
Luxury symbolism	.61	.00	.28	.00	.65	.00	.19	.00	.89	.00	.24	.00
Social consistency									.17	.00	.37	.02
Social approval									.05	n.s.	.12	.00
Self-consistency									.38	.00	.48	.00
Self-esteem									-.04	n.s.	.29	.00
Self-affirmation											.16	.01
Interdependent self	.18	.00	.24	.00								
Independent self					.18	.00	.48	.00				
Luxury symbolism x interdependent self	.05	n.s.	.13	.00								
Luxury symbolism x independent self					.11	.00	-.02	n.s.				
	$R^2 = .50$ $F = 25.62$ $p = .00$		$R^2 = .38$ $F = 15.52$ $p = .00$		$R^2 = .63$ $F = 43.66$ $p = .00$		$R^2 = .35$ $F = 13.88$ $p = .00$					

Table 6: Indirect effects of luxury symbolism on customer loyalty through self-concepts by self-construal effect

Moderator	Mediator	Condition	Effect	Standard error	LLCI	ULCI
Interdependent self	luxury symbolism→social consistency→brand loyalty	Low	.204	.042	.124	.290
		Medium	.227	.044	.142	.317
		High	.249	.052	.151	.354
	luxury symbolism→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	\	.120	.059	.007	.242
	luxury symbolism→social consistency→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	Low	.015	.011	.000	.042
		Medium	.017	.012	.000	.046
		High	.019	.014	.000	.052
	luxury symbolism→social approval→brand loyalty	Low	.013	.014	-.019	.037
		Medium	.034	.014	.010	.064
		High	.055	.022	.019	.105
	luxury symbolism→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	\	.191	.076	.046	.341
	luxury symbolism→social approval→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	Low	.001	.002	-.002	.005
		Medium	.003	.003	-.002	.009
		High	.005	.004	-.003	.015
Independent self	luxury symbolism→self-consistency→brand loyalty	Low	.249	.050	.160	.358
		Medium	.314	.055	.219	.430
		High	.380	.065	.264	.520
	luxury symbolism→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	\	.043	.052	-.056	.151
	luxury symbolism→self-consistency→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	Low	.014	.018	-.021	.049
		Medium	.018	.022	-.026	.061
		High	.022	.027	-.032	.074
	luxury symbolism→self-esteem→brand loyalty	Low	.064	.028	.012	.122
		Medium	.055	.021	.020	.101
		High	.046	.024	.011	.103
	luxury symbolism→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	\	.229	.071	.093	.370
	luxury symbolism→self-esteem→self-affirmation→brand loyalty	Low	-.002	.003	-.010	.003
		Medium	-.002	.003	-.008	.003
		High	-.002	.002	-.007	.003

Note: Effect is completely standardized; SE, standard error; CI, confidence interval at 95%.

Table 7 Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

		Validity Analysis								Communalities
	Items	Factor Loadings								
		Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	Factor 8	
Luxury Symbolism	Item 1	0.765								0.687
	Item 2	0.794								0.766
	Item 3	0.813								0.748
	Item 4	0.836								0.779
	Item 5	0.797								0.725
	Item 6	0.792								0.751
	Item 7	0.693								0.628
Self-consistency	Item 1	0.501	0.63							0.727
	Item 2	0.4	0.684							0.733
	Item 3		0.581							0.602
	Item 4		0.591							0.652
	Item 5	0.408	0.645							0.696
Social consistency	Item 1							0.84		0.79
	Item 2							0.853		0.754
	Item 3						0.788			0.747
	Item 4						0.709			0.772
	Item 5						0.765			0.818
Self-esteem	Item 1				0.797					0.779
	Item 2				0.816					0.79
	Item 3							0.664		0.7
	Item 4				0.795					0.793
Social Approval	Item 1			0.816						0.78
	Item 2			0.867						0.813
	Item 3			0.823						0.762
	Item 4			0.875						0.833
Self-affirmation	Item 1	0.653	0.466							0.7
	Item 2	0.685	0.408							0.687
Customer loyalty	Item 1		0.621							0.639
	Item 2		0.642							0.614
	Item 3		0.714							0.705
Independent self	Item 1					0.759				0.717
	Item 2					0.835				0.778
	Item 3					0.737				0.617
Interdependent self	Item 1							0.635		0.573
	Item 2			0.489						0.504
	Item 3							0.691		0.545
	Item 4							0.702		0.603
	Item 5							0.441		0.436
	Eigenvalues (Initial)	13.394	3.724	2.699	1.957	1.397	1.374	1.155	1.043	-
	% of Variance (Initial)	35.25%	9.80%	7.10%	5.15%	3.68%	3.62%	3.04%	2.75%	-

% of Cum. Variance (Initial)	35.25%	45.05%	52.15%	57.30%	60.98%	64.59%	67.63%	70.38%	-
Eigenvalues (Rotated)	6.834	4.554	3.838	2.58	2.316	2.293	2.192	2.136	-
% of Variance (Rotated)	17.99%	11.98%	10.10%	6.79%	6.09%	6.03%	5.77%	5.62%	-
% of Cum. Variance	17.99%	29.97%	40.07%	46.86%	52.96%	58.99%	64.76%	70.38%	-
KMO	0.941								-
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Chi-Square)	21071.461								-
Df	703								-
p value	0								-

2.7.2 Appendix B: Survey questionnaire

Motivations of luxury consumption and self-perception questionnaire

Dear participant,

Thank you in advance for taking the time to complete this survey. Your responses, along with those from other consumers, will help us complete a doctoral research on luxury consumption conducted by Nottingham University Business School China. The survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete, and your participation is vital to the success of this project. Your answers will be completely anonymous and will be used for academic purposes only.

First of all, you will be asked some questions concerning one specific luxury brand that impresses you the most. To be continued, you will need to answer some questions about your perceptions towards that specific brand and yourself.

Let us begin with the first part of this survey!

1. Have you purchased luxury brands before? Please choose the categories that you have consumed (Multiple choice)

A. Everyday luxury (e.g. Starbuck coffee, Chanel perfume, Swarovski, Swatch, Hennessy）

B. Affordable luxury (e.g. Coach, Calvin Klein, Max Mara, Tiffany silver jewelry, Dior sunglasses）

C. Traditional luxury （e.g. Louis Vitton, Gucci, Prada, Chanel, Cartier）

E. Ultra high-end luxury （e.g. Ferrari, Patek Philippe, Van Cleef & Arpels, Hermes, Leviev）

F. No, I haven't purchased any from above.

2. Please think of one specific luxury brand that you most often purchased or used and when was the last time you used it. Please write down the name of that brand

3.What product category did you purchase?

A. Clothes

B. Bags

C. Shoes

D. Accessories

E. Perfumes

F. Others

4.How often have you used it in the last three months?

A. Always

B. Often

C. Sometimes

D. Harley ever

E. Never

Please indicate how you feel about this brand by completing the following questions

5. To me, this is a global brand

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

6. I think consumers in other countries buy this brand

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

7. This brand is sold all over the world

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

How does this brand make you feel in general? Please complete the following questions

8.This brand enhances my personal image in the eyes of important others

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

9. Owning this brand allows me to get social approval

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

10. This brand allows me to make a good impression on other people

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

11. This brand allows me to display a status (social/economic) symbol

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

12. This brand makes me look sophisticated

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

13. This brand makes me look successful

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

14. Buying this brand makes me feel that I have made the smart choice.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

Please recall the feelings you held when using this brand in front of others and answer the following questions.

15. People who know me well would find it difficult to see me as a person who purchases this brand

Strongly disagree   ○7   ○6   ○5   ○4   ○3   ○2   ○1   Strongly agree

16. People who know me well think that I am totally different from people who purchases this brand

Strongly disagree   ○7   ○6   ○5   ○4   ○3   ○2   ○1   Strongly agree

17. My family and friends see me as the typical person who prefers this brand over other brands

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

18. The image of people who purchases this brand is very consistent with how I am perceived by people who know me well

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

19. People who know me well, think of me as a person that would like to purchase this brand

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

How do you feel about yourself when carrying/wearing this brand in public?

Please complete the following questions.

20. When I use this brand, I feel that I have achieved success in my life.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

21. When using this brand, I feel that I achieved a good social position

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

22. This brand helps to preserve my public image.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

23. Carrying/wearing this brand makes me feel that I have social power over other people.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

24. This brand makes me feel more influential over others

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

25. This brand makes me feel that I have charisma over other people.

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

In general, how do you agree with the following sentences?

26. Owning this brand makes me feel better about myself

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

27. Owning this brand makes me feel more confident

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

How does this brand make you feel about yourself and why have you purchased this brand? Please complete the following questions.

28. I consume this brand because it is consistent with how I see myself

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

29. This brand reflects who I really am as a person

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

30. People similar to me use brands like this

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

31. The person who typically uses this brand is very much like me

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

32. This brand is a mirror image of me

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

Please answer the following questions according to your perceptions towards this brand

33. To what extent is this brand part of you and who you are?

Not at all ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Very much

34. To what extent do you feel personally connected to this brand?

Not at all ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Very much

35. To what extent are your thoughts and feelings toward this brand often automatic, coming to mind seemingly on their own?

Not at all ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Very much

36. To what extent do your thoughts and feelings toward this brand come to your mind naturally and instantly?

Not at all ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Very much

37.I feel a personal connection to this brand

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

38. This brand reflects who I am

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

39. I can identify with this brand.

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

40. I use this brand to communicate who I am to other people

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

41. I think this brand helps me become the type of person I want to be.

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

42. I consider this brand to be me (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others).

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

43. This brand suits me well.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

What's your overall attitudes towards this brand? Please complete the following questions.

44. I am a loyal customer of this brand

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

45. If circumstances allow, I will not buy another brand if this one is present in the store

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

46. I always try to buy this brand as it is the best choice for me

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

Please indicate how you generally feel bout this brand by answering the following questions.

47. This is a wonderful brand

Strongly disagree○1 ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

48. This brand makes me feel good

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

49. This brand makes me feel happy

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

50. This brand is a delight

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

51. I am passionate about this brand

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

52.How often do you use public transportation?

very infrequently   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7 very frequently

Section B

What are you like as a person? Please answer the questions below

53. I often change my opinion (or the way I do things) in order to please someone else

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

54. In order to get along and be liked, I tend to be what people expect of me.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

55. I am willing to argue only if I know that my friends will back me up.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

56. I usually change my position when people disagree with me

Strongly disagreed ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

How do you normally feel about yourself? Please answer the questions below

57. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

58. I feel that I am a person of worth.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

59. All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure.

Strongly disagree   ○7   ○6   ○5   ○4   ○3   ○2   ○1   Strongly agree

60. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

How much do you agree with the following statements? Please answer the following questions.

61. It's worth it to be truthful with others about my habits and personality so that they know what they expect from me.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

62. For me it's better to be honest about myself when meeting new people, even if it makes me appear less than ideal.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

63. It's important for others to see me as I see myself, even if it means bringing people to recognize my limitations.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

64. When looking for a job, I work hard to find a place where people will accept me for who I am.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

65. When I have need, I find it easy to quickly turn to others I know for help

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

66.People should generally keep their troubles to themselves

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

How do you evaluate yourself in terms of the following statements?

67. I am the same person at home that I am at school/work.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

68. I act the same way no matter with who I am with.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

69. I prefer to be direct and forthright when dealing with people I've just met.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

70. It is important for me to maintain harmony within my group.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

71. My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

72.I would offer my seat in a bus to my professor.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

73. I respect people who are modest about themselves.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

74. Even when I strongly disagree with group members, I avoid an argument

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

Is there a gap between your actual self and the person you've always wanted to be? Please indicate how much you agree with the following descriptions.

75. My actual self is consistent with how I would like to be

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

76. My actual self is a mirror image of the person I would like to be

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

Is there a gap between your actual self and the person you think you should be and to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

77. My actual self is consistent with how I should be

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

78. My actual self is a mirror image of the person I should be

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

Please indicate how much you agree with the sentences below

79.I pay attention to brands that my favorite movie stars and pop singers are using.

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

80.I pay attention to the fashion styles of celebrities.

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

To conclude, please answer the following questions regarding your demographic characteristics.

81. What is your gender?

A.   Female

B.   Male

C.   Other

82. What is your age range

A. Under 18 years old

B. 18-24 years old

C. 25-34 years old

D. 35-44 years old

E. 45-54 years old

F. Over 55 years old

83.What is your education level

A. Less than a higher school diploma

B. High school diploma or equivalent

C. Bachelor's degree

D. Master's degree

E. Doctorate

84. What is your current employment status

A. Employed full-time

B. Employed part-time

C. Unemployed

D. Student

E. Self-employed

85. What is your annual household income

A. $31,000 or less

B. $31,000 - $42,000

C. $42,000 - $126,000

D. $126,000 - $188,000

E. $188,000 or more

86. How often do you purchase luxury brand?

A. Always

B. Often

C. Sometimes

D. Hardly ever

E. Never

87.How much proportion of monthly income do you spend on luxury goods?

A. None

B. Less than one-third

C. About two-thirds

D. Whole

E. More than whole income

Thank you for your time and effort! We appreciate your help!

3. Study 2: Redefining "masstige" luxury consumption in the post-COVID era

3.1 Chapter introduction

As an accelerator of transformation, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in major changes in the global luxury industry, resetting the priorities of consumers of luxury goods. According to Bain and Company (2021), the luxury market retracted by 23% in 2020 but is currently estimated to be worth €1 trillion worldwide, a return to its 2015 level. Plummeting purchasing power has created massive uncertainty about the ability of luxury brands to rebound and has resulted in shifts in consumption patterns and consumer perspectives that have upset the equilibrium of power (BCG, 2020), making the democratization of luxury a priority. This democratization is consistent with a shift of attention to the theoretical evolution and practical applicability of mass luxury (Kumar et al., 2021; Das et al., 2021). The term "masstige", meaning the mass luxury perceptions, combines the terms "mass", which refers to accessibility, and "prestige", which refers to symbolizing luxury through the use of premium prices or conspicuous logos. Masstige represents affordability and availability in the mass market (Kumar, Paul and Unnithan, 2020). The mass supply of luxury products has become more prominent and gradually attracted the attention of marketers (Pavione and Pezzetti, 2014) because, in doing so, luxury brands can maximize their profits and generate additional revenue (Paul, 2018; Kumar et al., 2020). It is indicated that each time there is economic recession or decline, luxury managers adopt "masstige" marketing strategies to sustain or promote their sales performance (Kumar et al, 2020). The past decade has seen many well-known luxury brands, including Louis Vuitton, Tiffany & Co., Burberry, Victoria's Secret, and Bath & Body Works adopting the masstige strategy (Silverstein and Fiske, 2003). This has become particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused economic hardship and resource scarcity, hindering people's ability to meet their basic needs and causing significant changes in consumptio patterns and consumer perceptions (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019; Dubois et al., 2020). These changes have been seen in a range of areas, from ownership to experiential luxury, from temporary to sustainable investments, and from lavish to ethical lifestyles (McKinsey, 2021).

The current understanding of masstige, despite its significance, is still lagging. Researchers have begun to explore the masstige strategy in brand management (Paul, 2018), consumer happiness (Kumar et al., 2021), and mass prestige value and competition in emerging markets

(Kumar and Paul, 2018). A recent review article stresses the importance of masstige and proposes a mass–luxury continuum. However, the authors state that the nature of masstige needs to be explored further and call for more research in this area (Kumar et al., 2020). Therefore, this research aims to explore the nature of masstige by adding self-related dimensions grounded in consumer psychology (Shahid et al., 2021; Shukla et al., 2022).

Masstige may be understood as a vehicle to achieving one's desired self-image or self-expression at an affordable price (Hung and David, 2020; Chernev, Hamilton, and Gal, 2013). The detailed reason of adopting the self-determined connotation are as follows. First, the notion of prestige has also evolved beyond traditional concepts of luxury. For example, living a healthy life or being environmentally friendly have become signs of higher status and cultural capital, transforming from being extrinsic (interpersonal/social) to being intrinsic (self-related) (Loureiro et al., 2020; Dubois et al., 2020). However, few empirical studies have been conducted to support this claim. Moreover, these emerging concepts of luxury (e.g., green, healthy, sustainable) appear to contradict the temporary focus and hedonism associated with traditional luxury meaning. Sustainability and luxury have been in conflict for decades, exemplified by notions such as "luxuriousness with enduring quality" (Sun et al., 2021), but we now need to redefine what luxury means for the masses since the outbreak of the pandemic. Moreover, traditionally, consuming prestige have been associated with negative psychological dissonance, which increases the likelihood of buyer's remorse and other negative emotions (e.g., guilt, anxiety) (e.g., Bryson et al, 2013; Loureiro et al, 2020). Specifically, dissonance in this context refers to the discrepancies in definitions of luxury and prestige between the self and external audiences, conflicts between the ever-evolving social norms and consumer values, and the negative emotions (e.g., guilt or shame) associated with conspicuous consumption (Dubois et al., 2020). Such negative cognitive and emotional responses have consequently backfired on the hedonic essence of luxury experiences and have largely impaired consumer well-being. Therefore, this heterogeneity in the definition of luxury (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014) requires the consideration of the nature of masstige to mitigate psychological dissonance under pandemic, that is to say, what constitutes the transformative meaning of mass luxury under the influence of COVID-19 remains unrevealed. Thus, in order to fill in such gap and unfold the mystery of mass luxury, we come up with the following questions in three domains:

1. How has the role of "self" transformed the meaning of luxury since the COVID-19 outbreak?
2. How have mass consumers adapted the meaning of luxury during the pandemic?

3. How do mass consumers manage their cognitive dissonance in day-to-day life, and how does this influence their perceived meaning of luxury?

To address the research questions, we took an interpretive approach, utilizing participants' personal experiences gathered via semi-structured interviews from a total sample of 31, especially looking at the customer segments whose life has been considerably affected by COVID-19. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically according to the theoretical constructs in the masstige luxury meaning and cognitive dissonance literature. This research builds on previous research on prestige and mass luxury meanings and makes several contributions to the literature. First, it addresses the existing gaps in the knowledge by exploring the ways in the mass consumers integrate their self-concept (inside–out vs. outside–in) with luxury consumption, thus offers a philosophical position relating mass luxury to dimensions of self. Second, the paper is the first to examine mass luxury concept in the COVID-19 era. It extends the application of dissonance coping theories to the mass luxury context, which involves tensions between conspicuous mindlessness and mindfulness and between self-extension and essential needs. Our findings provide meaningful and timely insights to luxury industries of what the mass audiences perceive luxury, how companies could communicate and add up to their brand equity in accordance with consumers' favor.

The remainder of the study is structured as follows. The following section defines key concepts and theoretical gaps by reviewing the relevant literature in both the masstige and luxury fields. Drawing on this literature review, the research methodology and findings are presented, followed by a reflection on the study and its implications for masstige theory development and luxury goods practitioners.

3.2 Literature review

The notion of masstige, also known as mass luxury, was initially introduced by Silverstein and Fiske (2003). They posited that luxury is no longer for the affluent classes alone, but rather its audience has expanded to mass segments due to the accelerated aspiration of living a superior life, as well as luxury items' availability to the majority (Paul, 2019). According to Kumar et al. (2019), distinct from conventional luxury, masstige (mass + prestige) complements the concept of "accessible luxury," as mass consumers seek prestige status at an affordable price. This affordability addresses luxury's new core attribute of mass accessibility,

making it different from conventional luxury, which emphasized status symbols and rarity, exclusivity, and discrimination (Veblen and Mills, 2017). In practice, to offer price-based accessibility, luxury retailers could either implement downward brand extensions or develop new brands to execute masstige strategies (Kumar and Paul, 2018)). In fact, different paradigms have been used to study mass luxury, such as the bandwagon luxury consumption model, which underlies social recognition (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014), and the populence paradigm, which emphasizes the acceptability of ideology for masstige (Granot et al., 2013). The key points of masstige lie in the balance of prestige limited to luxury symbolism and mass accessibility. What consumers consider as "prestige" has drawn much scholarly attention and has given birth to a new democratized luxury concept in the pandemic era (Kapferer, 2015). Therefore, how marketers execute masstige strategies should focus not only on price reduction, as this diminishes the luxury sentiment and perception. Contrary to the current literature, we consider prestige as an inside-out process, leading to "real hedonism" that reduces psychological dissonance, and we note that accessibility and affordability for the masses has moved beyond monetary presentation forms to a more self-constructive process based on self-oriented motivations. The literature on luxury attributes, as well as the literature gaps, is outlined in the following section.

3.2.1 The transformation of mass luxury under mint condition

3.2.1.1 From extrinsically to intrinsically self-oriented luxury

Prior research on luxury consumption has focused on understanding consumers' extrinsic motivation (Kim et al., 2020; Shao et al., 2019) for an impressive exterior (e.g., Dhaliwal et al., 2020; Wang et al, 2020and), which reflects the importance of others' perceptions in luxury consumption. The display of conspicuousness and prestige is the most significant impetus. However, today's consumers (Shahid and Paul, 2021) have paid increasing attention to their intrinsic motivations that fulfill their "intrinsic self" (e.g., internal desire; Berlyne, 1966), including self-directed pleasure, self-love (Tsai, 2005), and personal goals (Wilcox et al., 2009) that are unattached to external objects and bring them ultimate happiness. Consumers tend to feel intrinsically the opposite of what they show extrinsically, but still they revolve around their inner thoughts, emotions, and feelings (Wilcox et al., 2009). To be specific on this perspective, Ahuvia (2005) suggested that consumption behavior is only conducted to reflect "self-expression." Mick and Demoss (1990) indicated that self-gifting fundamentally increases self-

worth. As a result, such intrinsic self-oriented motivations could lead to enhancing subjective happiness, as compared to extrinsic motivations (Hudders and Pandelaere, 2012). However, little is known about which aspects leads to these self-driven motivations that enrich luxury experiences. In addition, previously studied self-oriented luxury values are normally directed at emotional well-being, hedonism (Parks and Guay, 2009), and cognitive well-being (Ahuvia and Wong, 2002) since personal values are originated from self-centric evaluations (Rokeach, 1973) and individuals are oriented towards their inner thoughts and feelings (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). This study will expand on this domain.

The concept of mass luxury is split into "mass" and "luxury." It is generally portrayed as the idea of sensory pleasure, glossy and conspicuous (Park et al., 2010), and is generally of decent quality and overpriced compared to its functional value (Ko et al., 2019). Mass luxury is also associated with traits of uniqueness, symbolism, and innovation (Kapferer and Valette, 2018), though the concept of luxury has never been precisely defined. Traditional luxury addresses the delivery of symbolism and expression of social exclusivity. Per the theory of the leisure class (Veblen and Mills, 2017), the core of luxury has been constantly reconstructed and managed for the preservation of social distinction. The conspicuous nature of luxury helps it to gain prestige, reflected in interpersonal admiration (e.g., mating goals) and social evolutionary demands (e.g., respect of social hierarchy and differentiation afforded by others) (Loureiro et al., 2020). Consistent with this research vein, the state aroused by another being's mere presence magnifies the emotional value of luxury goods (Dubois et al., 2020). Apart from the multi-faceted social perspectives, research of personal luxury mainly refers to the symbolic and hedonic dimensions. The symbolic domains primarily relate to the benefits of enhancing self-esteem, validating self-identity, and promoting social identity by consuming luxury goods (Sirgy, 2018). Such a product-centric approach has emphasized the control power of marketers over what can be conceived as luxury or prestige, through a combination of tactics in pricing and communication strategies (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009). The psychological benefits of such can be considered as an outside-in process brought about by external objects in the commercial context, which is extrinsically oriented by nature.

However, with the extended scope of luxury consumption beyond traditional luxury categories, consumers are seeking new meanings and benefits of prestige in luxury consumption (Currid-Halkett, 2017). A growing body of literature seeks to perceive luxury as intrinsically oriented, restricted only by consumers' perceptual abilities. For example, Kim et al. (2018) indicated the significance of subjective and aesthetic hedonism when responding to sophisticated

intrapersonal desires. Von Wallpach et al. (2020) further raised the issue of subversive customer-defined everyday luxuries, specifically the ephemeral moments that take consumers away from their mundane lives and daily routines. Holmqvist et al. (2020) conceptualized moments of luxury as a transient hedonic escape from the worries or responsibilities of life. In this vein, luxury can be considered a self-perceived concept, transformed into the most unanticipated contexts, triggered economically, and made accessible to the masses (e.g., Kreuzer et al., 2020; von Wallpach et al., 2020), which implies that luxury can be internalized and self-determined. However, research has just started to investigate this stream, and the deeper rationale between "self" and luxury remains mythical. Whether we can treat mass luxury as an inside-out process within an individual merits our research attention.

3.2.1.2 Dissonance-induced traditional luxury

Cognitive dissonance is defined as psychological discomfort caused by cognitive discrepancies among one's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and it is closely associated with individual self-domains (Akoxson, 1968) since values and dissonance are uniquely constructed by one's intrinsic self. Cognitive dissonance is a multi-faceted phenomenon (Markus and Wurf, 1987) that reflects understandings of the external world (Hinds and Bailey, 2003). The psychological discrepancies between the positive and negative sociometric and psychological drivers and consequences for luxury consumption were first illustrated by Dubois et al. (2020). The dark side of luxury consumption and prestige display has been identified at different social, economic, and psychological levels.

From the psychological level, one's ownership of luxury goods with high prices heightens his or her pride. Since pride is viewed as antisocial or selfish, it consequently can trigger negative emotions, such as guilt and shame (Antonetti and Maklan, 2014). Recent literature emphasizes the psychological costs of ego-focused luxury consumption (e.g., self-indulgence, vanity-seeking), which generates dissonant feelings such as regret, self-reproach, and buyer's remorse (Rosenzweig and Gilovich, 2012). This impairs well-being (Harmon-Jones, 2019) and could lead to negative consequences such as product return (Powers and Jack, 2013) and reluctance of repurchase (Wu et al., 2015). From the economic level, dissonance triggered by the nature of luxury consumption was based upon conspicuousness, excessiveness, or ostentatiousness, which creates conflicts between consumers' desires and aspirations, personal values, responsibilities, or social norms (e.g., thriftiness) (Borges, 2014). For example, materialism is

argued to be against community and affiliation values (Grouzet et al., 2005), which damages consumers' social well-being (Moldes and Ku, 2020).

Additionally, luxury consumption driven by sensory satisfactions (e.g., wearing animal fur) is considered extravagant and environmental unfriendly and induces dissonance as a consequence (Rolling et al., 2020). Moreover, due to its perceived association with excessive privilege, luxury consumption itself triggers inauthentic feelings from the bottom up, which consequently leads to a lack of confidence (Goor et al., 2020). Moreover, from the interpersonal (social) level, luxury consumers are perceived as less warm, materialistic, and self-aggrandizing in job settings and mating contexts, and even as culturally insensitive during a time of recession (Goenka and Thomas, 2020). These perceptions may potentially harm interpersonal relationships and may eventually damage the brands being consumed. For example, the perceived conspicuousness of an unearned luxury item may induce adverse psychological responses in the observer (e.g., unfairness). In this way, brand dilution undermines the prestige consumers' attempt to achieve, which warrants the consideration of how to sustain or maintain a nuanced meaning of both luxury and prestige that is relatively dissonance-free.

However, consumers have shown growing concerns towards personal and social issues such as personal well-being, economic recessions, and environmental degradation (Borges, 2014); therefore, a more conscious mode of consumption rises in response to these conditions, one which grants justification for one's spending and thus mitigates dissonance levels while maintaining one's feeling of pleasure. Theoretically, dissonance literature has suggested multi-compensatory behaviors to lessen or reduce such discomforts caused by luxury consumption, such as pro-environmental behavior, disposal (Holland et al, 2002), and recycling (Elgaaied, 2012). Since consumers actually tend to avoid purchasing luxury items as extrinsic means to display their social status, but rather respond more favorably towards luxury consumption that aligns with their intrinsic values (Shahid and Paul, 2021), the question of whether we can moderate inherent dissonance in luxury consumption through altering intrinsic luxury perceptions merits further research.

3.2.1.3 Core of hedonism and psychological consonance as a result

The hedonic school of thought claims that consumers' motivations are emotional in essence (Bhat and Reddy, 1998). Weijers (2012) considered hedonism as a multi-dimensional concept

that is closely tied to one's intrinsic benefits and emotional response concerning indulgence. Psychological or motivational hedonism asserts that human behavior is decided by the inner desire to amplify pleasure and reduce suffering. Current studies of luxury have mainly contributed to this research, focusing on the role of ownership and utility in arousing intensive affective states (e.g., multi-sensory satisfaction, fantasy, and emotive dimensions of product use). Examples include the transient happiness incurred through monetary efforts (e.g., luxury resorts offering superior services) (Hung et al., 2021) or a status-seeking purchase that brings satisfaction and pride (Nyadzayo et al., 2020). However, such forms of hedonism could backfire; in fact, recent work sheds light on the psychological costs of luxury consumption that impairs one's well-being and results in dissonant feelings. For example, Goor et al. (2020) found that luxury consumption brings inauthentic feelings on account of undue privilege and consequently, results in an increase in pride, which is often identified as an antisocial or egoistic emotion (Ki et al., 2017; McFerran et al., 2014).

The short-term hedonism of obtaining conspicuous goods triggers negative effects, such as guilt, which generate dissonance. Such a string of negative consequences reminds us of other forms of hedonism that repair such feelings, such as axiological hedonism, which considers pleasure as associated with intrinsic values and as the only constituent part of well-being. The core to axiological hedonism lies in the difference between intrinsic and instrumental value. An entity has intrinsic value if it is good as itself, instead of serving as a means to achieving something else. In fact, there has been a booming recognition of eudemonic well-being, and particularly self-realization, as a new luxury (Iloranta, 2019). There is also ethical hedonism, which bases pleasure on the rightness of one's behavior. In accordance with self-determination theory, joviality is generated by the fulfillment of one's duty and commitments (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Furthermore, the Epicurean school suggests that a peaceful mind brings ultimate hedonism and helps one achieve a genuinely pleasant life. Such a moderate form of hedonism tends towards spiritual harmony, balance, calmness, and temperance; it is not based on a costly, extravagant experience or on the acceleration of corporal satisfaction, but rather on a deeper understanding of the beauty of one's surroundings, interpersonal relationships, intrapersonal harmony, and the art of avoiding suffering, which is also known as consonance (vs. dissonance).

Consonance and dissonance are two contrary terminologies and can only be defined in respect to each other. As discussed above, dissonance is a negative psychological state generated from cognitive conflicts, which therefore motivates individuals to restore consonance due to their need for consistency (Sirgy et al., 2008). Up until now, research on the motivations and impacts

of psychological consonance in luxury consumption has been rare. According to Hobbs (2007), the hedonism of a soul involves psychic harmony amongst its constituent parts, which leads to a healthy state of mind characterized by peace and contentment (Augustin, 2021). In addition, Veblen's conspicuousness proposition for the leisure class also relies on cognitive consonance (Almeida, 2014).

3.2.2 The nature of the pandemic and the consequent dissonance

The World Health Organization (WHO) asserted that COVID-19 is a global pandemic arising from the coronavirus SARS-CoV2 (WHO, 2020), and that it is spreading around the world at a fast speed, is prolonged rather than a single traumatic incident, and is a greatly stressful, challenging, and life-altering event. In the widest sense, much like "plague" or "epidemic," "pandemic" refers to the transmission of a particular disease, triggering and sustaining risks and fears, and bringing interruptions to daily life with serious economic and psychosocial consequences. From an economic point of view, COVID-19 has resulted in a convergence towards the emerging market for luxury brands and a paradigm shift for global economic powers. In the global scope, society is facing an economic recession, resource scarcity, and a decrease in purchasing power across all industries. In the luxury domain, masstige strategy, which represents the affordability of prestige items for the masses, has become prominent for the major segmentations (e.g., the traditionally middle-income group and young consumers). This is especially true when there is an economic recession, decease in purchasing power, or a consumption dilemma (Hung and David, 2020). In the era of COVID-19, the increasing death rate, rising cases, and incremental unemployment ratio due to economic hardship and resource scar Hopkins city have resulted in major psychological discomfort, such as worries about falling ill and anxiety caused by working continuously in a confined space. The fundamental change raised by social distancing, national lockdowns, and mask-wearing has brought a radical discontinuity to everyday routines and people's lifestyles. It hinders humans' abilities to meet their basic needs in nearly all areas (e.g., reduced social support due to social distancing, decreased activities which satisfy the demands for self-esteem or social approval), and its consequences are significant, long-lasting differences from the life to which people are accustomed. Moreover, understanding the potential threats and risks from the disease, but still feeling challenged by being restricted, generates attitude–behavior discrepancies and leads to dissonance, in addition to the aforementioned negative consequences of luxury consumption

(Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019). In short, the pandemic has caused dissonance as a result of the following intrapersonal dimensions among consumers:

(a) being cognitively threatened (i.e., deep violation against existing assumptions of the world - specifically how the reality of resource limitation fails to satisfy individuals' pre-pandemic expectations),

(b) being chronic (i.e., continuous and enduring social isolation or lack of social support due to the policy reasons), and

(c) being consequential (i.e., causing profound changes to daily functioning – specifically interrupts daily routines and cognitive evaluation in the decision-making process) (Brooks et al., 2020).

When dissonance occurs, individuals are motivated to seek strategies to eliminate or release this discomfort, and the stronger the intensity of the dissonance, the stronger the individual's motivation to reduce it (McGrath, 2020). As a consequence, dissonance influences consumers' attitudes, affects their internalization of values, and ramifies their decision-making, as well as impacts their other psychological processes (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019), which fundamentally affects what consumers perceive as luxury meaning. For example, prestige seeking wouldn't be a priority when their basic needs are threatened.

In sum, this study aims to bridge the existing literature gaps by first arguing mass luxury as an intrinsically (self) rather than an extrinsically (interpersonal) oriented process, focusing on the essence of hedonism. In the process, the dissonance caused by the dark side of traditional luxury or prestige-seeking consumption behavior that was aggravated by the pandemic will be mitigated, which also determines the external form of mass luxury in the post-COVID era.

3.3 Methodology

3.3.1 Research approach

This research analyzes what consumers perceive to be masstige in the luxury context under the pandemic. We seek to select and manifest experiences and feelings that qualify as mass luxury from the consumer's perspective during the pandemic era. In accordance with this objective, our overall research approach is interpretive, and it focuses on participants' lived experiences (Thompson and Diana, 1997), "striving towards empathetic understanding" (Tracy

and Robles, 2013, p143). Enlightened by the criteria of a typical phenomenological investigation, as profiled by Edmund Husserl, our data collection aims to uncover participants' "intentional experience … which views without presumptions obtained from other objects and experiences (referring to 'Noesis–Noema') just like they are experienced" (Hopkins and Drummond, 2015, p144). It also indicates that as researchers, we suspend our judgment, while paying close attention to how individuals experience the Noesis–Noema correlation (Farina, 2014). Moreover, we conducted semi-structured interviews that allowed researchers to ask probing questions, discover new relevant issues, and increase the rapport between the interviewer and interviewees (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018).

3.3.2 Sample, data collection, and analysis

The primary data were collected using the convenience sampling method. This type of non-probability sampling method identifies informants who were selected from a list of the researchers' personal contacts (Sousa and Rocha, 2019). The data were mainly collected during the first COVID-19 lockdown in the UK. As one of the most affected countries in Europe with over 140,000 deaths (WHO, 2020), UK started the first lock down on 23 March 2020, which is indicated to have a profound effect in increasing the prevalence of anxiety and psychological tension among the general population. The possible causes correlated to increased social isolation, uncertainty about the state of the world, and being under a constant perceived threat of illness or death (Dettmann et al, 2022). Studies estimate that during the first lockdown, between 19.6% (Bu et al, 2021) and 67.5 % of the population experienced anxiety, and between 18.9% and 48.9% experienced depression (White & Van Der Boor, 2020).

Applying non-probability sampling (Ritchie et al, 2003), this study thus only included UK residents who were affected by the lockdown policy. To still achieve maximum variation of subjective views on mass luxury in this context, we ensured that the sample was diverse with regard to gender, nationality, civil state, educational background, and occupation. There were 40 individuals being contacted in total and being recruited by means of snowball sampling. They were asked the following filter questions: "Can you think of five experiences or moments that captured 'accessible luxury' for you during the last year?" wherein we allowed an open self-interpretation on the 'accessibility' beyond monetary costs and "Can you think of any changes (in buying luxury) brought about by the pandemic?" We encouraged participants to elaborate on actual experiences, meanings, feelings. A total sample of 31 customers agreed to

be interviewed with all together 155 luxurious moments and experiences being recalled (see Table 1 (for an overview of sample characteristics). Acknowledgement that interviewees attach a personalized connotation to mass luxury could be comprehended only if it is integrated with contextual sensitivity associated with cultural consensus (Thompson et al., 1997). Data were collected from a multi-site empirical area covering samples from five Western countries (the UK, Poland, Finland, the United States of America, and Turkey), and four Eastern countries (China, India, Iran, and Korea).

Table 1. Sample characteristics

No.	Name	Age	Gender	Nationality	Civil State	Education	Occupation
1	CH1	21	Male	Chinese	Single	Undergraduate	Student
2	CH2	22	Male	Chinese	Relationship	Postgraduate	Student
3	CH3	26	Female	Chinese	Single	Undergraduate	Accountant
4	CH4	32	Female	Chinese	Married	Postgraduate	Teacher
5	CH5	35	Female	Chinese	Married	Postgraduate	Teacher
6	CH6	32	Female	Chinese	Married	Postgraduate	Lecturer
7	BR1	35	Male	British	Single	Postgraduate	Engineer
8	BR2	39	Male	British	Married	Postgraduate	Musician
9	BR3	54	Male	British	Single	Postgraduate	Farmer
10	BR4	40	Female	British	Married	Undergraduate	Civil Servant
11	BR5	23	Male	British	Single	Undergraduate	Photographer
12	BR6	24	Male	British	Single	Undergraduate	Doctor
13	BR7	24	Male	British	Single	Undergraduate	Designer
14	BR8	50	Female	British	Single	Undergraduate	Social Worker
15	BR9	24	Male	British	Single	Undergraduate	Student
16	AM1	45	Male	American	Married	Postgraduate	Language Tutor
17	AM2	31	Female	American	Married	Undergraduate	Pharmacist
18	IN1	23	Male	Indian	Single	Postgraduate	Student
19	IN2	21	Male	Indian	Single	Undergraduate	Student
20	IN3	24	Female	Indian	Single	Undergraduate	Programmer
21	IN4	23	Female	Indian	Single	Postgraduate	Lawyer
22	IN5	24	Female	Indian	Single	Undergraduate	Programmer
23	TU1	25	Female	Turkish	Relationship	Undergraduate	Student
24	KO1	36	Female	Korean	Relationship	Postgraduate	Lecturer
25	KO2	45	Male	Korean	Married	Postgraduate	Estate agent
26	PO1	37	Female	Polish	Relationship	Postgraduate	Writer
27	FI1	28	Male	Finnish	Single	Postgraduate	Engineer

28	IR1	25	Female	Iranian	Single	Undergraduate	Mathematician
29	GE1	26	Male	German	Relationship	Undergraduate	Bank Clerk
30	GE2	42	Female	German	Single	Undergraduate	Social Worker
31	PA1	24	Female	Pakistan	Relationship	Undergraduate	Student

Notes: BR = British, CN = Chinese, IN = Indian, KO = Korean, FI = Finish, AM = United States of American, IR = Iranian, PK = Pakistani, PO = Polish, GE = German, TU = Turkish. The interviewees were randomly numbered.

We used e-mail and Zoom correspondence for participant recruitment, appointment arrangement, and preparing participants with pre-instructions, including consent forms and the interview questions (see Appendix A). All of the questions surround the topic of perceived luxury moments or experiences that individuals encountered during lockdown period. This preparatory stage asked participants to think of five experiences or moments that captured self-defined "accessible luxury" during the last year. Participants were prompted to expound on their actual experiences, temporal feelings, and the meanings they associated with themselves (e.g., they were asked how this experience helped to construct their self-concept). They were also asked to reflect on their perception of the changes brought about by the pandemic. Moreover, participants were encouraged to provide deeper answers by following a soft-laddering approach (Grunert and Grunert, 1995) in order to unravel the self-related meaning attached to mass luxury. Through non-intrusive and non-directive interview techniques, we were able to attain profound insights into consumers' actual experiences. Interviews took place mainly via Zoom and lasted between 30 and 80 minutes, with an average duration of 45 minutes. They were audio recorded and transcribed manually.

Interview content analysis was carried out to generate open coding which followed Thompson (1997) hermeneutic framework and constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2008). This method allows a clearly defined procedure based on a coding system, including labels, concepts, and words used to produce theories from the interviews, rather than simply to find facts (Ghezzi and Cavallo, 2020). Specifically serving the goal to obtain a holistic interpretation of personalized meanings ascribed to "mass luxury" as well shared meanings across narratives. In an iterative process of inductive categorization, we moved from open, to axial, to selective coding of data, obtaining progressively deeper theoretical results at each step. In the open coding step, two independent researchers carefully listened to the recorded interviews and transcribed important concepts that could connect to the underlying theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). An inductive coding tree was built based on both the key words generated by "NVivo" and constructed codes. The concepts identified through analysis were related to the participants' perceptions of self-oriented mass luxury. Then these first-order concepts were grouped into unified categories or themes. This axial coding step allowed the researchers to draw conclusions about consumer perceptions of masstige luxury during the pandemic.

Rather than expecting meanings to emerge from the selective coding itself, we employed abductive reasoning as well (Belk & Sobh, 2019). Finally, four core themes were created: self as content, self as process, self as context, and self as other (See Appendix B). Theoretical

integration of the themes formed the basis of a theoretical framework of self-concept in the masstige luxury context. The findings redefine mass luxury as an inside-out process within oneself, rather than outside-in process. Regardless of culture, stage of modernization, social class, age, or gender, our findings contributed common themes. Overall, the similarities and differences of the coding procedures were compared, discussed, and revised by two researchers, allowing us to generate consistent findings.

Nevertheless, instead of counting on meaning to appear from axial coding on its own, we also travelled back and forth between the interview data and relevant literature, following an iterative fashion. For instance, we reviewed the literature on how masstige is a proxy for attaining one's ideal self (Kumar et al., 2020) and a mechanism for building consumers' identities (Solomon, 2016). We also noted our interpretation of masstige luxury consumption, which manifests as "at peace with myself" and as self-affirmation that demarcates conventional luxury and masstige luxury. The researchers' different backgrounds (i.e., having extensive experience in psychology or luxury consumption) ensured the triangulation of data and introduced a certain level of "cultural distance" for the interpretation of the themes.

3.4 Findings

Our iterative readings of the 165 moments or experiences that we recorded, all of which occurred during the pandemic, revealed that the perceived meaning of mass luxury has shifted from extraordinary experiences to different types of self-oriented processes embedded in everyday life. This perception is associated with basic needs fulfilment and is a result of perceived scarcity, whereby consumers tend to pursue a shared ideal state of mind that can be defined as psychological consonance. Specifically, the results redefine mass luxury as an inside-out process within oneself, rather than an outside-in process. Looking into philosophical rationalizations of the different degrees of self (e.g., self as content, self as process, self as context, and self as other) enables the most flexible way of self-functioning from social, economic, and psychological perspectives, which resonates with our reflective interpretation of self-oriented mass luxury. By consistently associating one's experiences or feelings with a firm point of reference that endures across time, one can obtain a sense of oneself. A summary of the findings is shown in Figure 1. The interview themes are shown in Appendix B.

3.4.1 Masstige as self-context: Observational self as detachment

According to the theory of acceptance and commitment (Sterba, 1934), humans do not always act as a participant. Rather, one's consciousness, which experiences given feelings or perceptions and which functions as an observer of one's inward world, underlines the point that perceptions have no actual power over actions. This observation occurs as a luxury, as a detachment from facts, emotions, and other external stimuli—namely the observational self— and is considered to be a prominent state of self-awareness attained through the mindful extension of one's awareness. This is an ideal state from which individuals can move forward and progress. Turunen et al. (2020) similarly argued that "detachment" is predominant in the transactional evolution of luxury consumption. Specifically, they consider the luxury disposal process a detachment from a highly valued past-self, represented by a costly object, which enables a more empowered and controlled present.

In our study, the narratives revealed that this luxury disposal process is accessible in the sense that everyone may have self-awareness, yet not everyone is able to fully understand its meaning. In other words, it is more than a trendy word, but rather a true privilege to have an internal regulation process which can bring life-long change. This idea surfaced in interviewees' accounts when they reported access to a transcendent sense of self through meditative activities, such as intellectual contemplation, repetitive movements, or simply keeping a diary (Luchs and Mick, 2018). The observations that individuals make from the angle of another being provide reflective self-affirmation and compassion, as if from a loyal friend, as well a clearer vision of oneself. This offers the individual more control over the external world, resolves their inner conflicts, helps them to attain calmness, and provides them with a form of restoration for upcoming stresses.

It allows individuals to see things from a completely different perspective. For example, the interview participant (IN5, Programmer, age 24) said,

"*Writing in my diary, talking to myself is the most luxurious [activity] for me. Talking to my best friend builds up my own confidence, and I can see where to improve. It feels like someone has got your back and supports you.*"

In this vein, individuals are free from socially or contextually embedded roles and can see themselves from a third angle. Such detachment from obstacles and constraints leads to the acquisition of a peaceful mind, self-awareness, and free time, each of which is perceived to be

scarce in modern life and is thus interpreted as luxury (Hemetsberger et al., 2012). This process helps with achievement of one's self-actualization goals. In the meantime, our interviewees perceived that they regained their inner peace and reduced burdens in a constructive way:

"*The most luxurious thing in my life now is to detach myself from my own problems in that way, and my feeling is relief, and I'm better at accepting things, like I'm doing my best already*." (GE2, Social worker, age 42)

This balancing contemplation does not necessarily eliminate emotional distress for individuals. Rather, it keeps them steadily free of affect, and instead ensures a long-lasting calm state of mind and a sense of mastery and control, consequently bringing positive energy to the external world or other beings. Epicurean hedonism also suggests that this life approach aspires to be rational and balanced, and a state of bliss should not involve sensual pleasures, but mainly experiences of the mind (Roubal, 2018). This process of love and calmness was described as "*keeping one's cup full*" by (PA1, student, age 24). Such processes make our interviewees feel empowered through an extended self, which is linked to the essence of luxury (Belk, 1988; Freire, 2014). Instead of a feeling of detachment or disassociation from reality, the interviewees reported a feeling of connectedness that emerged paradoxically:

"*I think over time, I have been able to connect with myself better and realize when to be hard on myself and when to be nice to myself, just getting that nice balance. So, I'm not just accepting everything that I do, but definitely things are more under control.*" (PA1, social worker, age 24)

Apart from the enlightenment of being in a constant state of knowing and mindfulness, some of our interviewees consider the meditative process as a luxury since it brings a spiritual awakening and provides profound insights into life and oneself; thereby, it prepares individuals for the unexpectedness and uncertainty of upcoming events. For example, participant (IR1, Mathematician, age 25) described,

"*The practice [meditative activities] feels like an inside-out version of myself. This is actually a luxurious way of life. And it gets me ready for the day because with more awakening of my mind and body, I feel like there's more space in me, and also in my spirit as well, to help me set up for the challenge or whatever is coming up in the rest of the day.*"

In summary, this conscious dissociation of oneself has enabled the person to achieve a harmonious state and look at reality with a calmer, clearer, and more connected state of mind.

As Epicureanism suggests, to bring peace into one's mind helps one to achieve a genuinely pleasant life, accompanied by spiritual harmony, balance, calmness, and temperance, which is not based upon leading a costly, extravagant life or on sensory pleasures, but rather on deeper values of harmony and avoiding suffering (Hobbs, 2007). This is consistent with the research on luxury, which is linked with freedom from distractions, such as different sorts of noises, having to think, or simply trying to subconsciously fit into a particular social context (Llamas and Thomsen, 2016). However, the narratives in our study enlarged the meaning of experiential luxury, which is traditionally defined as freedom from necessity, enforcement, or constraint on choices, actions, and even attachments (Merriam-Webster, 2012). The observational perspective also added new implications to the meaning of freedom through enabling cognitive diffusion, which helps to separate oneself from one's thoughts. In addition, instead of the escape from reality (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982) as an essential part of the consumption experience, the observational self allows individuals to be more present in the moment and provides them with the internal freedom from being a participant. This observational self is a process of spiritual awakening in which people explore higher levels of love and the self to understand how much more in control a person could be over what they feel or fear. It enables one to feel like another being who acts as a connection or intermediate during any incidents. This is regarded by the masses as a privilege, though it is beyond the traditional meaning of prestige (Kumar et al., 2020). Also distinct from previous studies (Turunen et al., 2020), our study focuses on the simultaneous increase of self-mastery and a longer-lasting luxurious state. In addition, the elements of connectedness (vs. detachment) emerged many times, as with the integrated self or with the past or future. Sarial-Abi et al. (2017) found that the reinforcement of mental connections linking the past, present, and future helped alleviate psychological threats, which in our case refers to the post-pandemic dissonant state.

3.4.2 Masstige as self-content

Different from self-context, self-content typically refers to a person as the center of everything in which he or she has participated (e.g., activities, places) (McHugh et al., 2019). In this category, we found that several dimensions emerged from our interviews, all of which are dominated by individuals' participation. The content of these activities is based on one's subjective initiative and creativity in consciousness regardless of the outside world, which offers an optimal luxurious experience during a difficult time.

3.4.2.1 Thinking self as meaning-making

Within self-content, the thinking self refers to the inner monologue that proactively evaluates, questions, reasons, and rationalizes any given moment, situation, or behavior. We found that the interviewees tend to consider meaningfulness as a sort of attainable luxury, or they tend to embed meaning into small, everyday activities. Meaning-making is the process by which people make sense of their collective experiences by exercising their willpower to find meaning and purpose in life—or to give significance to others' lives—and to live accordingly (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2018). The motivation for seeking meaning might be the experience of suffering that demands answers to existential doubts, such as "What sort of life is worth living since it is already so hard?" People are more interested in meaning-making in a pandemic since their pre-assumed world is shattered, and how they used to achieve happiness and self-identity has been taken away (Llamas and Thomsen, 2016). This invokes the momentum for individuals to seek their real self and true purpose in life. In line with the latest findings on the influence of COVID-19, meaningful living has a positive impact on resilience and subjective well-being (Yıldırım et al., 2020).

There appears to be a major shift away from situating oneself in a consumeristic reality and towards a transcendental society that serves a greater purpose than oneself, which marks the beginning of a meaningful life (Batthyany and Russo-Netzer 2014; Wong, 2016) and helps people to bounce back from the challenges of supplementing psychological resources and practicing adaptive flexibility. Rosenberg (2020) also indicated that the need to embrace and transform suffering into a meaningful experience is at the foundation of individual growth, resilience building, and psychological functioning. Expressions such as *"painful but rewarding,"* "*it pays off,*" "*feeling the constant growth,*" a*nd* "*more open to self-betterments,*" are used to describe such processes. As Kunchamboo et al. (2017) suggested, this creation of meaning initiates affection and brings eudemonic hedonisms, which serve one's self-realization goals (Ryan and Deci, 2001). This is in line with Chitturi et al.'s (2008) viewpoint that consumers tend to associate hedonic product benefits with the fulfillment of promotional goals that a person aspires to meet. In our narratives, in contrast to a short-term focus, interviewees emphasize growth and advancement that results from practices in which they engage with the challenges they meet because this rewards them with long-term contentment and satisfaction. Words like "*positive change,*" "*accomplishment,*" and "*self-actualize*"

emerged in the narratives. For example, (BR5, Photographer, age 23) described such an evolving process of luxury and self-actualization,

"*If everything you're doing is too easy, then maybe you're not pushing yourself as far as usual. That's maybe something that's unhealthy for me. I think I have to be constantly testing myself, and I definitely always look at myself as developing, that's precious*."

Additionally, meaning can come from helping others and creating values that affirm one's beliefs, bring self-satisfaction, and lead to a real sense of accomplishment and self-realization. According to Shahid and Paul (2021), consumers have the urge to achieve the highest level of need in Maslow's pyramid, "self-actualization." As (BR7, Designer, age 24) described,

"*My biggest luxury is to be able to create, in the sense that I might be able to create something that someone who is like me but age 16 could read and feel a bit better about themselves*."

Apart from the tendency to take initiative in their activities, our interviewees also found joy through embedding meaning into the everyday activities that they used to ignore. Thus, people tend to feel satisfied and fulfilled when acting in a pro-environmental way. According to ethical hedonism, if an action is morally right, it brings pleasures to an individual (Boluki and Rodbari, 2016). This is also in line with Yıldırım and Güler's (2021) findings concerning psychological resolution toward the pandemic. For example, (KO1, Lecturer, age 36) said,

"*Meaning is very important for me. So, always using my own coffee cup is a way for me to save the environment. I found that I am keeping this promise for myself, and even when no one else is watching me, it just makes me feel content and happy*."

In sum, being proactive and deliberate with one's actions towards meanings and purposes (e.g., setting goals), embracing resilient resources, and adding meaning to one's actions are all conducive to individuals' sustainable well-being, quality of life, and optimism, each of which are considered luxuries by most of our respondents (Minkkinen et al., 2020). Again, these luxuries indicate preparedness for overall life incidents.

3.4.2.2 Somatic self as eternal property

The notion of the somatic self indicates that the relationship between humans and their physical bodies starts to develop ahead of their inner monologue, which accounts for the sense of consonance and dissonance, and which either attracts or rejects people according to certain aspects of their expressions and feelings. Since one's psychological response can be triggered by the somatic self, it is considered to be the cornerstone of one's self-concept (Schalk, 2011). In our study, the somatic self mainly emerged around such focuses as health, physical sensation, and taking care of the physical body. However, more important was the focus on long-lasting fulfillment, which adds sustainable value to one's life. This is decidedly distinctive from the materialism and traditional hedonism brought about by luxury consumption.

It appears that the pandemic reduced luxury consumption due to biologically rooted uncertainty or stress, which forces humans to focus on development-oriented goals, such as preserving resources for the future, rather than on momentary indulgences (Griskevicius et al., 2013). This is clearly contrary to the conventional meaning of luxury. In fact, the concept of sustainability has for decades been increasingly associated with luxury and prestige, including the belief that a luxury item has a longer product life cycle (e.g., use, disposal, durability), historical heritage, and other timely attributes (Gardetti, 2020; Sun et al., 2021). Moreover, living a healthy life for oneself and behaving in an environmentally friendly manner (e.g., purchasing specialized grocery items and fitness equipment) have become new symbols of one's high status and cultural capital. As (CH4, Teacher, age 32) described,

"*I just found these things are more sustainable. If I have healthy relationships and good health, the happiness brought from these things can last a long time. But if I buy a nice dress, that happiness doesn't last—it won't make me truly happy.*"

In fact, it is not only momentary satisfaction, but also lasting benefits that our respondents said were constructive in obtaining premium and sustained well-being (Taylor-Jackson et al., 2021). The preparedness element also emerged in the idea of being sustainable, as well as the belief that consistency in health-seeking actions brings permanent change to a person's life. For example, (BR6, Doctor, age 24) mentioned,

"*Exercise gets you ready for work and cools your body down intellectually. It changes your mindset and the way you are eventually, through both workouts and diets.*"

3.4.3 Masstige as self-process

Human beings are dynamic creatures, and their ongoing sense of self metaphorically promotes the inner experience of coming and going as a natural process (i.e., like the clouds or the weather). If self as content is a solid domination of appointed content, "self as process" can be considered a more flexible flow of such content and of the human experience more generally. Self as process comes into being as an integral part of living a vital life (Moran and McHugh., 2019). As time flies by, individuals pass from instant to instant throughout their life. We found the following dimensions within this category of self as process.

3.4.3.1 Self as fleeting flow

Csikszentmihalyi et al. (2018) defined "flow" in the luxury context as the extent to which an experience genuinely satisfies a state of conscious concentration and enables consumers to become focused and absorbed in the activity, which brings deeper joy, transcendence, and perceived improvement in one's quality of life. Within such flow, a limited amount of information is given to cognitive space, with the exception of cognitive representations of self-concepts, which enables individuals to temporarily forget who they are. In this way, individuals are given the chance to expand and enrich themselves without being preoccupied with knowledge. This provisional loss of self-consciousness could direct the individual to self-transcendence, whereby the boundaries of his or her being are pushed forward and time seems to hold still.

Time seems to emerge as fleeting instants, reoccurring intervals, or continuous activities appearing in both commercial and non-commercial settings. A "fleeting flow" is defined as a recurring time bucket that is controlled by the individual. Such periods involve the experience of freedom, uniqueness, and rareness, which are all related to luxury (Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2019). The interviewees immersed themselves in the ongoing process of "*going with the flow*" by taking a daily walk, running, being in the middle of a lake, or painting, allowing for the expression of their thoughts. They used phrases such as "*drifting*," "*ongoing enjoyment*," "*following the attention where it feels relaxed*," "*not trying hard*," and "*let[ting] your mind wander*" to describe the feelings of enlightenment and contentment generated from the flow of consciousness. For example, (BR8, Social worker, age 50) described her experience as follows,

"I tend as much as I can not to use any guide or any formal tools. I just sort of tend to walk, then if I'm staying in a city like Vienna, if I hear some sound that I fancy is coming from somewhere in the city, I might just be redirected suddenly, halfway through. It is just sort of relaxing."

Distinct from the freedom of escapist luxury (Holmqvist et al., 2020), another important feature of such fleeting processes is their effortlessness, which set people free from cognitive demands, such as "*randomly watching funny shows without choosing*" and "*go[ing] with my will.*" (KO2, Estate agent, age 45) shared such feelings,

"It's kind of a luxury. I don't really like to plan too much. If I can just kind of decide where to go and follow my will…and it's stressful to even make decisions sometimes."

As opposed to being free from duties and goals, some participants valued taking the initiative to do things that one likes. (CH5, Teacher, age 35) revealed that she actually enjoys always working. Satisfaction and sureness are considered luxuries by this interviewee. From Hegel's philosophical point of view, the self does not "remain what one has become but situates in the absolute movement of becoming" (Bubbio, 2017, p105). For example, (CH5, Teacher, age 35) said,

"Once I finish this work, there's always another thing popping up, I kind of enjoy the process of always progressing or being in the middle of something; it brings security."

One's aspiration towards luxury is experienced as a manifestation of freedom or flexibility and emerges in everyday life, putting individuals' minds in an ongoing state of peaceful joy and bringing preparedness to their reality. It is a peaceful state of mind that is not necessarily generated through leisure time, but rather in the process of fulfilling one's duty.

3.4.3.2 Immersing the somatic self in the moment

In this category, we find that our interviewees tend to treat themselves as sensory beings who are fully engaged in the moment as a way of self-regulating and freeing themselves from anxieties, worries, and negative emotions. This loss of self-awareness separates individuals from the activities they are engaging in, as they only need to focus on the moment, which aligns with von Wallpach et al.'s (2020) advocacy for the momentary nature of experiential luxury. In the philosophy of luxury, the moments representing self-conscious clarity (e.g., a pregnant

moment) are the ones in which individuals realize their humanity, and in which instrumental behaviors appear as enjoyable symbolic forms. Therefore, the reflective self can be free from biological laws and reason, which Wiesing has connected with the utopianism of luxury (Featherstone, 2020). In addition, Aeberhard et al.'s (2020) study further supported the idea that consciously experiencing oneself in the moment and falling deeply within oneself is the most luxurious kind of moment. In a salsa dancing context, Homlqvist et al. (2020) suggested that by fully indulging oneself in the moment, one constructs a luxurious hedonism.

However, their study emphasized the collective basis of hedonism, whereas here we address the role of the intrinsic self. This differs markedly from the traditional hedonic benefits studied in luxury consumption, which focused on sensory pleasure simulation (De Barnier and Valette-Florence, 2013). Examples of interviewees' comments include "*smelling the coffee bean,*" "*looking at the blue sky,*" and "*appreciating the color of food.*" In this way, individuals feel grounded and highly involved, and thus they better appreciate the tiny things in life and the feelings in themselves of being good. This is in line with Disabato et al.'s (2016) subjective well-being model, which revealed a strong relationship between hedonic well-being, happiness, and engagement. However, such immersion is also distinct from the intense involvement studied before as a luxury experience whereby the ego is lost by indulging in the moment, and it becomes disassociated from space and time (Williams et al., 2009). Carruthers (2020) addressed the "luxury of pensiveness," arguing that momentary peace and transcendence can be found by experiencing the beauty of sand itself.

Being immersed in the moment also refers to living outside of your head and accepting reality, as opposed to spending time and energy thinking about what one wishes his or her situation were like or (even more often) trying to avoid thinking about how it is not what one wishes it were. Instead of fighting, denying, or avoiding discrepancies, being immersed in the moment creates energy and space to enjoy the positive with a calmer mind. This feeling is a luxury, as described by (GE2, Social Worker, age 42):

"*The sun shines on your face, and [I am] just being, completely staying with myself. This doesn't imply we don't do anything about it, but it just implies that I'm going to be here anyway. Although the external situation changes, I am still here and doing what I like. That's real and luxurious.*"

Moreover, our interviewees emphasize that the sort of content and satisfying feelings they achieve come from the internal self (e.g., self-esteem, self-love, self-compassion) at every

moment, rather than from pursuing such feelings through external activities or events in the past or future. This is to appreciate and be grateful for what one already has. An example is illustrated by (IN3, Programmer, age 24):

"It was like, if I get admitted to a master's degree, I'm going to be happy. Then I realized that we're always looking for happiness externally. The moment we get it, we start to look for the next thing that is going to make us happy, and it's a cycle of never-ending happiness—but now I feel like happiness is rather appreciating what we have."

In addition, our respondents also indicate the newness of every moment. However, unlike the traditional disruptive features embedded in the meaning of luxury (von Wallpach et al., 2020), we found that the respondents considered affordable or controllable adventures more favorable or precious. This is the opposite of a massive life change free from risks, which is normally the result of financial security or the ability to return to something familiar. Many people enjoy adventures, but in a moderate and controllable way. For example, (BR4, Civil servant, age 40) described himself as a small-scale explorer:

"I don't mind getting lost during expensive day trips. I love to be curious and to discover anything new, but I hate massive change, and I want to experience some moments that are a bit cooler."

In summary, given the importance of meaning-making for coping with adverse experiences (e.g., the pandemic), being mindful about the present has been recognized as important, as it helps cultivate emotional well-being and affective balance (Wong, 2012). Differing from previous research in luxury consumption of hedonic immediacy with an intensive temporary focus (Holmqvist et al., 2020), we found that being immersed in the present brings both cognitive and affective calmness, leading to sustainable well-being. Such awareness is enhanced spontaneously by our interviewees. In addition, the paradoxical elements of both newness and familiarity appeared as risk-free or affordable adventures and brought psychological comfort.

3.4.4 Masstige as self–other

In contextual behavioral science, the term "self" is the result of being able to develop relationships with the world, and "the self is often fundamentally considered as interpersonal and is constituted of a " (Kenny and West, 2008, p120). The binary between oneself and the

other is probably one of the most principal theories about consciousness and identity formation, claiming that the presence of another enables the possibility of recognizing oneself, given that other beings are always being incorporated into a person's self-concept (Schalk, 2011). The connections between nature and humankind that stem from enhanced mindfulness are experienced as a mass luxury, corroborating an existing thesis on the cultivation of sacred moments (Goldstein, 2007). Following this logic, we categorize the influences of the other as "self with nature" and "self with society."

3.4.4.1 Self with nature

Nature has been previously defined as a "mother" who provides food, shelter, beauty, and health, as well as a place to visit to improve personal characteristics (Schultz, 2002). By connecting with nature, one can fulfill basic needs, enhance physical and mental strength, develop his or her personality, and form a positive ecological worldview. Recent research also suggests there is a psychological connection between nature and subjective happiness (Nisbet et al., 2011), greater life satisfaction (Evans et al., 2005), and decreased anxiety and depression levels. Schultz (2002) suggested that connecting to nature is a way to express one's cognitive representation of self, and the exposure to natural settings facilitates psychological recovery from stressful stimuli. Since the pandemic has created a disconnect from nature and society as we spend significantly more time indoors, engagement with nature, including daily walks in nature or arranged hiking, has become the new luxury for most of the interviewees. This manifests in comments about how they can "*breathe fresh air*," "*feel their lives*," "*clear up [their] mind*," "*feed the soul*," and "*be reminded to be grounded*." These phrases represent novel and rare feelings that the interviewees did not experience before the pandemic. For example, (BR1, Engineer, age 35) said,

"*I didn't go walking previously, but now [during COVID-19] I walk every day when I can. It's brilliant. It's like the best thing ever, going to the park and seeing deer, I can't describe the happiness. The rare feeling is only ever for seconds. But it feels amazing. This is a treasure to me.*"

This dimension is in line with von Wallpach et al.'s (2020) research findings based on subjective daily luxurious moments, one of which is to create a "space for deceleration and retreat in nature." Apart from the blissful feeling and relaxation achieved, our interviewees also pointed out that the connection between nature and oneself only requires a one-way

communication, so they can be their authentic self, letting emotions out without worrying about meeting any human expectations, as described by (BR9, Student, age 24):

"Sometimes when you're actually talking to another person, what they say to you is not what you actually want to hear. It's not just them listening and talking, it's combined with the feedback that they give to you. [In nature] you don't have to make that effort to make [them] understand or to worry if they are happy. You can even scream when you feel like it, so it is a luxury."

In addition to sensory and emotional fulfillment, nature also brings eudemonic joy and benefits one's overall well-being, which corresponds to the essence of living a life that is perceived as desirable and rooted deeply in a core set of virtues and virtue ethics. According to Nartova-Bochaver and Muhortova (2020), the unity with and closeness to nature produces a self-developing balance that includes a concern for nature, harmony between oneself and nature, and an admiration for nature. (TU1, Student, age 25) describes these feelings:

"In the country or local community, everyone's close to nature. They value nature more. It's like the soil that is always nice to you; for example, whatever you plant, you get a harvest. It really feeds my soul."

In Schultz's (2002) general paradigm of human–nature relationships, connectedness with nature leads to caring and commitment, such as pro-environmental attitudes and a sense of empathy in terms of unity with nature and the self. Contrarily to egotistical hedonism, which requires an individual to consider only his or her own pleasure in decision-making, altruistic hedonism suggests that the creation of pleasure for *all* people is the optimal way to measure whether an action is preferable. In accordance with this line and with the meaning-making process that brings luxurious feelings, (KO1, Lecturer, age 36) found that pro-environmental consumption, such as bringing her own cup to a coffee house, was a luxury that brought her contentment and peace:

"My luxury for this year would be bringing my own coffee cup to Starbucks. Knowing that I am contributing to protecting the environment makes me feel so content. It's like a promise to myself, especially during this pandemic time."

3.4.4.2 Self with society

Ratcliffe (2013) asserted that one's state of mind constitutes how one is perceived in the eyes of others, namely one's belongingness to the world. A strong positive relation has been found between a person's sense of interpersonal belonging and the magnitudes of his or her happiness and subjective well-being (McAdams and Bryant, 1987). Since subjective well-being can be considered as a "reflected appraisal" and as socially constructed (Veenhoven, 2021), social capital can produce hedonic benefits, and social participation is rewarding due to its empowerment of self-mastery. The deficiency of social bonds or explicit experiences of social exclusion can trigger anxiety and loneliness. A large body of research has analyzed how luxury goods help to construct one's social self as a self-extension, and therefore bring hedonic and emotional benefits (e.g., Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2018; Wilcox et al., 2009).

Identified by Holmqvist et al. (2020), the collective foundation of hedonism serves as one of the main characteristics of luxurious moments. In fact, we found that most of our interviewees would consider a collective activity with a group of people to be very satisfying, and that simply knowing that you belong to a group brings feelings of "*security*," "*safety*," "*being in control*," and "*being in a comfort zone*," each of which is considered a luxury during this special time. Corresponding to Zhang et al.'s (2020) work, which considers fear of missing out as an emotional response to perceived psychological threats to one's self-concept, some interviewees suggested that being surrounded by people, instead of being left alone, seems to put them in a luxurious-feeling bubble. In the area of positive psychology, subjective well-being relies on the availability and quality of social ties, which protects individuals from negative labeling (e.g., Diener et al., 2003). Strong emotional ties with family or close friends and the metaphor of "feeling at home" are examples of luxuries for people who are isolated during the pandemic.

"*I spend time with my family, and it is very luxurious and very special for me. I feel so complete and full of love. That's the most important thing, like being in a comfort zone.*" (AM2, Pharmacist, age 31)

Another strong benefit of social involvement that is perceived as luxurious during the pandemic is emotional support, including offering one another love, care, sympathy, and mutual understanding (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012). As suggested by Adriansen et al. (2011), high levels of support from less intimate ties could also lead to life satisfaction, which can be represented in bidirectional communication, and which benefits psychological

construction and eases stress. (FI1, Engineer, age 28) considered physically being with family members and bringing joy to them to be rewarding. Other relational processes, such as hugs, enhanced emotional connectedness, and psychological competence are similarly rewarding, according to (PA1, Student, age 24). She also considers that sustainable healthy relationships suppress desires for conspicuous goods.

"*Things have changed. Now a hug is more valuable than that branded thing. Thus, having someone at your back is definitely a luxury.*"

Hwang and Kandampully (2012) suggested that emotional connection is at the core of luxury consumption. This is in line with Veenhoven's (2021) assertion that the feeling of connectedness accompanied by social integration provides conditions for subjective well-being. Connection with other people through love, affection, or empathy provides a fertile ground for the most emotionally luxurious moments in people's lives, such as the moments characterized by their unified features (Hemetsberger et al., 2012). In this way, people become more empathetic and emotionally connected than ever, and they get to understand one another. They feel non-judgmental sympathy for those who go through hardships, and they show more gratitude for their lives, natural entities, and possessions; moreover, by doing so, they feel more satisfied and less anxious.

"*I think this time in lockdown, I've been re-evaluating my friendships, and how I make friends and interact with them. This sort of empathy gives you a new perspective on life, and it nourishes the spirit.*" (AM1, Language tutor , age 45)

In line with this, Kreuzer et al. (2020) illustrated how moments of care, through their authentic presence and interpersonal synchrony, contribute to luxury experiences. They concluded that "true" luxury lies in the experience of humanity through interpersonal interactions, which surpasses the materialistic and conspicuous aspects of luxury. Apart from the emotional exchange, interaction with others can also have a mirror affect wherein individuals can see themselves or develop new self-knowledge based on the similarities within humanity. According to Owens (2006), self-concept is formed through social interactions, acting as the outcome of behavior and self-reflection, which has an inherent spiritual or charitable character (Hemetsberger et al., 2012) that potentially converts oneself into a more desired form. The affirmation of one's self-concept is also founded through the collaborative process.

3.4.5 Consonance as the ultimate essence of luxury

 Hedonic benefits are typically associated with highly aroused positive emotions (e.g., excitement and cheerfulness), and are closely tied with aspiration, achievement, and promotion (e.g., Chernev, 2004), which each act as strong drivers for luxury consumption. Contrary to the intense hedonic feelings which are associated with conventional luxury (Kim et al., 2020), our findings suggest that perceived prestige during the time of the pandemic is more about a balanced affect or a peaceful state of mind that is free from attachment (e.g., emotional or material). According to Csikszentmihalyi (2014), rather than depending on external objects, hedonism is ultimately defined as a condition that is prepared, cultivated, and defended by individuals, and that most importantly comes from inner harmony, which leads to a deeper sense of long-lasting exhilaration. We term this balanced, harmonious affective state as "consonance," and it is associated with comments such as, "*at peace with myself*," "*calmness*," "*harmony*," "*content*," "*to be settled*," "*reduce the strength of emotion*," and "*steady*"; it also refers to self-resolution, e.g*., "more of the inner things to fight*," "*the inner battles are just your thoughts*," "*making peace with yourself is luxurious*," and "*be able to reason with myself*." Moreover, it refers to self-monitoring, e.g., "*how you can maintain a healthy mind to have some kind of luxury*."

In addition, the formation of self-concepts, such as "*feeling very comfortable in myself*" and "*knowing where one stands*," means that in order to achieve such psychological consonance, our interviewees consider that finding oneself, or the process of exploring oneself, is essential. They expressed this sentiment by saying, "*Not knowing yourself is hard*," "*everything we do serves the purpose of self-discovery*," and "*happiness is attained within ourselves*." In this way, they are able to gain more control, be more prepared for unexpectedness and uncertainty, and gain adaptability and resilience in the face of hardships. In turn, this brings sustainability over one's psychological well-being, which supports previous studies (Arslan, 2015; Du et al., 2017) For example, (GE2, Social worker, age 42) mentioned,

"*Be at peace with myself, what I'm looking for is whatever ups and downs happen, inside I will always stay calm. Even when storms come outside, there is still a blue sky that remains in my mind*."

3.5 Discussion

Our findings address the relationship between luxury and the self and argue for finding luxury in oneself. This involves transgressing the boundaries between necessities and instrumental rationality to redefine attributes of traditional "luxury" and transfer the focus of luxury from a non-human, economic perspective into self-dimensions beyond monetary exchange. This is further based on the joint point of psychological consonance as a cornerstone of luxury, which enables timeless, placeless, transcendent, and interconnected qualities. The following sections detail such a path. In the next section, we discuss masstige in both its components; that is, mass accessibility and luxury prestige. The essence of such an inside-out process and the role of the pandemic are also elaborated.

3.5.1 Luxury prestige as an inside-out (vs. outside-in) self-concept

We asked the interviewees questions in a reflective and mindful way and found that each individual tended to think or rationalize in a similar manner. It could be argued that the pandemic has influenced people's mindsets and their ways of thinking. It is more important that luxury is possessed and experienced by a person in terms of internalization and self-relevance (Belk, 1988) rather than through ownership. The definition of mass luxury is changing, and the search for the simple and authentic pleasures in life make us content with who we are and what we stand for. A firm belief has arisen that luxury derives from being rather than from having, a shift from luxury as extrinsically (e.g., symbolism display) oriented to intrinsically (e.g., psychological consonance) oriented. Traditionally, luxury or prestige has been typically associated with high financial costs and perceived as "extravagant," and generally is a bad word in conservative culture. However, it has transformed into a good concept, as investment in self-care and overall well-being has become the new symbol of prestige. As inferred by extant findings (e.g.,, Dubois et al., 2020), the pursuit of status-driven prestige constantly evolves along with the ever-changing norms or group values in different

contexts; this brings tension and requires consumers to adapt. However, such an inside-out, self-oriented process does not have the same boundedness, or constancy, that mitigates the dissonance of traditional masstige consumption.

3.5.2 Redefining mass accessibility and potential paradoxes

The recent democratization and popularization of luxury consumption has made it more accessible to broader segmentations of the global market (Cristini et al., 2017). In line with idea that luxury encounters are accessible to many as long as people are mindful of them, luxury can be found in unexpected contexts and triggered inexpensively (e.g., Banister et al., 2020; Holmqvist et al., 2020; Kreuzer et al., 2020). In this way, mass accessibility can be defined far beyond traditional monetary efforts. In fact, accessibility has not really been framed experientially before, apart from being considered as the major concern in Cristini and Kauppinen-Räisänen's (2020) conceptual research on transforming global commons into luxuries for everyone.

In opposition to most traditional conceptualizations of luxury, they argued that luxuries do not always fall into a sphere beyond necessities. Quite the opposite can be the case, since today's luxuries spread to the accessibility of global commons and elementary resources, such as clean air, water, and food. Such resources are excessively depleted and have become inaccessible for many, which adds nuance to the concept of everyday luxury. In addition, our research indicates that accessibility is closely related to personal self-awareness and mindful ability in a self-constructive way, one that cannot be afforded by monetary efforts or conspicuousness. Although the experiences that emerge as self-oriented mass luxury are generally rooted in everyday life and in routine, there remains paradoxes in the dynamic attributes among them, such as

- control vs. lack of control
- preparedness (control over uncertainty, self-restoration) vs. unexpectedness (e.g., affordable adventure)
- connectedness (e.g., immersion in the present, connection with oneself and with other beings that promotes growth and affirms one's self-identity) vs. detachment (e.g., escaping from the facts)
- motion (e.g., self as a fleeting process) vs. stillness (e.g., safety, security seeking)
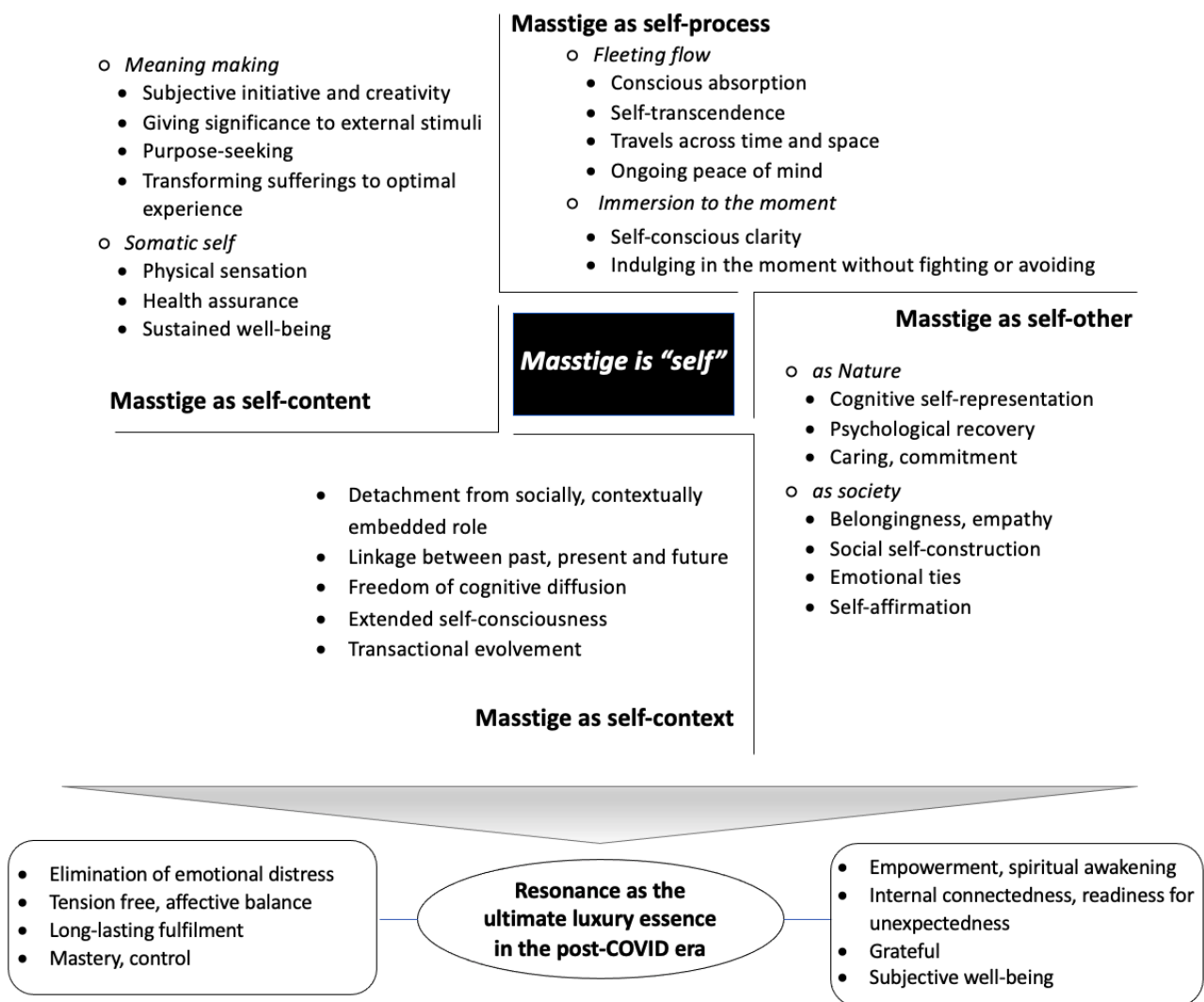
- familiarity vs. newness

3.5.3 The role of the pandemic and dissonance coping

Since the prerequisites for self-functioning and the existence of basic human needs that serve as the foundation of one's well-being have become rare, exclusive only to increasingly smaller groups of social elites (Cristinia and Kauppinen-Räisänenb, 2020), dissatisfaction and discomfort have become a common psychological state for the masses. Due to the pandemic, which at the time of writing (June 2021) is still causing ongoing uncertainties, compared to typical promotion-focused hedonism involving high emotional gratification of desires, aspirations, and fulfillment (Chitturi et al., 2008), the hedonic benefits we found are more closely associated with a prevention-focused process which emphasizes mental preparedness, perceived control, and a sense of security. Second, in line with Banister et al.'s (2020) work, by arguing that luxury experience is rooted in everyday practice, different levels of the self have been categorized in terms that conceptualize the attainable luxurious experience in our study.

All of these experiences involve an internal attitudinal shift towards a current situation in order to regain psychological consonance. Other than the extrinsic goals of gaining social praise and rewards through financial success, social recognition, and appealing appearance, mass luxury is intrinsically oriented and includes personal growth, group affiliation, and alignment with the authentic and integrated self; this enriches the hedonistic meaning of luxury and also indicates that luxury is very much an inside-out process. Third, due to cognitive conflicts and emotional discomfort concerning the nature of the pandemic, masstige is considered as a dissonance coping strategy that impairs the aftereffects of traditional luxury consumption (e.g., guilt or shame), as well as critical challenges caused by the pandemic.

Figure 1. Summary of findings

Masstige as self-process
- ○ *Fleeting flow*
  - Conscious absorption
  - Self-transcendence
  - Travels across time and space
  - Ongoing peace of mind
- ○ *Immersion to the moment*
  - Self-conscious clarity
  - Indulging in the moment without fighting or avoiding

- ○ *Meaning making*
  - Subjective initiative and creativity
  - Giving significance to external stimuli
  - Purpose-seeking
  - Transforming sufferings to optimal experience
- ○ *Somatic self*
  - Physical sensation
  - Health assurance
  - Sustained well-being

Masstige as self-content

Masstige is "self"

Masstige as self-other
- ○ *as Nature*
  - Cognitive self-representation
  - Psychological recovery
  - Caring, commitment
- ○ *as society*
  - Belongingness, empathy
  - Social self-construction
  - Emotional ties
  - Self-affirmation

- Detachment from socially, contextually embedded role
- Linkage between past, present and future
- Freedom of cognitive diffusion
- Extended self-consciousness
- Transactional evolvement

Masstige as self-context

- Elimination of emotional distress
- Tension free, affective balance
- Long-lasting fulfilment
- Mastery, control

Resonance as the ultimate luxury essence in the post-COVID era

- Empowerment, spiritual awakening
- Internal connectedness, readiness for unexpectedness
- Grateful
- Subjective well-being

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3.6. Conclusion

3.6.1 Theoretical contributions

This paper investigates the new meaning of masstige under pandemic conditions. We have redefined mass luxury with four self-as-dimensional psychological processes, namely self as content, self as process, self as context, and self–other. We argue that masstige is a self-oriented concept in this transformative era. The ultimate goal that consumers pursue is to reduce dissonance and regain consonance, which is a continuous consonant state of mind, and which initially expands the momentary nature of experiential luxury (von Wallpach et al., 2020). Rooted in consumerism, our study transforms the meaning of luxury from being politically useful into focusing on the psychological well-beings of customers. Specifically, this study contributes to the literature of masstige, cognitive dissonance theory, and luxury transformation in the following domains.

First, although the current literature has addressed the attainment of status and the ideal self as reasons behind masstige consumption, the theoretical foundation of masstige is relatively weak considering the psychological meaning underpinning such consumption patterns (e.g., Kumar and Paul, 2018Paul, 2019. Our study advances the meaning of prestige and mass accessibility overtop of economic measure (Granot et al., 2013) by broadening its dimensions of time and personal efforts (psychic energy, attention, and mindfulness), which goes against conventional luxuries that emphasize achieving status symbols through their rarity, exclusivity, and discrimination (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014). This meaning of prestige moves away from monetary presentation forms to a more self-constructive process based on self-oriented motivations. Furthermore, our findings reconstruct mass luxury as an inside-out process (intrapersonal) rather than an outside-in pro)cess that is traditionally based on extrinsic motivation (Kim et al., 2020; Shao et al., 2019) and an impressive exterior (Dhaliwal et al., 2020) nd they expand the argument that self-oriented luxury values are directed at emotional being and hedonism (Parks and Guay, 2009) as well as cognitive being (Ahuvia and Wong, 2002).

Second, we contribute to both the antecedents and coping of cognitive dissonance literature. Specifically, our study advances new mass luxury as a novel process for dissonance mitigation instead of passive coping, and therefore, it resolves the inherent dissonant backfire on the hedonic essence of the luxury experience through altering intrinsic luxury perceptions (Shahid and Paul, 2021), which improves consumers' well-being (Harmon-Jones, 2019). By doing so,

we also expand the hedonism realm in conventional luxury consumption, which is normally accompanied by a temporal focus (Ki et al., 2017; von Wallpach et al., 2020), to a more moderate form (e.g., axiological hedonism, ethical hedonism) that moves towards spiritual harmony, balance, calmness, and temperance, rather than extravagance or acceleration of corporal satisfaction (Iloranta, 2019).

Third, our study is original in its revelation of the consequences of the pandemic on a perceived shift in the concept of mass luxury and consumption patterns (Sanderson et al., 2020). Since the pandemic has resulted in a convergence towards the emerging market for luxury brands and a paradigm shift for global economic powers, we have explored contextuality (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Wiedmann et al., 2007) and subjectivity in consumer-perceived luxury under such conditions and found them to be catalysts and interventions, thus broadening the theoretical and applicable boundaries of cognitive dissonance theory. In particular, people perceived that activities that bring inner peace and calmness enable basic functions to be deemed as luxuries.

Fourth, this study adds nuanced luxury attributes based on existing literature (Holmqvist et al., 2020; von Wallpach et al., 2020) by discovering a potential paradox in the pandemic context. The key terms identified are preparedness vs. unexpectedness (e.g., affordable adventure), connectedness (e.g., immersion in the present) vs. detachment (e.g., escaping from the facts), motion (e.g., flexibility) vs. stillness (e.g., ongoing peace), and familiarity vs. newness. Further investigation is merited since these terms bring new supplements and substitutes to traditional masstige meanings.

3.6.2 Managerial contributions

In general, the findings of our study suggest a fundamental change of mass luxury perception driven by intrinsic self-oriented dimensions and psychological well-being and posit luxury as a new normal of living for the mass audiences. Therefore, this study provides four managerial implications for luxury marketers and practitioners. First, the displays of exclusivity, prestige, and conspicuousness that used to satisfy others' perceptions are no longer conceived of as appealing to mass audiences. Accessibility is no longer monetarily based, but rather privilege is created on the basis of mindfulness ability. Self-awareness should be the concern of managers, especially when targeting downward segmentations. Although

mindfulness-based programs for stress reduction have recently been very popular (e.g., spa retreats or luxury resorts) (Buck, 2018), the masses have neither the luxury of time nor the economic ability to attend regularly. Therefore, our research provides new insights that suggest marketers could embed elements which arouse self-awareness through strategy-making or could add such elements to product innovation, such as developing telework and home entertainment (fitness-centered video games, zoom yoga) during the pandemic. Regarding marketing communication, managers could create media stories, advertising images, and message content to embed these elements, including embedding self-as-dimensions into media content and self-care methods, For example, this could include using more "I" concepts to empower consumers' self-dimensions rather than passively focusing on the product characteristics. Luxury marketers could also simply use hedonic message appeals to increase perceived luxuriousness, especially when targeting consumers whose approach to luxury is internalized rather than externalized.

Second, today's marketers are facing innumerable challenges regarding how to meaningfully engage with mass audiences and sustain their loyalty, which indicates a need to adapt their offerings to supplement and substitute the growing wellness mentality of the mass consumers instead of targeting the middle-income group and young consumers. Practitioners could also rethink how to communicate well-being credentials in authentic ways that empower consumers to subscribe to a healthier, more refined lifestyle. For example, this could be done by making value propositions in order to connect more deeply with consumers and by grasping the concepts of "meaning-making'', "rewards" or "goal achievement" in their marketing plans. In addition, practitioners could satisfy the essential needs of the masses by embracing perceived scarcity and luxuriousness, improving the credibility of brands' ethical commitments, and developing brand equity based on these commitments. Managers could also reinforce their brands' value proposition and socially-responsible positioning by integrating the profound moral implications for society and the natural environment. To give an idea of healthy living and mindful brand perception, the quality of the used material, ingredients, or objective performance data can be disclosed. Moreover, social connection is of utmost importance during the pandemic, a prevalent aspect of the "new normal." This could involve the utilization of video conferencing platforms and embedding more human touch into these platforms by adopting new technologies such as artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and virtual reality to optimize experiential value.

Third, marketers need to manage unprecedented levels of uncertainty by rewiring their operational models to improve adaptability and create a faster decision-making process. They also need to balance speed against discipline in pursuit of future innovations, since the influence of the pandemic is recognized as being permanent (Bain and Company, 2021). Fourth, in order to maximize the benefits of a masstige strategy, luxury brands must return to their roots and make adjustments to reinforce brand perceptions anchored in meaning-making for the consumers' well-being and psychological consonance, thereby eventually achieving a sustainable shift to a demand-focused business model in order to survive in this fluid market environment.

3.6.3 Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study that need to be addressed. First, the interview topics were intentionally set experiences rooted in everyday life during the pandemic; the interviews were conducted in a reflective question format to ensure that they would be optimally accessible to the masses. However, it is worth investigating how to embed such mindful elements into luxury consumption settings and deliver a resonant experiential essence to the mass consumer. For example, how can marketers exert control to maximize consumers' self-efficiency or affirm their sense of self or inner state? Moreover, we detected several paradoxical elements that emerged in perceived masstige under the new era, including familiarity vs. newness, motion vs. stillness, connectedness vs. detachment, and preparedness vs. unexpectedness. However, the concrete relationships and interactions between each construct, as well as the specific content included in each construct, remain unclear. Further analysis could advance our knowledge in this area. Finally, the pandemic that has informed our study, and to which we mainly refer, is COVID-19. Its impact and influence vary on a global scale (e.g., there are different government policies in different countries), and some areas have been affected only to a minimal degree. Although we do not assume that our findings differ in terms of their overall direction, other factors may exert some influence. For example, factors such as a location's level of modernization and urbanization may exert similar influences and cause anxiety and dissonance. Should we conceptualize these terms as well, and how do we differentiate these contextual features? Future research could contrast samples from more diverse groups (e.g., rural areas). Other demographic traits should be considered for the same reason.

Additionally, in terms of the sampling method, although non-probability sampling has enabled certain levels of efficiency and simplicity to implement, the key challenge is that the sample might potentially lacks clear generalizability for theoretical development (i.e., sample estimates may not reflect true effects among the target population because the sample poorly represents the target population). Acknowledging that the personalized meaning participants ascribe to mass luxury can only be understood if contextualized and situated in relation to culturally shared knowledge (Thompson et al, 1994), which might increase the possible biases by selecting samples from across cultural origins.

3.7 Chapter summary

The concept of "new luxury" has challenged the conventional marketing of luxury goods as prestigious, leading to greater affordability of these goods in the mass market. This has become more evident since the outbreak of COVID-19, which has been a catalyst for consumption in the luxury market. This study investigates the mass marketing of luxury goods and explores the essence of masstige luxury consumption since the outbreak of COVID-19. An interpretive approach was conducted based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 31 participants. It analyzes four themes of mass luxury: self as content, self as process, self as context, and self-other. We further conclude that the mass consumption of luxury reduces cognitive dissonance, with the pandemic resolving the dark side of conventional luxury consumption. Our findings provide important insights for both scholars and practitioners in the development of a more holistic understanding of masstige in the post-COVID era.

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Appendix for study 2

Appendix A: interview questions

1. Please first indicate your age, nationality, educational background, civil state, and occupational status.

2. Can you think of any luxurious moments or experience during the last year, which can be big, small, highlights, or just special, and why they were luxurious? Please list five. Why do you think this experience is so special, what is at the core of it? How did it satisfy you, and why do you perceive it as luxurious? Can you tell me about other similar experiences or examples that made you feel the same way, or about any temporal enjoyment that does not have to have long-term value that you consider luxurious? How does this experience contribute to or help you build yourself? How would you consider it to have done so?

3. Can you identify how this moment or experience satisfies or fulfils your ego? Do you feel everything you do is to satisfy self-oriented goals, or do you always care about how you feel? Has that changed during last year? What are the causes?

4. Are you always aware of what is going on within yourself and how surroundings affect you? Are such experiences or moments co-created by you and an agent or the environment? How do you see their roles in creating sensory experiences for yourself?

5. Can you identify what is for you a perceived luxurious experience or moment? Are there any features that distinguish it from other pleasurable experiences or feelings? Do the features or qualities change over time? How does that influence your ego or your engagement with the external world?

6. Do you always think in this way, or does this have something to do with the circumstances you are in? Has your perception changed; for example, is what you used to perceive as luxury no longer valid now? What caused the change? Can you think of any triggers?

7. Do you always observe things, and are you aware of the inner change? Do you think your feelings have something to do with your psychological needs or demands related to the pandemic?

8. If so, how do you think the pandemic has changed your behavioural or consumption patterns? Would you say the pandemic is a catalyst of your underlying demands or an intervention into your normal?

9. How do such luxurious moments and experiences influence your overall well-being, happiness, life, or daily routine? What do you think is the essence of such changes related to yourself? Is there any difference between this and other ordinary experiences that shape or influence your ego? If yes, please illustrate.

Appendix B: key concept/themes of our research findings

Sample citations	Codes	Categories	Theme
IN5: "Writing in my diary, talking to myself is the most luxurious [activity] for me. Talking to my best friend builds up my own confidence, and I can see where to improve. It feels like someone has got your back and supports you."	Self-awareness; mindful activities	Observational self as detachment	**Masstige as self-context:** detachment from facts, emotions, and other external stimuli.
BR5: "If everything you're doing is too easy, then maybe you're not pushing yourself as far as usual. That's maybe something that's unhealthy for me. I think I have to be constantly testing myself, and I definitely always look at myself as developing, that's precious."	Positive change; accomplishment; self-actualization	Thinking self as meaning-making	**Masstige as self-content:** subjective initiative and creativity in consciousness regardless of the outside world, which offers an optimal luxurious experience during a difficult time
CH4: "just found these things are more sustainable. If I have healthy relationships and good health, the happiness brought from these things can last a long time. But if I buy a nice dress, that happiness doesn't last—it won't make me truly happy."	Behaving in a sustainable manner; sustained well-being	Somatic self as eternal property	
BR8: "I tend as much as I can not to use any guide or any formal tools. I just sort of tend to walk, then if I'm staying in a city like Vienna, if I hear some sound that I fancy is coming from somewhere in the city, I might just be redirected suddenly, halfway through. It is just sort of relaxing."	Ongoing enjoyment; feelings of enlightenment; freedom or flexibility	Self as fleeting flow	**Masstige as self-process:** a more flexible flow of human experience, which comes into being as an integral constitution to living a vital life.
GE2: "The sun shines on your face, and [I am] just being, completely staying with myself. This doesn't imply we don't do anything about it, but it just implies that I'm going to be here anyway. Although the external situation changes, I am still here and doing what I like. That's real and luxurious."	Self-regulating; momentary peace; love adventures	Immersing the somatic self in the moment	
BR1: "I didn't go walking previously, but now [during COVID-19] I walk every day when I can. It's brilliant. It's like the best thing ever, going to the park and seeing deer, I can't describe the happiness. The rare feeling is only ever for seconds. But it feels amazing. This is a treasure to me."	Engagement with nature; blissful feeling and relaxation; altruistic hedonism	Self with nature	**Masstige as self-other:** the presence of another enables the possibility of recognizing oneself, given that other beings are always being incorporated into a person's self-concept
AM2: "I spend time with my family, and it is very luxurious and very special for me. I feel so complete and full of love. That's the most important thing, like being in a comfort zone."	Interpersonal belonging; emotional connectedness	Self with society	
GE2: "Be at peace with myself, what I'm looking for is whatever ups and downs happen, inside I will always stay calm. Even when storms come outside, there is still a blue sky that remains in my mind."	Self-monitoring; harmonious affective state	Adaptability and resilience	**Consonance as the ultimate essence of luxury:** a condition that is prepared, cultivated, and defended by individuals, and that most importantly comes from inner harmony, which leads to a deeper sense of long-lasting exhilaration.

4.Study 3: Does technology customizability have their best interests at heart? A quantitative study of narcissists' SNS use among generation Z consumers

4.1 Chapter introduction

Recently, new information technology has penetrated the conventional market via innovative technologies, thereby transforming it into a more technology-oriented structure, especially with regard to SNS (Instagram, Twitter, etc.). SNS has allowed people to share their own views and personal data at a very rapid rate and in real-time to the entire network. Its usage is particularly phenomenal among generation Z, known as 'digital natives', who have grown up developing relationships through social networks. Their great dependence on SNS plays a significant role in generating sales and revenue from marketing perspectives (Statista, 2021), especially under the economic disruption of pandemic. This segmentation has demonstrated unique customer profiles (e.g., being risk averse (Priporas et al, 2017), holding unstable self-esteem, Gentina & Rowe, 2020) among which ego-oriented narcissism tendency is especially prevalent with the booming of SNS (Neave et al, 2020). Differing from other online platforms, which are anonymous, many SNS servers require disclosure of personal information for (O'Brien & Torres, 2012) which feeds such tendency to a large extent. Furthermore, as the critical affordance of SNS, algorithmic filters can nudge customized content towards individuals, facilitating information exposure, the service journey, and the consumption process, and consequently bringing convenience to people's lives (e.g., Cho & Sundar, 2022; Buffington, 2011).

However, prior studies have discussed convenience as an introduction to an inevitable trade-off cost, i.e., a greater potential loss of privacy (Appel et al., 2020; Ahn et al., 2015). For example, the ForgeRock 2021 Breach Report revealed that attacks aimed at gaining registration details (e.g., usernames, passwords) have increased by a tremendous 450% from 2019 to 2020; a direct result of the digital revolution during the Covid-19 pandemic, translating into over one billion compromised records in America alone. Several studies have been conducted which indicate that rising privacy concerns may lead to an unwillingness to engage with media content, negative attitudes towards the firm involved, and consumer's resistance to the disclosure of information on social media (Oghazi et al., 2020; Olsen & Pracejus, 2020). Arguing that SNS allow people to create an online profile and tailor information based on personal preferences, existing studies have focused on the SNS-related antecedents of privacy concerns, such as specific online functions (Joinson, 2008), mutual connections between users (Nagle & Singh,

2009), and varied information of a personal nature (Nosko et al., 2010). Thus, privacy is a vital part of the SNS domain, and it has become a necessity to examine the role of technology customizability in balancing convenience and privacy concerns among users of SNS, especially the digital natives.

Furthermore, in line with rising privacy concerns, the way users view SNS is becoming increasingly hostile, leading to considerable psychological discomfort which is recognized as cognitive dissonance (Marikyan et al., 2020). As a result, there is evidence to show that approximately 40% of digitally connected consumers have admitted to deleting at least one social media account due to fears of a data breach, which varies among different age groups (Edelman, 2018). As one of the adverse outcomes of technology adoption in information system (IS) research, dissonance is generally associated with negative psychological states, such as anxiety, guilt, and regret. For example, failure in technology performance encourages withdrawal behaviour, especially in individuals who have low self-efficacy in terms of computer usage (Wilfong, 2006); or when an individual encounters inconsistency between their performance with technology and their internal norms (Vaghefi & Qahri-Saremi, 2017); or even when facing the dark side of technology which may make a user believe they should not have been using it at all (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002). Such dissonant feelings influence consumers' decision-making process (e.g., hinders technology consumption, results in negative reviews of technology products) (Marikyan et al, 2020; Rutner et al, 2008), therefore is has great marketing significance. However, the cognitive instigation for technology adoption and the recognition of cognitive or behavioural adjustments in the IS literature has been neglected (Marikyan et al., 2020). Thus, whether privacy concerns lead to technology dissonance and convenience neutralizes such influence merits our research attention.

In addition, the social media literature provides valuable insights into individuals who demonstrate narcissism. They are often self-absorbed, conceited, and have a tendency to brag about themselves—this in itself helps to explain the proliferation of SNS (e.g., Kong et al., 2021; Schneider et al., 2015). Narcissistic users tend to display an inflated self-image or impeccable content for purposes of self-promotion, making SNS a very useful platform for achieving those goals (Bergman et al., 2011). Previous studies have identified narcissism as a significant characteristic of those whose personal information is exposed. For example, Carpenter (2012) suggested that people with narcissistic orientations tend to seek attention by posting on SNS. Furthermore, the positive relationships between narcissism and SNS usage have been found specifically relevant among generation Z users (Ong et al., 2011). Some

existing studies reveal conflicting findings. For instance, Lutz and Ranzini (2017) found narcissists have fewer privacy concerns when engaged with SNS and that narcissistic orientation motivates individuals to disclose a great amount of personal information, whereas Kwolek (2012) has identified specific concerns over privacy among narcissists. Since narcissism is considered to be a strong driver of self-disclosure on SNS, it is necessary to explore the relationships between it and these two accompanying, but opposing, features— privacy concerns and perceived convenience. Given that dissonance research has also long ignored individual differences in terms of their narcissistic traits (grandiose vs vulnerability), this study investigates the specific interaction between cognitive dissonance and its two facets.

Given the gaps identified above, this study aims to evaluate and compare the convenience and the privacy attributes of technology customizability among generation Z individuals who display varied narcissism traits. The specific research questions are as follows:

1) To what extent does technology customizability bring privacy concerns and perceived convenience, consequently leads to technology dissonance among generation Z?

2) Do different types of narcissism react differently in terms of the impact on privacy concerns and their perception of technology convenience on the dissonance level?

To answer these questions, a quantitative approach is employed. The proposed model and hypotheses are validated empirically using survey data collected from 300 American SNS users (aged 13–24). We aim to contribute to the existing literature in three ways. Firstly, this study extends the current technology customizability literature in SNS by providing a clearer picture of its impact on convenience/privacy tensions. It further distinguishes the system-initiated personalization from the user-initiated customization in how they drive user's technology dissonance among generation Z. Secondly, it expands the theoretical insights into cognitive dissonance in the context of SNS use by showing how theories drawn from the social psychological literature can enable better understanding of use's SNS dependence. Thirdly, the proposed model advances our understanding of how convenience vs privacy concerns and the subsequent dissonance with SNS usage can become either salient or weakened in terms of different narcissistic traits displayed. In terms of practice, this study provides empirical evidence concerning the need for generation Z users to moderate their behaviour and avoid adverse effects of negative personal consequences resulting from the overuse of SNS.

4.2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

4.2.1 Technology customizability

Customizability appears as a technology that allows individuals, or information systems, to tailor their information environment; it enables the use of unwanted resources automatically and systematically while generating the preferred content efficiently and effectively (Dylko, 2016). Such customized content can be user-driven, where consumers take control of their information environment based on their predispositions (Bozdag, 2013), or system-driven, where users' information environment is created by soft codes (Beam, 2014; Sundar & Marathe, 2010).

Traditional online customization has been acknowledged as an important phenomenon in consumer and marketing research (e.g., Awad & Krishnan, 2006; Xu et al., 2011), such as the various issues associated with manufacturers and retailers. These may be due to customization levels, processes, and methodologies (Silveira et al., 2001), the results of benefits from value co-creation studies (e.g., solution provision (Töllner et al., 2001), or as a result of problem-solving (Aarikka-Stenroos, & Jaakkola, 2012). The rapid development of machine learning and artificial intelligence has enriched the connotation of the traditional meaning of "customization" and made it the most prominent feature of the online consumption environment, serving the purpose of predicting consumer demand, enhancing engagement, and encouraging sales (Zhang & Sundar, 2019; Olsena & Pracejusb, 2020). However, there is a lack of a clear conceptual boundary between technology customizability and psychological response among the new generation.

The core of technology customizability lies in the abundant acquisition, storage, and analysis of online data which is disclosed by consumers themselves. By building individual profiles to inform market needs and provide customized services, organizations can obtain optimal profits by adopting advanced algorithms (Lin et al., 2012). For example, accurate forecasting can be produced via unsolicited tracking of consumer data (Knijnenburg et al., 2012); related commercial recommendations could then be shared with third-party platforms in all aspects (Mayer & Mitchell, 2012). Meanwhile, companies are also able to enhance consumer satisfaction (Rust & Espinoza, 2006) with personalized searching possible based on a consumer's navigating, browsing and transaction history (Baglioni et al., 2003). Nevertheless, such practices are against consumers' rights to protection of their data privacy and cause concern about technological use (Xu et al., 2011). Existing studies of technology

customizability have failed to address the explicit trade-off and psychological responses of technology customizability in SNS. This study facilitates such understanding in the following sections.

4.2.2 Perceived Convenience

Perceived convenience is considered to be having the capability to reduce one's non-monetary costs (e.g., time, energy, and effort) when consuming certain products or services (Berry et al., 2002; Brown, 1989); it has been mainly studied in the online transactional and service literature. For example, the convenience offered by online payments was identified as the basis of preference over traditional payment tools (e.g., de Kerviler et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2010). In IS literature, Knijnenburg et al. (2012) suggest that convenience can be drawn from perceived ease of use to the extent that a system, or the use of a machine, is effortless. Most importantly, convenience has captured as the principal goal of technology adoption, which is to make human life easier by the simplification of difficulties with common tasks (Kim et al., 2010). Among the penetration of new technology, technology customizability can be seen as of great value to customers since it promotes user-oriented convenience to a new level. For example, it reduces cognitive overloads when processing information and facilitates consumer decision-making process through the automatically generated tailed information via SNS (Knijnenburg et al., 2012). As a technological tool, customizability generates convenience by helping individuals realize their goals and amplifying their pre-existing tendencies for information choice. Therefore, it facilitates their online engagement to a great extent. Hence, we hypothesize:

H1. Technology customizability is positively associated with the perceived convenience of SNS use.

4.2.3 Concern for information privacy

Other than the convenience brought about by technology, studies involving consumers' attitudes towards privacy have attracted significant considerations in the online environment

(Aguirre et al., 2015; Liu & Mattila, 2017). Although a clear definition of privacy is difficult to provide from across the extant literature, Sewart (2017) considers privacy as equal to being left alone as this enables an individual to decide on what constitutes an invasion of privacy. Privacy concerns indicate the perceived risks associated with loss of control regarding both the process and consequences, namely the procedural and distributive justice (Milne et al., 2017). Research in consumer research and related disciplines have studied privacy concerns from diverse angles. Examples include the relationship between privacy, consumer trust (Martin, 2018), and firm performance (Martin et al. 2017). Among the antecedents being studied of privacy concern, the concept of customization is especially relevant in social media setting due to the personal data disclosure (e.g., Martin, 2018; Martin et al, 2017).

However, the findings between privacy concern and personalized content are rather heterogeneous due to the ill-defined concept of personalization and contextual features. For example, Aguirre et al. (2015) illustrated varied consumer attitudes towards personalized advertising content, while Martin et al. (2017) studied privacy under the adoption of personalized devices. In our study, we specifically look at the impact of technology customizability on privacy concerns while increasing convenience to the younger generation. Because technology customizability mainly generates content based on either the previous disclosed information or consumers' online behavioural traces, there has been a rising concern for date breach, perceived fairness (Krishen et al., 2017); and other legal and ethical of privacy intrusiveness (e.g., Kolotylo-Kulkarni et al., 2021; Nill & Aalberts 2014). That is, the higher the customized technology, the more potential risk is associated with data privacy, therefore, we hypothesize that,

H2. Technology customizability is positively associated with information privacy concerns.

4.2.4 Technology dissonance

Cognitive dissonance theory has served as a cornerstone in consumer research for decades, it emphasizes that the psychological discomfort induced by disconfirmed expectations, triggered by cognitive discrepancies, associated with negative emotions, such as guilt, anxiety,

and regret, consequently, influence the decision-making process (e.g., Sweeney et al., 2000; Park et al., 2019). In the IS literature, it has been used to explain consumers' responses when they face disparity between pre-service expectations and actual product performance (e.g., Park et al., 2015). Prior research has demonstrated the benefits of customized strategies (e.g., Koch & Benlian, 2015) while raising potential concerns over social platforms and the online environment. As technologies have become inevitably more personal, ubiquitous, and pervasive in our lives, privacy concerns and other potential issues (e.g., perceived trustworthiness, uncertainty, and vulnerability (Wünderlich et al., 2020) could also create psychological barriers of risks associated with negative emotional responses, termed as technology dissonance.

Edelman (2018) points out that many consumers prefer not to give up their privacy for a more customized experience since they are uncomfortable with the idea of being tracked, they worry about to whom their data may be sold or whether such process is legal, especially when their personal information is collected without them being informed (Joinson & Paine, 2007). Such experiences make consumers feel threatened and out of control (Collier,1995), they generate psychological discomfort. On the contrast, technology customizability is considered mainly to bring convenience to individuals' lives and increases the perceived fulfilment. Various studies have confirmed the high level of relevance between perceived convenience and a positive consumer affect (e.g., Shin & Park, 2019; Kim et al., 2015), which might diminish the discomfortable states created by the potential risks. Therefore, we hypothesize the two polarised functions discussed above are counterproductive in the formation of the consumer's psychological response. That is,

H3. Perceived convenience is negatively associated with technology dissonance.

H4. Information privacy concerns are positively associated with technology dissonance.

4.2.5 Dependence on Social Networking Sites (SNS)

SNS are online platforms that enable individuals to construct social relationships, facilitate interactions with those who share common interests and backgrounds, and enhance social capital and ties (Eftekhar et al., 2014; Cachia et al., 2007). The increasing dependence on SNS

has profoundly transformed consumers' lifestyles wherein they can manage their self-presentation, constructing or controlling self-expressions strategically (Lee et al., 2015). SNS dependency can be conceptualized as the perceived extent to which SNS is able to fulfil a range of consumer goals in daily life (Tai & Sun, 2007). Ball-Rokeach et al. (1984) indicate that the dependency relationship with media is formed by consumers' psychological motivations and personal goals. However, previous research has mostly focused on the situational factors which influence SNS usage—e.g., SNS features (Joinson, 2008) or mutual connections among SNS users (Nagle & Singh, 2009)—rather than consumers' psychological antecedents.

Although there is research that identifies the negative impacts of online privacy (Joinson et al., 2010), and the security risks (Johnson et al., 2018), the underlying psychological mechanism has not been clearly addressed. Bhattacherjee (2001) suggests that continuous intentions to adopt a particular type of technology are decided by the affective state of the individual. For example, drawing on cognitive dissonance theory, individuals are internally motivated to undertake different behavioural or intentional responses (e.g., attitude change, confirmative information seeking, or behavioural change (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007) to reduce their psychological discomfort when dissonance occurs. These responses fall into two categories which are either approaching or avoidance approaches. Therefore, when technology dissonance occurs, consumers are very likely to become more resistant and expose themselves less towards the tech products to eliminate their psychological tension and restore their inner balance. In our study, we conceive that the higher the dissonance level, the lower consumers' dependency on SNS; therefore, we hypothesize that,

H5. Technology dissonance is negatively associated with dependence on SNS.

4.2.6 Grandiose narcissism VS vulnerable narcissism

In addition to the above, it is suggested that individuals' inherent traits play an important role in the prediction of SNS behaviour since personality characteristics demonstrate regular patterns of thinking and behaving (Liu & Arnett, 2002; Nosko et al., 2010). Thereinto, narcissism has been identified to be highly relevant in SNS engagement for the predominant purposes of self-expression and self-promotion (Kong et al., 2021). The two forms of narcissism (grandiose and vulnerable) were originally conceptualized by Wink (1991), who claims they share common traits, such as the tendency of displaying grandiose self-related fantasies, entitlement driven by materialism values or disrespect of others (Besser & Priel,

2010). However, in between these distinctions lie unique motivations and characteristics. That is to say, although the behavioural responses are similar, the psychological rationales and interaction with external stimuli might differ. To date, we have identified only two studies that link narcissism with SNS behaviour, those of Fossati et al. (2009) and Stone and Bartholomay (2019). Both only investigate the sensitivity of narcissism to external judgement or social rejection, the internal psychological process of narcissists has been neglected and merit research significance in the context of SNS.

In fact, grandiose narcissism is mainly connected with an instant exhibition of self-importance, normally demonstrating aggressive and dominant tendencies in consumers behaviour (Miller et al., 2011), and associated with grand superiority, arrogance, and extraversion (Fastoso et al., 2018), which motivates individuals to actively seek self-promoting opportunities regardless of the potential psychological concerns over privacy or other risks. And they tend to be more emotionally retarded and overly confident when facing potential threats and do not always feel discomfort (Neave et al, 2020). It is argued that grandiose narcissists are more tolerant of privacy risks than they are of simply losing the attention of their audiences (Miller et al., 2013), not even to mention the perceived benefits they gain from SNS usage. Therefore, it results in these individuals being less vigilant and less sensitive about the disclosure of their personal information associated with potential risks. Because of their insensitivity and lack of emotional clarity, when facing the benefits and risks, grandiose narcissists do not tend to encounter an uncomfortable feeling. Thus, we hypothesize:

H6a. Grandiose narcissism negatively moderates the relationship between concern for information privacy and technology dissonance.

H6b. Grandiose narcissism positively moderates the relationship between perceived convenience and technology dissonance.

In contrast, vulnerable narcissism is closely associated with hypersensitivity, fragility, insecurity, and defensiveness (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Miller et al., 2011). Although the interpersonal behavioural tendency is similar to that displayed by the grandiose narcissist, the psychological rationales vary. For example, vulnerable narcissists seek special attention as self-assurance, whereas grandiose narcissists expect it because they believe they are superior. (Miller et al., 2011). Thus, individuals with vulnerable narcissistic personality traits are more stressed, fearful, suspicious of interdependency, and likely to display submissiveness,

introversion, shame, and low trust in certain situations (Ronningstam, 2009; Sedikides et al., 2011). Different from grandiose narcissists' attention seeking motivations when posting inflated images through SNS, vulnerable narcissists present themselves on SNS for self-assurance purposes.

When facing a situation associated with privacy threats or lack of control, the sensitive nature of the vulnerable narcissistic orientation may lead to increasing concerns and a high psychological cost. They may even react more actively towards the potential convenience benefits which could diminish their psychological barriers such as dissonant feelings. This is due to hypersensitivity and hypervigilance on the part of these individuals who would, therefore, react in a way which allows them to avoid situations which threaten their personal selves. We hypothesize,

H7a. Vulnerable narcissism positively moderates the relationship between concern for information privacy and technology dissonance.

H7b. Vulnerable narcissism negatively moderates the relationship between perceived convenience and technology dissonance.

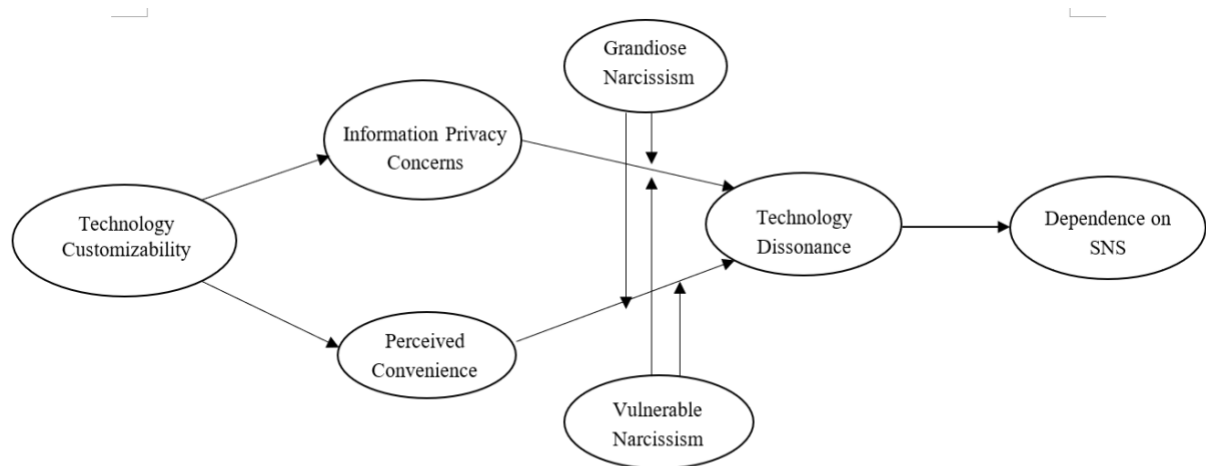The proposed research framework is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Proposed research framework

4.3 Methodology

To empirically test the proposed model, we collected data using an online survey. The sample, measures used, and the data collection processes are explained in the following sections.

4.3.1 Participants and sampling method

Engagement with SNS has become an immensely popular activity among generation Z, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic (Statista, 2021). Recent data suggest that nearly 82% of all internet users in the US are active participants in SNS, and almost 91% of generation Z use at least one such site on a daily basis (Statista, 2021). Concerns have been raised that SNS is an environment in which narcissistic tendencies are promoted by allowing consumers to constantly present themselves positively (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). In terms of the narcissistic segments, previous research on self-reported narcissism acknowledged that people in the US are more narcissistic than those from other nations (e.g., Wetzel et al, 2021; Jonason et al., 2017). Therefore, our investigation was mainly conducted among generation Z customers across the US.

Data were collected by a professional data acquisition company. The sample includes 300 generation Z consumers (Female=210, Male=84) in the US. The respondents were randomly selected from the company's sample library of 8.5 million consumers wherein, females were previously reported as more active in SNS usage rather than males (Statista, 2022). We set the age limit in our screening question specifically to individuals aged between 13-24 years old to fit the research segment. Regarding the teenaged participant, the company obtained appropriate parental consent and youth assent to participate in the study. Specifically, if the participant is under 18-year-old (the basic demographic information was registered with the company previously), the parent's consent is automatically required. Study participation required signed parental consent and individual participants' assent. We explained that the participants could refuse to answer some questions. Demographic descriptions are provided in Table 1.

Before being administered in full, our questionnaire was initially evaluated by a group of five UK and four US academic staff. In order to encourage the authentic disclosure of perceptions by respondents, they were guaranteed that the information provided would remain anonymous and confidential (Podsakoff et al., 2003. Later on, in the survey, participants were

firstly asked a screening question about their past SNS usage to ensure only those active users among generation Z were included. Instead of designating a specific SNS site, we asked the participants to choose one site (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Youtube, Snapchat, or Pinterest) which they often use, and to complete the questionnaire according to their user experience (Gnambs & Appel, 2018).

Table 1 Socio-demographic characteristics of participants of study 1

Variable	Frequency	
	N	**Percent (%)**
Start time of using SNS		
Less than 6 months ago	67	22.33
6 months–1 year ago	46	15.33
1–2 years ago	49	16.33
2–3 years ago	25	8.33
More than 3 years ago	113	37.67
Age		
< 13 years old	5	1.67
13-16 years old	31	10.33
17-20 years old	138	46.00
21-24 years old	126	42.00
Gender		
Female	210	70.00
Male	84	28.00
Other	6	2.00
Education level		
Elementary school	4	1.33
Middle school	10	3.33
High school	159	53.00
Undergraduate	80	26.67
Postgraduate	47	15.67
Frequency of usage		
Less than once a week	69	23.00
A few times a week	79	26.33
1–5 times per day	61	20.33
6–10 times per day	44	14.67
More than 10 times per day	47	15.67
Average time length per session		
Less than 10 min	80	26.67
Between 10 min and 30 min	85	28.33
Between 30 min and 1 hr	77	25.67
Between 1 hr and 2 hr	33	11.00
More than 2 hr	25	8.33
Frequency of online content relevant to personal data disclosure through SNS		
All the time	45	15.00
Very often	97	32.33
Sometimes	108	36.00
Hardly ever	27	9.00
Never	23	7.67

4.3.2 Measurement items

Most items applied to operationalize the current model are from existing measurements; we used seven-point Likert scales adapted to the context. Three steps were conducted to prepare our measurement items. Firstly, the online questionnaire included a short introductory message about "technology customizability" and provided the connotations of the term. Secondly, a focus group was formed comprising four researchers to refine and modify the measurement items. For instance, the item "I wondered whether I should have bought something else", was revised to, "I wondered whether I should have used other tools". Finally, the questionnaire was pretested with 20 freshers at an American university; several adjustments were made based on their feedback to ensure the more precise capture of the intended meaning. In the course of our measurement validation in the main study, items with factor loadings of more than .70 were kept.

The technology customizability questions capture the primary focus on the communication of the SNS provider (Nyheim et al., 2015; Chellappa & Sin, 2005). We adapted Thirumalai & Sinha (2009) technology customizability scale to the SNS context. In line with previous research (e.g., Huang et al., 2017; Gao et al., 2018), we adopted scales that measure concerns about information privacy directly from the current IS literature. Subsequently, perceived convenience was measured using an adapted version of convenience in catalogue and internet shopping (Mathwick et al., 2001). Technology dissonance (e.g., "I should have used other tools for information instead of giving away personal data") was measured based on Marikyan et al.'s (2020) and Sweeney et al.'s (2000) cognitive dissonance scales, including both cognitive and emotional components.

terms of the dependent variable, dependence on SNS was measured using the 'technology dependence' items established by Goodhue and Thompson (1995). An example item of dependence on SNS is, "I would use SNS as often as I can". Finally, we measured the moderating variables of narcissism. The NPI-16 (Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006) was used to measure grandiose narcissism with a forced-choice scale. Respondents were asked to choose the closest expression of their personality from 16 pairs of descriptions which reflect narcissistic (coded 1) versus non-narcissistic (coded 0) behaviour, such as "I insist upon getting the respect that is due to me" versus "I usually get the respect that I deserve". Vulnerable narcissism was measured using the 10-item hypersensitive scale from Hendin and Cheek (1997) which assesses hypersensitive narcissist orientation. An example item is, "My feelings are

easily hurt by ridicule or by the slighting remarks of others". To ensure that the measures mirrored our conceptual definitions of the constructs, we modified the scales carefully (see Appendix for final items); this required the rewording of some statements to fit the attributes of the SNS context better.

4.3 Results

To check for common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was used (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Thus, we conducted factor analysis of all item scales together and examined the unrotated factor loading matrix. The size of the homology deviation can be determined based on the first principal component of the matrix. After following this process, the first principal component of this study was 23.86% (threshold value <50%), indicating the absence of common method bias in the data.

According to Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step approach, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to estimate the measurement using AMOS 18.0. The measurement model indicated a good fit: CMIN = 2019.119, df = 1631, CMIN/df =1.238, $p < .001$, CFI = .965, GFI = .827, NFI = .842, RMSEA = .028. Convergent validity of all constructs was confirmed through significant path loadings of all items (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The t-values of all estimated path coefficients were significant at the $p < .001$ level. The AVE of all constructs surpassed the cut off value of .50, which indicates convergent validity (Hair et al., 2010). To examine the unidimensionality of the latent constructs, we conducted exploratory factor analysis (Bryant & Yarnold, 1995). The results suggest a single underlying factor for each construct. Additionally, the Cronbach's alpha values (in the range .69–.91) indicated adequate reliability for each construct (Hair et al., 2010). CFA factor loadings were all acceptable (i.e., all above .60), suggesting unidimensionality of all constructs (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) (See Appendix). Discriminant validity was confirmed when the AVE of every pair of constructs was larger than the R^2 (i.e., the squared correlation of each of the two constructs) (Hair et al., 2010) (see Table 2).

Table 2 Discriminant validity of study 1

	TC	CV	PC	TD	DOS	GN	VN
TC	.792						
CV	.451***	.766					
PC	.492***	.486***	.757				
TD	.301***	.578***	. 431***	.758			
DOS	-.285***	-.519***	-.412***	-.549***	.897		
GN	.082	.085	.015	-.036	.015	.713	
VN	.175**	.255***	.195**	.149*	-.196**	.051	.790

Key: *TC = technology customizability, CV = convenience, PC = information privacy concerns, TD = technology dissonance, DOS = dependence on SNS, GN = grandiose narcissism, VN = vulnerable narcissism*

4.3.1 The structural model and hypothesis testing

We examined the proposed hypotheses using structural equation modeling (SEM). The structural model indicated a good fit (CMIN =651.978, *df* = 490, CMIN/*df* = 1.331, *p* < .001, CFI = .975, GFI = .886, NFI = .908, RMSEA = .033). Technology customizability is found to positively affect concern for information privacy (β =.513, *p* <.001). Thus, H1 is supported; that is, among generation Z, consuming customized technology services increases their concern about information privacy.

We also found that technology customizability positively affects perceived convenience (β = .474, *p* < .001). Hence, H2 is supported, showing that customized technology services enhance convenience perceptions among generation Z. Furthermore, concern for information privacy (β = .224, *p* < .001) is found to significantly and positively relate to technology dissonance. Thus, H3 is supported, indicating that increased information privacy concerns can promote psychological dissonance over technology.

Surprisingly, perceived convenience (β = .492, *p* < .001) is found to positively influence technology dissonance. Thus, H4 is rejected, illustrating that the perception of convenience promotes dissonant feelings towards technology in general. In addition, we find that technology dissonance (β = -.55, *p* < .001) negatively impacts the dependence of SNS, which supports H5

and indicates that generation Z users with strong dissonance over technology tend to consume SNS less frequently.

4.3.2 Test of moderating effects

A stepwise hierarchical regression analysis was conducted through SPSS 23.0 (Hayes, 2018) to assess the continuous moderation effects of narcissism. Following the procedures suggested by Edwards and Lambert (2007), we standardized the variables before evaluating the moderation effect. The results of the main effects of concern for information privacy (Step 1) and grandiose narcissism (Step 2) on technology dissonance and the moderation effects (examined through the interaction term in Step 3) are elaborated below. In Step 1, the results demonstrate a significant positive impact of privacy concerns on technology dissonance ($\beta = 1.227$; $p < .001$). Step 2 shows no significant influence of grandiose narcissism on privacy concerns ($\beta = -.151$; $p > .05$), although the influence of privacy concerns ($\beta = 1.23$; $p < .001$) on technology dissonance remains significant in Step 2. The moderation effect of grandiose narcissism on the relationship between privacy concerns and technology dissonance was evaluated by including the regression model. Results show that H6a is rejected, grandiose narcissism ($\beta = .032$; $p > .05$) does not significantly influence the relationship between privacy concerns and dissonant feelings against technology among generation Z. Meanwhile, the moderation effect of grandiose narcissism on the relationship between perceived convenience and technology dissonance was examined. Results show that grandiose narcissism ($\beta = .027$; $p > .05$) has no significant moderation effect on the relationship between perceived convenience and technology dissonance. Hence, H6b is rejected, indicating that consumers with stronger grandiose narcissistic orientation do not encounter more dissonance when holding privacy concerns about the information.

In addition, the moderation analysis of vulnerable narcissism on the relationship between concern for information privacy and technology dissonance was conducted. Results show that vulnerable narcissism ($\beta = .058$; $p < .01$) significantly and positively moderates the relationship between privacy concerns over information and technology dissonance; hence, H7a is supported, indicating that consumers with stronger vulnerable narcissistic orientation tend to feel more psychological discomfort when information privacy is at stake. When examining the moderation effects of vulnerable narcissism on perceived convenience and technology dissonance, vulnerable narcissism ($\beta = .042$; $p < .01$) demonstrates a significantly positive influence on the relationship between perceived convenience and technology dissonance; thus,

H7b is rejected, indicating that generation Z users with a stronger vulnerable narcissistic orientation might encounter more dissonance over technology, even when they perceive great convenience from such technology adoption. We applied simple slope analysis and plotted graphs for one standard deviation above and below the mean value of the moderators (Aiken & West, 1991), as shown in Figure 2. Overall, six of our nine hypotheses are supported.
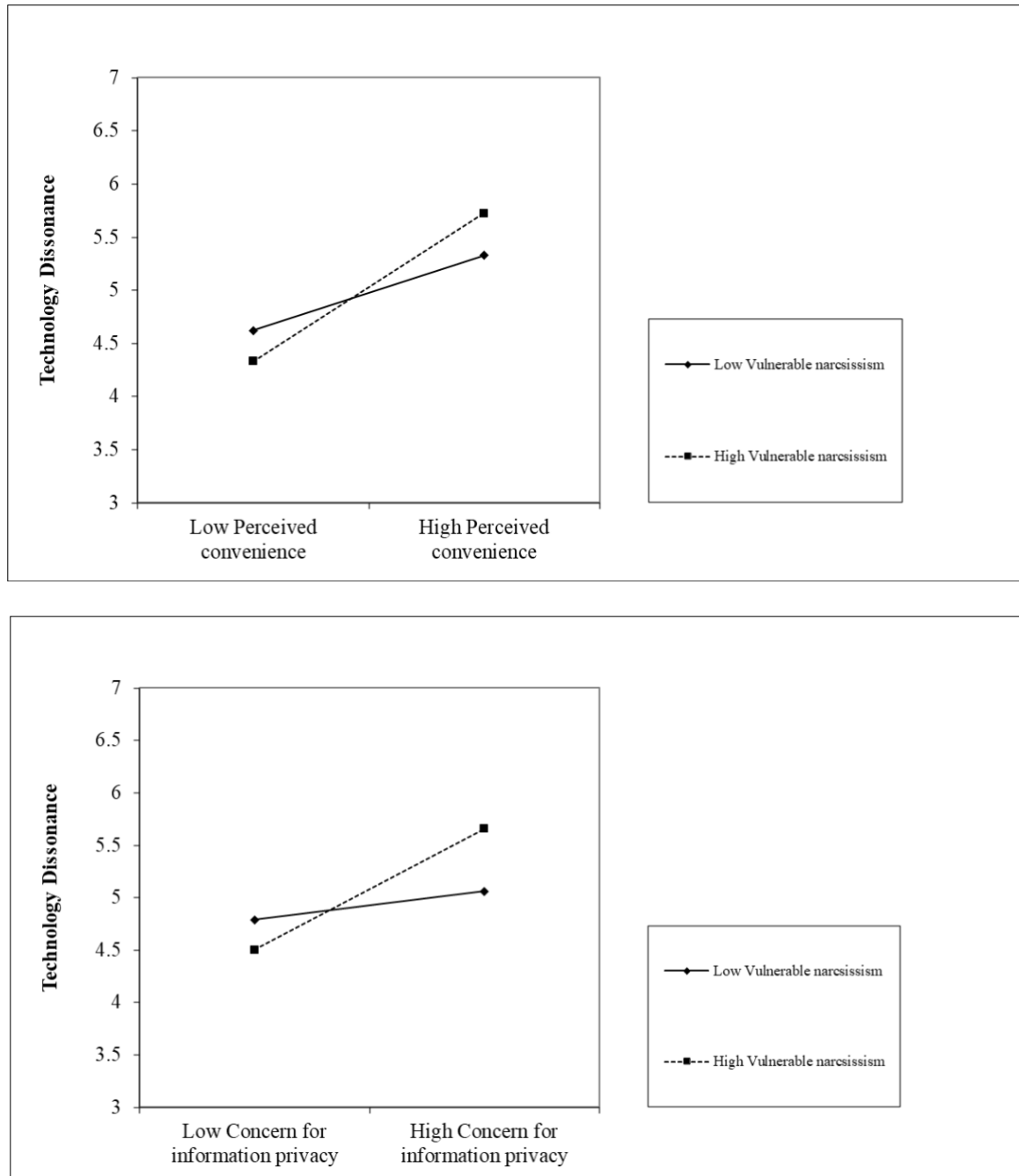

Figure 2: The moderating effects of vulnerable narcissism on the impacts of convenience and information privacy concerns on technology dissonance

4.4 Discussion

Our findings illustrate the psychological process associated with technology customizability, specifically, demonstrate the potential trade-off concerning both the convenience benefits and privacy concerns. Convenience and privacy concerns have opposite functions in technology dissonance generation, which contributes to both dissonance antecedents and the coping literature (Marikyan et al., 2020). Consistent with prior literature on the negative behavioural responses of information privacy (e.g., Sedikides & Gregg, 2001; Ahn et al., 2015), our study has uncovered the underlying mechanism of how technology customizability influences SNS usage by adopting a cognitive dissonance framework. It is worth mentioning that our findings might be limited to the market segmentation of generation Z specifically due to their unique nature. For example, they are recognized as holding unstable self-esteem, insecure who needs more social support through SNS compared to other age range (Gentina & Chen, 2019), which might demonstrate stronger dependence of SNS even under dissonant feelings compared to other segmentations. Additionally, although generation Z is the segment who desires and reacts more positively towards convenience and immediacy (Priporas et al, 2017).

In comparison to privacy concerns, convenience, has been identified less frequently studied in the literature (Dewan and Chen 2005), which has an overlap with perceived ease of use from the technology acceptance model in generating positive affect in IS literature (Pal et al. 2019). it is interesting to see that perceived convenience could not reduce the psychological discomfort generated by new technology, which contradicts previous studies (such as those by de Kerviler et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2010). The reasons might be as followed, researchers indicates that the benefits of technology, such as convenience, might remind individuals of the potential risks even more, and this may damage their self-views of being fair-minded, thereby leading to dissonant feelings. Again, such counter-intuitive result might have something to do with the specific generation being investigated.

Due to the insecure tendency of generation Z, the perceived convenience could also be greatly influenced by process transparency, legal concerns, and accuracy in algorithmic processes (Shin, 2020), and potentially weaken the positive psychological responses caused by technology convenience for this segment. There is the persistent ongoing choice dilemma for digital tech providers between the convenient customer experience versus enhanced protective measures against privacy, where achieving both are considered as the ideal resolution,

especially for the generation Z who has a high demand of SNS usage and a increasing level of concerns. (Sørensen 2018).

SNSs serve as an ideal platform for narcissists to construct and maintain, via interpersonal behaviors, a desired self-image (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; e.g., updating posts and photos of themselves or providing timely feedback). Expanding previous research papers which simply argue the narcissism as a positive indicator for SNS usage (Kim et al, 2016). This paper has unfolded the distinctive natures of different types of narcissism and how they interact with SNS enabled customizability. Interestingly, although the two subtypes of narcissistic characteristics share commonalities, both involve an intense interest in self-obsession and superiority, they are remarkably different (Loeffler et al., 2020). For generation Z, grandiose narcissism is not found to have any impact on generating dissonance due to privacy concerns, such a personality trait does not react to perceived convenience any differently either, which deviates from the over-confident and dominant nature of the grandiose narcissist among this segment (Buss & Chiodo, 1991).

However, it validates the overly self-centred, arrogant, supercilious feature of such orientation which focuses only on the 'self' (Miller et al., 2011), lacking sensitivity to, and perceptivity of, external resources, whether positive or negative (e.g., social issues and ethical concerns) (Wu et al., 2019). As Sedikides and Gregg (2001, p. 238) profess, "everything that hits this self is deflected immediately". Grandiose narcissists are solid, like an iron tower, and like high-functioning autistics who are oblivious and indifferent, even socio-emotionally retarded, and are therefore proficient at deflecting undesired cognitions, which aligns with the proposition that Generation Z could be risk averse (Priporas et al, 2017).

Furthermore, their abundant confidence enables grandiose narcissists to overestimate their capabilities, to trust in their wisdom for the control of external resources, and to disregard the benefits (Myung & Choi, 2017). On the contrary, vulnerable narcissists display nuances of perceived convenience and psychological dissonance induced by privacy concerns among generation Z, this verifies that insecure grandiosity is underpinned by feelings of inadequacy and incompetence (Miller et al., 2011). As Rose (2002) claims, vulnerable narcissists are profoundly inferior and hypersensitive to external encounters by its nature, they have low self-esteem and are less satisfied with life in general and especially generation Z (Gentina & Rowe, 2020). In addition, Loeffler et al., (2020) points out that vulnerable narcissist orientation tends to be associated with overall emotional regulatory difficulties, such as negative acceptance of

an emotional response, control failures, limited cognitive access to self-regulation strategies, and deficiencies in emotional clarity, which could, therefore, generate more dissonance compared to that observed among their grandiose counterparts. Foster and Trimm (2008) even suggest such intentional motivation could translate into aversive regulatory behaviours, rather than an avoidance approach since consumers with highly vulnerable narcissism tend to protect their unstable self-dimensions from further destabilization.

4.4.1 Theoretical contributions

The theoretical contributions of our study are three-fold. Firstly, we investigated the psychological underpinning between technology customizability and SNS engagement by adopting a cognitive dissonance framework. Thereinto we contribute to the cognitive dissonance litearture by addressing its antecedent of privacy concerns in new technology (Marikyan et al., and its behavioural responses, namely, SNS dependence, specifically via an avoidance approach. Thirdly, and most importantly, our findings highlight the vast differences between the two forms of narcissism and generation Z in the SNS context and initially studies the psychological response of narcissism towards technology usage and cognitive dissonance. It is of vital importance to find that those with vulnerable narcissistic characteristics possess research significance due to their nuanced 'inner fragility' beyond self-obsession (Loeffler et al., 2020). Also, we have unpacked the predominant features (e.g., digital native, narcissistic tendencies) of generation Z to better understand the psychological antecedents and attitudes towards SNS usage.

4.4.2 Managerial contributions

The current study has informed SNS marketing strategists and management of overall consumer outcomes for generation Z as follows. Firstly, since social media has become a primary element of modern adolescent life, platform and brand managers should focus more on eliminating consumers' ethical concerns about their personal information disclosure to ensure greater transparency and trust. Specifically, agencies and marketers need to hold SNS more accountable for their actions in terms of data sharing to make young consumers feel secure and in control, which are the two factors critical to privacy concerns (Tucker, 2014). For example, to establish transparent communication policies and to address privacy

assurances since Lee and Cranage's (2011) work, shows that consumers tend to respond more positively when privacy concerns increase.

Secondly, companies could also inform consumers about data disclosure and help them gain better knowledge on law, advertising restrictions, and their rights (Martin et al., 2017) since consumers' attitudes towards technology customizability are influenced by their own decision to take the initiative for data disclosure. In this case, the adolescents' parents could also intervene and address the potential risks of online behaviour and encourage the ethical practice of new technology (Forester-Miller & Davis, 2016). Thirdly, the knowledge of consumers' narcissism profiles could remarkably augment the efficiency of marketing SNS activities and aid firms to a great extent.

4.4.3 Limitations and future study

There are some limitations to be considered in the current research. Firstly, as a personality trait, a narcissistic tendency may generally be considered as comparatively stable (Kandler et al., 2014) whereas self-presentation management is somehow flexible in varied SNS contexts. Although study 1 has not specified a designated SNS as an image-based app, Instagram is an example which allows a relatively high level of self-expression and, therefore, strongly associates with narcissism (Seidman, 2013; Jin & Muqaddam, 2018).

Secondly, although the present study was appropriately powered, it is also worth mentioning that the sample was predominantly female, which may merit further investigation with a closer gender split. In addition, when studying personality traits, cultural factors play a significant role in shaping consumers' beliefs and attitudes; therefore, a cross-cultural comparison study could encourage a deeper understanding of the role of narcissism and privacy concerns over SNS.

Thirdly, in study 2, when studying the different types of customizability, the affordances of specific SNS that consumers linked may differ. This could potentially influence psychological responses (Jeong & Coyle, 2014), and additional work may be needed. In addition, we have adopted convenience sampling method in this study which enables the least time-intensive implementation, however, we only selected US samples within the data base of the data acquisition company, which lacks of generalisability and could cause potential biases in the framework testing. Specifically, the findings might not be sufficient enough to be

representative of the whole US population or generation Z in a wider scope regarding the traits or mechanism. And because of the high self-selection possibility in non-probability sampling, the effect of outliers can be more devastating in this kind of subject selection and leave vulnerability to severe hidden biases. Therefore, randomization of data selection needs to be brought up in the future research.

4.5 Chapter summary

Anecdotal evidence suggests that social networking sites (SNS) increasingly allow generation Z users to tailor customized content based on their personal information. This technology customizability fosters convenience but also raises a dilemma for users over privacy concerns. Drawing on cognitive dissonance theory, we show how a convenience vs privacy dilemma drives users' technology dissonance and their subsequent dependence on the use of SNS. Two empirical studies demonstrate the potential trade-off between the benefits of convenience and concerns over privacy resulting from technology customizability. Furthermore, these two facets have opposite functions in technology dissonance with a negative impact on SNS dependence as a result. More importantly, recognizing the "self" as having a key role in dissonance among generation Z, vulnerable narcissism shows nuances of psychological dissonance induced by privacy concerns. The findings of the study contribute to the discussion on technology customizability and cognitive dissonance by illustrating the creation of more effective technology customizability policies by SNS providers to improve targeted marketing among generation Z users.

5. Conclusion
5.1 Chapter overview

This chapter first looks back to the three studies and summarize the main findings. Then, we briefly discuss the main theoretical and managerial implications of this thesis. Finally, we summarize the common limitations of the three studies and provide suggestions for future research.

5.2 Thesis summary

Marketing research has often cited as a field full of theory borrowing (Whetten et al.,2009). If being done well, it could add richness to the theory's field by examining and extending theoretical boundaries in a marketing context. This thesis focuses on self-concepts, luxury consumption, self-construal and narcissism in light of cognitive dissonance theory. Through three studies, we deepen our understanding of luxury consumption under new era greatly and how it interacts with self-domains.

In study 1, we postulate a relationship between luxury symbolism and consumers' psychological underpinnings for self-congruity theory (self-consistency, self-esteem, social consistency, and social approval), which is hypothesized to influence self-affirmation and result in customer loyalty. Moreover, we test the extent to which self-construal modulates the impact of luxury symbolism on the underpinnings of self-congruity and compare the conceptual framework in China and the US. Moving beyond the symbolic function which traditionally brings prestige and social status in luxury consumption, study 2 broadens and redefines the meaning of mass luxury under pandemic era and discovered four self-as dimensions (e.g., self as content, self as process, self as others, self as context) underpinning psychological consonance. Therefore, developing a dissonance-free perspective opposing to traditional luxury. Following study 1 and study 2, study 3 investigates how the individual trait-narcissism influences dissonance beyond luxury consumption context and actually find different types of narcissism have varied moderation effect on predicting technology dissonance, although dissonance remains negatively associated with SNS behaviour.

5.3 General discussion

The application of cognitive dissonance theory has crossed top marketing research and keeps expanding. With its broad applicability, it has been incorporated with many other theories in the field of origin. This thesis mainly contributed to the theory of cognitive dissonance, self-concepts, narcissism and masstige separately. Specifically, based on the literature gap regarding the self-congruity effect, Study 1 examines the underlying psychological mechanism between luxury symbolism and customer loyalty via four psychological functions originating from self-congruity theory, and contrasts their cultural valence (Sirgy and Samli, 1985). In addition, the study initially addressed the significant role of self-affirmation in predicting customer loyalty and identified it as an important

psychological function behind luxury symbolism. Moreover, it expands the existing brand literature by introducing self-construal as an important cultural moderator to be considered when discussing luxury symbolism, it highlights the contingent effects on the relationships between luxury symbolism and the four psychological functions.

Study 2 advances the meaning of prestige and mass accessibility overtop of economic measure (Granot et al., 2013) by broadening its dimensions of time and personal efforts (psychic energy, attention, and mindfulness), which goes against conventional luxuries that emphasize achieving status symbols through their rarity, exclusivity, and discrimination (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014). This meaning of prestige moves away from monetary presentation forms to a more self-constructive process based on self-oriented motivations. Especially, argues new mass luxury as a novel process for dissonance mitigation instead of passive coping, and therefore, it resolves the inherent dissonant backfire on the hedonic essence of the luxury experience through altering intrinsic luxury perceptions (Shahid and Paul, 2021), which improves consumers' well-being (Harmon-Jones, 2019). We have also explored contextuality (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Wiedmann et al., 2007) and subjectivity in consumer-perceived luxury under such conditions and found them to be catalysts and interventions, thus broadening the theoretical and applicable boundaries of cognitive dissonance theory.

As for study 3, we contribute to the cognitive dissonance litearture by addressing its antecedent of privacy concerns in new technology (Marikyan et al., and its behavioural responses, namely, SNS dependence, specifically via an avoidance approach. In addition, we initially studied the psychological response of narcissism towards technology usage and cognitive dissonance and highlight the varied difference in affecting dissonance, especially consumers with vulnerable narcissistic characteristics possess research significance due to their nuanced 'inner fragility' beyond self-obsession (Loeffler et al., 2020).

5.4 Limitations and future recommendations

As part of our research limitations, we suggest exploring current research findings in across different context. Here, luxury consumption has been adopted not simply as a contextual factor but as one of the fundamental elements in dissonance process. Research covers a variety of marketing or psychological disciplines would benefit examining the nature of our findings, which could also complement the growing research stream for theory testing. Consumer research, at its core, provides a unique opportunity to explain dissonance or coping process

under a noncontrived setting. Although the three studies have different focuses, they share some common limitations and also have their own ones.

For study 1, although the findings provide support for current theorizations on luxury consumption, we acknowledge a limitation regarding the representativeness of the sample used, such as the inclusion of teenagers (under 18 years old), and of relatively lower-income-level participants. The sample bias also occurs in study 3, wherein the participants are predominantly female, which may merit further investigation with a closer gender split. Besides, the self-concepts in study 1 such as self-esteem, self-consistency and the personality trait in study 3-narcissistic tendency may generally be considered as comparatively stable (Kandler et al., 2014) whereas self-presentation management is somehow flexible in varied contexts, which is worth to be further investigated. It is also worth considering a more global adaptive measurement scale for self-concepts and contrasting the expanded scale items from other relevant literature in the luxury consumption context (e.g., self-affirmation) to reduce potential bias.

As for study 2, we also need to explore the managerial implications further, such as how to embed mindful elements into luxury consumption settings and deliver a resonant experiential essence to the mass consumer. Similar to study 1, how marketers exert control to maximize the self-concepts, like consumers' self-efficiency or affirm their sense of self or inner state is critical to be considered. In addition, the contextual feature plays an important part in study 2, although we do not assume that our findings differ in terms of their overall direction, other factors may exert some influence. For example, factors such as a location's level of modernization and urbanization may exert similar influences and cause anxiety and dissonance could have been included in the future study.

In addition, because dissonance is perceived as an uncomfortable psychological state for who encounter it, it can particularly impair one's well-being, especially the younger generations. Future studies could also explore the contexts and individual features bit more to see under what conditions some engage in more dissonance reduction while others continue such experience. To answer such question, it might be fruitful to further combine and examine cognitive dissonance theory with other motivational theories such as regulatory focus theory, self-maintainence model. Marketing scholars need to consider the implications of cognitive dissonance beyond individual level by examining it in an organizational, filed or group level. For example, as suggested by Bolino et al (2008), can one manage another's dissonance process? Since a large amount of literature in actor-network theory has suggested the interrelations between one and another and moved theoretical lens beyond focusing within one's self-

concepts. In this view, impression management theory could also be involved to come up with effective coping strategies for dissonance. And situational factors are of great importance to determine when and how questions in dissonance process.

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7. Appendix for study 3

7.1 Appendix A: survey questionnaire

Social network site adoption and new technology utility among younger generation

Dear participant,

Thank you in advance for taking the time to complete this survey. Your responses, along with those from other consumers, will help us complete a doctoral study on online consumption behavior. The survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete, and your participation is vital to the success of this project. Your answers will be completely anonymous and will be used for academic purposes only.

First of all, you will be asked some questions concerning the social network site which you use most often. You will then be asked some questions about your views of information exposure and self-perceptions.

Let us begin with the first part of this survey!

A social networking service (SNS) is an online vehicle for creating relationships with other people who share an interest, background, or real relationship. Social networking service users create a profile with personal information and photos and form connections with other profiles.

1.Could you please select which one of the below sites that you most often use? (Please choose at least one)

A.   YouTube

B.   Instagram

C.   Twitter

D.   Reddit

E.   Snapchat

F.   Tumblr

G.   Pinterest

H.   TikTok

I.   LinkedIn

J.   Others, please specify_____

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements

2. I often talk about my feelings on SNS websites

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

3. I often post about my relationships and private life on SNS websites

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

4. I often post photos of me and my friends on SNS websites

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

5.I often express my thoughts and true self completely on SNS websites

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

6. How often is the online content that you are browsing somehow related to your activities conducted on SNS websites? (e.g., recommended advertisement or product recommendation or push notification based on your personal information given on SNS websites)

A.   All the time

B.   Very often

C.   Sometimes

D.   Hardly ever

E.   Never

Please indicate how you feel about the personalized content that is generated based on your activities on SNS websites

7. I value such online content that is personalized for the device (e.g., computer, mobile phone, etc.), browser (e.g., Netscape, Internet Explorer) and operating system (e.g., Windows, Unix) that I use.

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

8. I value such personalized content for my usage experience preferences

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

9. I value goods and services that are personalized on information that I have voluntarily given out through SNS websites

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

Customizability is a technology allowing users or information system to very efficiently and effectively tailor users' information environment by enabling systematic and automatic exclusion of disliked sources, topics and opinions, and inclusion of preferred sources, topics and opinions.

Please indicate your attitudes towards tailored/personalized information technology below

10.It is an efficient way to browse information in any time, any place

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

11.It makes my life easier

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

12.It fits in with the pace of my life

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

13.It is truly functional (e.g., helps to filter information that I need)

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

14.I find it very practical (e.g., recommends ads that suits me)

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

Please rate how (convenient) you personally find about this tailored/personalized information technology, how does it make you feel along the scales below

15.

Difficult   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Easy

16.

Inconvenient ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Convenient

17.

Complex   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Simple

18.

Time-cosuming ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Fast

19.

Restrictive   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Liberating

20.

Accessible   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Inaccessible

Please also indicate to extent you agree with the following statements

21.I am concerned that this SNS websites are collecting too much information from me

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

22.I am concerned that this SNS websites will use my information for other purposes

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

23.I am concerned that this SNS websites will share my information with other parties

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

24. I am concerned that this SNS websites do not protect privacy of my information

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

25. I am concerned that this SNS websites allow other users to access my information

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

Overall, please indicate how you feel about the disclosure of your information through SNS websites

26. I wondered if I really needed such technology

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

27. I wondered whether I should have used other tools

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

28. I wondered if I had made the right choice of allowing such technology

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

29. I wondered if I had done the right thing in giving away my personal data

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

When I realize that my personal information is shared with other platforms through SNS websites, I feel,

30. Angry

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

31. Agitated

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

32. Irritated

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

33.Frustrated

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

34. Accountable

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

35. Guilty

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

36. Ashamed

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

37. Bad

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

38. Irresponsible

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

In terms of the leakage of your personal data on SNS websites, please indicate how you feel along the scale below

39.I feel sorry for giving away my personal data

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

40.I regret giving away my personal data

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

41.I should have used other tools instead of giving away my personal data through SNS websites

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

And please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements

42. I would use SNS more than other tools

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

43. I would prolong my usage on SNS

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

44.I would use SNS as often as I can

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

45. I would use SNS every time I can (whenever I can)

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

46.SNS usage is very important to me

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

47. SNS usage entails no risk at all

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

Please indicate your perceptions of SNS nature

48. SNS is a site with

Practical functionality ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Experiential
enjoyment

49. I am not at all familiar with SNS product category

Strongly disagree ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Strongly agree

50. How often do you use public transportation?

Very infrequently ○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 Very frequently

Thank you for completing the session above, now please tick the closest description of your personality from 16 pairs of statements below (Please choose one between the two options)

51.

A. I know that I am good because everybody keeps telling me so

B. When people compliment me, I sometimes get embarrassed

52.

A. I like to be the center of attention

B. I prefer to blend in with the crowd

53.

A. I think I am a special person

B. I am no better nor worse than most people

54.

A. I like having authority over people

B. I don't mind following orders

55.

A. I find it easy to manipulate people

B. I don't like it when I find myself manipulating people

56.

A. I insist upon getting the respect that is due me

B. I usually get the respect that I deserve

57.

A. I am apt to show off if I get the chance

B. I try not to be a showoff

58.

A. I always know what I am doing

B. Sometimes I am not sure of what I am doing

59.

A. Everybody likes to hear my stories

B. Sometimes I tell good stories

60.

A. I expect a great deal from other people

B. I like to do things for other people

61.

A. I really like to be the center of attention

B. It makes me uncomfortable to be the center of attention

62.

A. People always seem to recognize my authority

B. Being an authority doesn't mean that much to me

63.

A. I am going to be a great person

B. I hope I am going to be successful

64.

A. I can make anybody believe anything I want them to

B. People sometimes believe what I tell them

65.

A. I am more capable than other people

B. There is a lot that I can learn from other people

66.

A. I am an extraordinary person

B. I am much like everybody else

Please indicate to what extant you agree with the following statements

67. I can become entirely absorbed in thinking about my personal affairs, my health, my cares or my relations to others

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

68. My feelings are easily hurt by ridicule or by the slighting remarks of others

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

69. When I enter a room, I often become self-conscious and feel that the eyes of others are upon me

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

70. I dislike sharing the credit of an achievement with others

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

71. I dislike being with a group unless I know that I am appreciated by at least one of those present

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

72. I feel that I am temperamentally different from most people

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

73. I often interpret the remarks of others in a personal way

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

74. I easily become wrapped up in my own interests and forget the existence of others

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

75. I feel that I have enough on my hands without worrying about other people's troubles

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

76. I am secretely "put out" when other people come to me with their troubles, asking me for my time and sympathy

Strongly disagree   ○1   ○2   ○3   ○4   ○5   ○6   ○7   Strongly agree

To conclude, please answer the following questions regarding your demographic characteristics

77. When did you start using SNS?

A. Less than 6 months ago

B. 6 months–1 year ago

C. 1–2 years ago

D. 2–3 years ago

E. More than 3 years ago

78. How often do you check SNS?

 A. Less than once a week

 B. A few times a week

 C. 1–5 times per day

 D. 6–10 times per day

 E. More than 10 times per day

79. On average, how long do you use SNS per session?

  A. Less than 10 min

  B. Between 10 min and 30 min

  C. Between 30 min and 1 hr

  D. Between 1 hr and 2 hr

  E. More than 2 hr

80. What is your gender?

A. Female

B. Male

C. Other

81. What is your age range

A. Below 13 years old

B. 13-16 years old

B. 17-20 years old

C. 21-24 years old

82. Which ethnic group do you belong?

A. White Non-Hispanic

B. African-American

C. Hispanic

D. Asian-American

E. Other

F. Chose not to disclose

83.What is your education level

A. Elementary school

B. Middle school

C. High school

D. Undergraduate

E. Postgraduate

Thank you for your time and effort! We appreciate your help!