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Displaying luxury on social media: Chinese university students' perception of identity, social status, and privilege

<https://doi.org/10.1515/omgc-2024-0011>

Received April 22, 2024; accepted January 9, 2025

Abstract

Study purpose: This study draws on theories of conspicuous consumption, cultural capital, and impression management to explore how Chinese university students perceive the display of luxury goods consumption on social media as a means of communicating identity, social status, and privilege.

Design/methodology/approach: A mixed-methods approach was employed, using an online survey with open-ended questions to gather qualitative and quantitative data from 329 Chinese university students. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify critical patterns in participants' perceptions of the display of luxury goods on social media.

Findings: The findings reveal that participants perceive the display of luxury goods on social media as a strategy for self-presentation and identity construction. This practice is influenced by cultural norms, particularly the concept of “face” (mianzi), which refers to maintaining social reputation and gaining respect within one's community. While some participants associate luxury displays with elevated social standing and economic power, others critique them as performative acts and disconnected from authentic markers of privilege.

Social implications: The study highlights the role of social media in shaping cultural narratives of identity and privilege, particularly in collectivist societies like China. It underscores how digital platforms mediate the performance of luxury consumption, reflecting both global trends and localized cultural dynamics.

This article underwent double-blind peer review.

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Practical implications: Marketers and social media practitioners can leverage these insights to design culturally relevant strategies that align with Chinese consumers' motivations for luxury consumption.

Originality/value: This study contributes to the literature by integrating global theories of luxury consumption with the unique cultural constructs of Chinese society. It explains how social media shapes the intersection of identity, status, and privilege in digital spaces.

Keywords: China; social media; luxury goods; identity; cultural capital; conspicuous consumption

1 Introduction

Luxury has long been synonymous with wealth, social status, and privilege, as established in Veblen's work, the *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). In today's social media-driven world, platforms such as Instagram, Xiaohongshu, and Sina Weibo have transformed how individuals showcase their wealth, status, and privilege. These platforms allow users to share images of luxury items such as designer clothing, expensive watches, exotic vacations, and high-end cars, fostering a culture of opulence, consumerism, and at times, envy. Social media users have become active participants in sharing and promoting luxury consumptions, driven by increasing expenditures on luxury goods and greater engagement with digital platforms. For instance, Instagram users frequently document luxury consumption activities related to fashion, beauty, travel (Cohen et al. 2022). Similarly, data from Statista (2021), reveals that 73 % of female users aged 21–30 on Sina Weibo engaged with posts about luxury items in 2020, with cosmetics, purses, and jewelry receiving highest levels of engagements (Statista 2021).

Social media has transitioned consumers from passive spectators to more active participants, enabling a robust engagement in sharing and promoting their purchases with a broader group of audiences (Bartosik-Purgat et al. 2017; Ham et al. 2019; Peng 2019). Digital platforms have become avenues for impression management, enabling users to carefully craft and project their desired identities through the ownership and display of luxury goods or socially recognizable products (Charoennan and Huang 2018; Leban et al. 2021; Michaelidou et al. 2022). Existing literature highlights the antecedents and consequences of this phenomenon. For instance, (Dubois et al. 2021; Johnson and Van Der Heide 2015; Wai and Osman 2019) found that sharing luxury purchases has a profound impact on self-image and interpersonal relations. According to Taylor and Strutton (2016), Facebook not only serves as a medium for self-promotion but also fosters an environment where conspicuous

consumption is encouraged through the interplay of envy, narcissism, and identity construction. Others suggest that by presenting their luxury consumption to a broader audience without geographical restrictions on social media, individuals intend to develop a range of identities, including uniqueness, social status, and personal image (Bazi et al. 2020; Kemper et al. 2022; Siepmann et al. 2022).

However, the link between luxury consumption and social privilege remains contested. Historically, luxury consumption has been widely perceived as a privilege exclusive to individuals of superior wealth (Wang et al. 2020). Consequently, previous scholarly investigations mainly focused on examining the factors driving affluent individuals to acquire luxury goods, as shown by Veblen's work in 1899. Nevertheless, as the range of luxury consumption expands, there is a growing need to re-evaluate and revise these perspectives in the contemporary day. In a study conducted by Goor et al. (2020), it was discovered that luxury consumption engenders feelings of inauthenticity among consumers due to its perception as an excessive privilege. Dubois et al. (2021) suggest that individuals have begun to extend their focus beyond the consumption domain to earn the significance and advantages associated with luxury. For example, shopping at specialized grocery stores, investing in fitness equipment and programs, and adopting sustainable energy and materials are increasingly linked to privilege and status (Haws et al. 2017).

As a concept, luxury encompasses a wide range of categories, including luxury products, experiences, and services such as transport and travel. These categories share common attributes, such as exclusivity, superior quality, and high symbolic value (Vickers and Renand 2003). However, they differ in how they are consumed and displayed on social media, with each category serving distinct purposes in identity construction and self-presentation. Luxury products such as high-end fashion, accessories, cosmetics, and technology are tangible items typically associated with conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899). They are shared through carefully curated images emphasising branding and craftsmanship and aesthetic appeal.

Luxury experiences, such as fine dining, spa services, or exclusive events focus on intangible emotional and sensory value they provide. Unlike physical products, luxury experiences are shared on social media as part of broader lifestyle narratives. Posts featuring luxury experiences often emphasize enjoyment, fulfillment, and personal milestones, projecting an aspirational identity beyond material possessions. These experiences allow individuals to connect with audiences on an emotional level, demonstrating their alignment with elite cultural values. Lastly, luxury transport and travel, including first-class flights, private jets, luxury cars, and high-end vacations, combine tangible and intangible elements of luxury. These forms of luxury emphasize mobility, exclusivity, and adventure, signaling both financial capability and access to elite opportunities. Sharing transport and travel content on social media often highlights the consumer's ability to enjoy rare or unique

experiences, blending the object-based signaling of luxury products with the narrative focus of luxury experiences.

These categories collectively function as tools for self-presentation and identity construction on social media. Each type of luxury allows individuals to craft aspirational personas and signals belonging to elite social groups, though the methods of display may vary. Luxury goods not only reflect social status but also serve as symbols of cultural capital, differentiating consumers based on their ability to access and display these items. For the purpose of this study, luxury goods are defined as high-end fashion, accessories, cosmetics, and luxury experiences (e.g., fine dining or travel) frequently featured on social media platforms to communicate social and cultural meanings in digital spaces.

Statistics show that Chinese consumers embrace luxury consumption at a younger age, with individuals aged 21–25 making their first luxury purchases before turning 20 (Zeng and Ye 2021). Chinese university students, in particular exhibit notable degree of materialism and conspicuous consumption as means of gaining respect and preserving social status within the communities (Ngai and Cho 2012). Given their propensity towards luxury purchases and extensive engagement with social media platforms, Chinese university students were chosen as a suitable subject group for the study (Tsai et al. 2013). Specifically, this study aims to examine how Chinese university students perceive the display of luxury consumption on social media and how these practices influence the perception of social status and privilege. To address a gap in the literature this study is guided by the following research question: How do Chinese university students perceive the display of luxury goods on social media to communicate identity, social status, and privilege within Chinese society?

2 Theoretical framework and literature review

2.1 Luxury consumption

Luxury or conspicuous consumption was first conceptualized by Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Veblen 1899). Veblen described this as the acquisition of goods and services intended not merely for their practical utility but as markers of wealth, prestige, and social prestige. At its core, conspicuous consumption reflects a desire to elevate one's social standing and cultivate a unique identity that distinguishes individuals from their peers. While traditionally associated with affluence, Veblen argued that the aspiration to display status is not confined to the wealthy; it is a universal phenomenon observable across all socioeconomic strata. Although luxury goods are often epitomized by items such as designer handbags, high-end

timepieces, and exclusive sports cars, individuals from varied economic backgrounds are equally drawn to these items. Whether to project exclusivity, affirm identity, or signal social status, the allure of luxury transcends income levels. This dynamic has become even more pronounced with the advent of social media, which has significantly reshaped the landscape of luxury consumption. Influencers and celebrities present opulent lifestyles on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, where luxurious possessions are increasingly perceived not merely as commodities but as integral extensions of personal identity and aspirational living. Luxury consumption, therefore is not merely an act of acquiring goods, it is embedding in the broader sociocultural framework, reflecting the evolving interplay between consumer choices and social aspirations. By publicly showcasing luxury items, individuals navigate complex relationship between identity, status, and the societal values. These behaviours reveal how luxury consumption both shapes and is shaped by cultural norms and technological advancements, underscoring its continued evolution across various temporal and cultural landscapes.

2.2 Status, privilege, social and cultural capital

Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1986), conceptualized consumption preferences as mechanisms for establishing and maintaining symbolic hierarchies that define and reinforce social distinctions. These hierarchies emphasize the ways in which consumer choices reflect and communicate one's social position. Central to Bourdieu's theory is the notion of symbolic capital, which refers to the social power embedded in cultural symbols, such as luxury items, that confer social prestige, honor, or distinction upon their owners. For instance, a designer handbag or an exclusive pair of shoes does not merely represent their monetary cost but also functions as a badge of success and a marker of social status. In today's digital age, this concept takes on new dimensions as social media platforms amplify the impact of symbolic capital and enable users to communicate their social status through curated displays of luxury.

When individuals showcase luxury items on social media, they transform these possessions into digital 'badges' of achievement and exclusivity. This phenomenon is well illustrated in the practices of celebrities and influencers who, through their curated posts, convey their style and societal position (Michaelidou et al. 2022; Shahzadi and Ali 2023; Taylor and Strutton 2016; Wang et al. 2020). For example, a celebrity may post a photo of themselves wearing a haute couture outfit at a high-profile event. This decision signals their exclusivity and aligns them with a distinct social class. However, this practice is not limited to celebrities; everyday social media users partake in this culture by sharing images of their luxury purchases or experiences, participating in a form of digital validation, where likes and comments serve

associal recognition. Smith Maguire and Hu (2013) argue that this transformational potential of social media allows users to cultivate their symbolic capital actively, reshaping their identities in alignment with their consumption choices. Therefore, Bourdieu's framework provides a nuanced lens through which we can analyze the interplay between luxury consumption and social media, revealing how deeply ingrained social hierarchies are perpetuated in contemporary society. Through consumption, individuals are not just acquiring goods but engaging in a complex social dance that reflects and reinforces their place within a broader social landscape.

2.3 The role of social media in luxury consumption

Social media platforms have evolved into dynamic arenas for identity performance and consumer behavior, where users actively curate and engage with content (Shahzadi and Ali 2023). Platforms like Xiaohongshu and Instagram prioritize visual content, using imagery to promote consumption and aspirational lifestyles. Practices such as “card punching” or the act of posting selfies in luxurious settings further reinforce conspicuous consumption by combining social validation with visual storytelling (Jahn et al. 2012). Additionally, emerging technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) and immersive content further enhance the aspirational dimensions of luxury, turning consumption into an interactive and shareable experience (Hjarvard 2013; Schroeder 2016).

In the digital era, luxury consumption has transcended private ownership and become a performative act. Goods and experiences are displayed on social media serve as markers of identity and status, amplifying their symbolic and cultural significance (Schroeder 2016). Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), or influential users with large followings on platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin, play a central role in shaping luxury consumption. By curating aspirational content, KOLs enhance brand value and inspire followers to emulate luxurious lifestyles, thus fostering a new form of digital social capital (Chen and Cheung 2018). Through their curated posts, KOLs act as brand ambassadors, integrating luxury aesthetics into their personal and professional lives. This dynamic not only influences purchasing decisions but also reshapes social norms, as followers aspire to replicate the lifestyles these influencers portray (Leban et al. 2021; Wong and Ahuvia 1998).

The visual-centric nature of social media platforms contributes significantly to the performative aspects of luxury consumption. Platforms like Instagram and Xiaohongshu enable users to portray themselves as aspirational figures, aligning their online personas with socially valued ideals of affluence and sophistication (McQuarrie et al. 2013). Social media's affordance, including visibility, immediacy,

and interactive engagement, allows users to display luxury goods, while intensifying the performative aspects of consumption (So et al. 2018). Other studies highlight how these platforms facilitate ‘status signaling,’ as curated content is used to emphasize social or economic advantages, often through the display of luxury items (Berger and Ward 2010; Djafarova and Rushworth 2017). Gierl and Huettl (2010) identified three key aspects of conspicuous consumption: visibility, expression of status and uniqueness, and the allure of exclusivity. These traits underscore the social function of luxury goods, which often carry meanings beyond their practical use (Lewis and Moital 2016). Leaver et al. (2020) emphasized how practices, culture, institutions, and material spaces are increasingly designed to be ‘social-media-worthy,’ reflecting the influence of digital platforms on consumer behaviour. Consequently, luxury goods and symbolic consumption, now communicate status through storytelling, blending social and cultural capital into digital age’s performative consumption landscape.

2.4 Digital self-presentation and social capital in the display of luxury consumption

For young adults, displaying luxury on social media is more than an aesthetic choice; it is a means of gaining visibility, validation, and social standing among peers (Phua et al. 2017). Luxury consumption on social media is not just about status signaling but also about impression management and identity construction (Escalas and Bettman 2005). Social media provides a stage for what (Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling 2006) describe as ‘luxury exhibitionism,’ where users strategically display luxury items to gain social validation and cultivate a desired self-image. Moreover, the reach of social media platforms makes these displays accessible to close networks and global audiences, thus amplifying the social capital individuals can accumulate from displaying luxury goods (Phua et al. 2017). This growing trend of ‘symbolic consumption,’ highlights how luxury goods derive value not only from ownership but also from their social perception and interaction online (Belk 2013). According to Erving Goffman (1971) social interaction is a theatrical performance, this is particularly relevant in today’s social media landscape. Platforms such as Xiaohongshu act as stages where users carefully curate their posts to project aspirational identities. By showcasing luxury brands, users construct personas that signal wealth and status while evoking admiration and envy. These curated posts often go beyond the products themselves, presenting an entire lifestyle that serves as a form of impression management. In this context, shared content becomes vital for personal branding, allowing users to communicate their values, tastes, and social aspirations.

Social media platforms have become essential for showcasing purchasing experiences and sharing personal narratives. De Vries et al. (2017) identified

self-expression and socialization as key motivations for sharing luxury consumption online. Self-expression allows individuals to craft and project an idealized version of themselves, while socialization fosters social connections through shared interests or mutual admiration. Similarly, Duan and Dholakia (2017) found that sharing purchases on social media correlates with heightened self-perception and interpersonal relationships, often resulting in increased happiness and fulfillment. These behaviors suggest that social media not only functions as a platform for communication but also as a space for identity negotiation and relational bonding.

Ham et al. (2019) identified four motivations driving consumers to display their purchases online: social presence, social conversation, easy connection, and self-management. Social presence refers to the sensation of being immersed in a social environment, where individuals feel connected and engaged with others in real time. This concept underscores the role of social media in replicating in-person interactions, providing users with a sense of belonging and visibility within their networks (So et al. 2018). Social conversation reflects users' desire to initiate and participate in discussions centered around their consumption habits, fostering engagement and interaction with peers. Easy connection highlights the convenience of using social media to maintain and expand one's social network through shared experiences and mutual interests. Lastly, self-management involves the strategic presentation of oneself to others, where users carefully curate their posts to align with desired personal or social identities. This includes managing how they are perceived by others, balancing authenticity with aspirational elements. These motivations collectively illustrate the complex interplay between personal identity, social interaction, and the affordances of digital platforms. By understanding these drivers, researchers and practitioners can better comprehend how and why individuals use social media as a stage for consumption displays.

Charoennan and Huang (2018) and Wai and Osman (2019) argued that social media enables conspicuous consumption by encouraging users to align their self-presentation with idealized images promoted by influencers and KOLs. Similarly, (Wai and Osman 2019) found that self-esteem moderates the relationship between social media use and conspicuous consumption, suggesting that individuals with higher-self-esteem are more likely to engage in such displays. Bazi et al. (2020) have explored how luxury consumption and social media enables consumers to boost self-identification and self promotions, emphasizing that users derive symbolic meaning and self-congruency from their online posts, which communicate social status and accomplishments. Oliveira and Fernandes (2022) similarly highlight how consumers actively engage with luxury brands on social media to express their personalities and align themselves with aspirational lifestyles. Siepmann et al. (2022) also conducted an experimental investigation to explore the link between online displays of luxury consumption and the perception of social status. They found that luxury products

remain the primary way for people to showcase their social status. Ilich and Hardey (2020) also explored the “unboxing purchase” phenomenon and found that identity presentation and socialization played important roles in this behavior. By showing luxury brand packaging, individuals perceive it as a representation of their social position and self-expression. This allows them to derive symbolic significance from brands and indicators of consumption, ultimately achieving social status through subsequent encounters or exhibiting their social connections.

However, following the COVID-19 pandemic, luxury consumers increasingly value sustainability and durability, moving away from overt displays of wealth (Leban et al. 2021). High-net-worth individuals increasingly present their consumption as ‘ethical luxury’ or construct personas through more discreet consumption practices to maintain social legitimacy. Their power and status are communicated through exclusive experiences and social connections, such as attending privileged events or access to exclusive locations (Michaelidou et al. 2022). These changes reflect a broader evolution in the performance of luxury, as consumers navigate the balance between social visibility and cultural legitimacy in post-pandemic world.

2.5 Luxury consumption and Chinese face consciousness

In the Chinese cultural context, luxury consumption on social media is intertwined with the concept of ‘face’ (*mianzi*), which involves maintaining one’s social reputation and dignity within the community (Zhang and Wang 2019). The collectivist nature of Chinese society places significant emphasis on relational positioning, where behaviors that align with cultural norms of respect and hierarchy help individuals achieve social validation (Ngai and Cho 2012). The cultural concept drives ‘performative consumption,’ where luxury items are displayed not only for personal satisfaction but as symbols of social success (Peng 2019). For many young Chinese consumers, luxury consumption serves as a means to signal social cohesion and alignment with their peers (Tsai et al. 2013). Zhang and Wang (2019) argue that face consciousness is a critical factor driving luxury consumption in China. The interplay between cultural expectations, social signaling, and personal reputation motivates individuals to use luxury goods as tools for achieving social distinction and relational harmony.

On Xiaohongshu, a popular social media platform among young consumers in China, a notable phenomenon known as ‘bragging culture’ (晒文化) has emerged, wherein users share luxury purchases such as high-end fashion or exclusive accessories to reinforce their social standing and enhance their image within their peer groups. These displays not only project wealth and taste but also subtly communicate prestige and belonging (Duan and Dholakia 2017). Drawing on the uses and

gratifications theory (UGT), which emphasizes that individuals actively seek out media content to satisfy specific needs and desires, displaying luxury consumption on Xiaohongshu fulfills dual purposes: self-enhancement and community belonging. For young adults, particularly those who are establishing their identities and seeking social validation, displaying luxury purchases on social media provides a sense of self-worth and achievement. It allows them to present themselves as successful and stylish, thus fulfilling their need for self-enhancement.

In the specific context of China, it has been pointed out that young people who wish to engage in reciprocal relationships, express themselves freely, act altruistically, and maintain deeper friendships and broader social connections find social media sharing appealing. A study conducted by Peng (2019) among young individuals in urban areas of China revealed that sharing meal-related content is seen as a form of self-presentation. This practice allows individuals to showcase their tastes and lifestyles while also establishing and differentiating their social status within the middle class. Furthermore, this study focuses specifically on the societal environment of China as it transitions from a socialist economic system to a market-oriented one. The author suggests that the social media sharing behavior of these young urban individuals is linked to the rise of the emerging middle class in contemporary China. This demographic's lifestyle is significantly influenced by the consumerism that has its roots in the West.

Moreover, this display also fosters a sense of community belonging among like-minded individuals. As Ham et al. (2019) point out, young consumers often seek validation and connection through social media engagement, and the online display of luxury purchases can serve as a bonding experience that creates a sense of shared identity and solidarity within specific social circles. By participating in this 'bragging culture,' users not only enhance their individual self-image but also contribute to and reinforce the collective identity of their peer group, thereby satisfying their need for community belonging. In this way, the display of luxury consumption online becomes a complex interplay of individual performance, social validation, and communal bonding, all intricately tied together through the theories of Goffman's staging and the uses and gratifications theory.

Despite extensive research on luxury consumption in Western contexts, limited attention has been paid to how these practices manifest in collectivist cultures, particularly among younger, aspiration consumers in China. Few studies have specifically examined the relationship between luxury consumption displays on social media and university students' identity perceptions. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the interplay between luxury consumption, identity construction, and perception of such practices among Chinese university students. Guided by theories of conspicuous consumption, social capital, and self-presentation, it aims to explore the perceptions of university students on the display of luxury consumption on social

media. Social media platforms, with their emphasis on visibility and connectivity, serve as powerful tools for communicating aspirational identities, offering a unique lens through which to understand how luxury consumption is performed, perceived, and negotiated in a collectivist cultural context.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to explore how Chinese university students perceive the display of luxury goods consumption on social media. The approach integrated both quantitative and qualitative data to achieve a comprehensive understanding of participants' thoughts, behaviors, and cultural contexts. The mixed-methods design facilitated the triangulation of findings, combining the breadth of quantitative data with the depth of qualitative narratives to capture the complexities of identity construction and perceptions of social status and privilege in the digital age.

The study focused exclusively on Chinese university students to investigate their perceptions of the display of luxury consumption on social media. The research design was inspired by the research conducted by Siepmann et al. (2022), whose findings confirmed the positive influence of luxury consumption and experiences on individuals' perceptions of status. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: the first gathered socio-biographical information from participants, and the second included two open-ended questions designed to elicit insightful narratives about their perceived impact of luxury consumption displays on social media on social status and privilege.

In order to ensure clarity and mutual understanding of the concept of luxury, two preparatory steps were taken. First, the study drew upon the work of Chen et al. (2020) which examined luxury brand preferences among university students in Shanghai, China. Secondly, the study referred to Agility Research (2021) report, which outlined luxury brands favored by Chinese consumers. At the beginning of the survey, participants were provided with a predefined list of luxury brands within the context of this research. The list included Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Gucci, Cartier, Tiffany, Bvlgari, Dior, Guerlain, Lancome, Montblanc, Vacheron Constantin, Versace, Hermes, Armani, Prada, Estee Lauder, and Rolex. This step established a shared understanding of the term 'luxury' within the context of this research.

A pilot study was conducted with 30 randomly selected university students prior to the official questionnaire launch. Feedback from the pilot led to refinements in the phrasing of open-ended questions, improving clarity and reducing ambiguity. The

revised questions focused on participants' perceptions of the display of luxury purchases rather than their personal experiences, enhancing the specificity of expected outcomes.

The final questionnaire was generated on Wenjuanxing, a widely used survey tool in China that allows researchers to create questionnaires, generate QR codes for easy distribution, and compile responses seamlessly. This research received ethical clearance from the ethics review committee at our affiliation. All respondents gave their consent to participate in the study and were informed that the data would be used anonymously for research purposes only.

3.2 Participant recruitment

Although university students are not the primary consumers of luxury goods, they represent an aspiration demographic that luxury brands are actively cultivating for long-term loyalty. University students in China are at a formative stage of identity construction, where social media and consumerism heavily influence perceptions of self-worth and social belonging (Peng 2019). By focusing on this demographic, our study captures the emerging attitudes and behaviors that could shape the future of luxury consumption in China. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling in October 2022. Questionnaire links were distributed on the researchers' WeChat Moments and Weibo, leveraging the researchers' personal networks, as well as within targeted WeChat groups such as university classmate and alumni groups. Geographically, the respondents were students from universities in Shanghai and Suzhou. Participants received an online cash reward ranging from 1 - 5 RMB as compensation for completing the questionnaire.

A total of 348 individuals responded to the questionnaire. After excluding incomplete responses ($n = 6$) and participants who did not meet the eligibility criterion of being university students ($n = 13$), the final sample size was 329 respondents ($N = 329$). Demographic analysis revealed that 62.9 % of the respondents were females ($n = 207$) and 31 % were males ($n = 102$). The educational background of the participants showed that 41.9 % ($n = 138$) were undergraduate students, while 53.8 % ($n = 177$) were postgraduate students (Table 1).

3.3 Data analysis

A qualitative thematic analysis approach was employed to analyze the entire text as a potential unit of analysis, allowing for the extraction of codes and themes (Braun et al. 2019). The method was chosen for two key considerations: Firstly, qualitative

Table 1: Participants’ frequencies on gender and education level.

Variables	Detail	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Gender	Male	102	31 %
	Female	207	62.9 %
Education level	Undergraduate	138	41.9 %
	Postgraduate	177	53.8 %

research is particularly suited for exploring the unique nuances of the Chinese cultural context. Luxury consumption and attitudes toward it can be profoundly influenced by cultural factors such as traditional values, social norms, and economic conditions (Ngai and Cho 2012; Zhang and Wang 2019). Thus, researchers could capture these cultural subtleties that may be overlooked in quantitative studies, which often rely on generalized measures and statistics (Braun and Clarke 2013). Secondly, qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of university students’ perspectives, a specific demographic that may have unique attitudes and behaviors toward the display of luxury consumption (De Vries et al. 2017). This approach can provide insights into their motivations, barriers, and experiences, which are often complex and multifaceted.

During the data analysis process, an open coding technique was used to identify concepts and their dimensions, which were then grouped into broader categories. To ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, each researcher independently coded the dataset, which minimized potential bias and enhanced the transparency and credibility of the findings. The researchers independently read through the data carefully and systematically assigned initial codes to text segments based on their explicit meaning or implicit concepts. For example, “The post makes people think I’m rich” was coded under.” Once all the responses were coded, the researchers began to identify patterns and relationships among these codes. Similar codes were then grouped into broader categories. From these categories, themes were established to provide a structure framework to interpret the data. Any discrepancies or differences in coding were discussed and resolved through consensus after independent coding by the two coders, involving revisiting the data, refining codes, or merging similar themes. While consensus among researchers and peer review provided some validation, the researchers admit that there is still an inherent subjectivity in how individual researchers interpret and assign codes to text segments.

4 Findings

The findings reveal multifaceted views of how Chinese university students perceive the display of luxury consumption on social media. While 24.6 % of participants

diminish the connection between luxury displays and privilege, 21 % rejected their association with social status. However, a subset of respondents perceive luxury displays as reflecting “wealth and economic power” (17.6 %) or as facilitating “connection and social networks” (9.4 %). Additionally, 8.5 % associated such displays with “self-identity and vanity,” while 4.9 % viewed them as “misrepresentation.” These varied perspectives highlight the complexity of online displays of luxury consumption as a phenomenon shaped by by self-expression, social validation, and digital trends.

4.1 The display of luxury consumption and social status

21 % of respondents noted that material possessions do not determine social status and that sharing photos of luxury goods online does not necessarily correlate with real-life social status. Despite acknowledging that luxury goods could project an image of wealth, some respondents noted that these goods do not inherently reflect one’s social status. They pointed out that wealth is only one aspect of social status.

Social status is not determined solely by economic power. (Participant 129)

The improvement of social status is not necessarily related to luxury goods. Sharing is sharing. (Participant 138)

They believed social status is determined by factors such as family background, power, occupation, education, personality traits, or societal contributions rather than just material wealth or luxury consumption. Some also mentioned that sharing photos of luxury goods on social media might temporarily change how others view them but do not substantially affect one’s social status.

I disagree with this. Social status not only includes the ability to consume luxury goods but also includes many other factors such as career choice, educational level, and so on. (Participant 297)

I disagree because it is true that many people judge your social status according to your consumption level, but in fact, people with low social status are not able to consume luxury goods, consumption of luxury goods will only improve your status in the heart of the sales. (Participant 232)

4.2 The display of luxury consumption on social media and privilege

24.6 % of respondents expressed that displaying luxury items on social media does not reflect one’s privilege. The inquiry additionally sparked a discourse surrounding the intricacies of privilege within the realm of luxury consumption. A subset of respondents contended that privilege transcends mere consumption, encompassing more nuanced and multifaceted notions. This perspective resonated with others who

posited that genuine privilege encompasses far more than material acquisitions and cannot be solely attributed to possessions. Moreover, certain participants argued that privilege is not a byproduct of conspicuous consumption displays but rather stems from an underlying capacity for high-level expenditure. This sentiment aligns with several participants' qualitative responses, where they doubted that online displays of luxury significantly influenced how they were treated offline.

The privilege does not equal the shining bag. (Participant 268)

In everyday life, no one needs to step aside just because of your consumption taste. (Participant 126)

Privilege is a complex issue. It is about one's abilities and resources, not sharing luxuries. (Participant 209)

Privilege does not pass through luxury goods. True privilege is something invisible that you cannot feel but truly surrender to. (Participant 26)

The privilege that can be bought by money is not a real privilege. (Participant 250)

There are many determinants of privilege, but this is definitely not the main one. (Participant 322)

Sometimes, when there is a privilege, luxury goods are consumed. (Participant 74)

4.3 Luxury consumption is a symbol of wealth and economic power

17.6 % of respondents believed that sharing images of luxury goods on social media displays economic power and wealth.

It makes people think I'm rich. (Participant 45, 159, 181)

This will give other people the impression that you are well-off. (Participant 154)

They suggested that consuming such products indicates financial stability or the ability to earn a high income. Thus, showing others how much one can afford to spend displays one's purchasing power and quality of life.

It is the embodiment of the quality of life. (Participant 200)

Being able to afford luxury consumption means having extraordinary purchasing power, and sharing this can show a relatively high economic level to strangers. (Participant 109)

4.4 Luxury consumption allows for the expansion of connections and social networks

9.4 % of respondents indicated that owning and displaying their possessions of luxury goods on social media can facilitate connections with other wealthy or high-level consumers.

It helps to improve your social network. (Participant 71)

It can let me make friends with those who are all rich. (Participant 259)

Luxury consumption was a social signal to attract people of similar interests and socioeconomic status. Thus, the consumption and display of luxury products could promote certain perceptions and help establish a network with high-income individuals. For many respondents, sharing luxury goods on social media is a tool for social networking or gaining acceptance.

It may attract people with similar interests. (Participant 233)

You can screen out people who are not on the same level. (Participant 293)

It makes it easier for me to find someone with the same level of consumption. (Participant 2)

It could attract the attention of people of higher social status. (Participant 264)

4.5 Luxury consumption leads to publicity and fame

8.5 % of respondents felt that owning and sharing images of luxury goods on social media could impact others' perceptions and behaviors, inducing admiration, attraction, or possibly envy.

There might be an advantage to having more followers. (Participant 263)

Sharing some luxurious photos will attract more fans on social media. (Participant 297)

The respondents believed posting photos of luxury goods on social media could increase their popularity and help establish a fanbase. They reported that their display of luxury goods earned them better treatment from others and earned them respect and admiration. Hence, people who regularly share their consumption of luxury goods gain more followers on social media platforms, expand their social circle, and potentially attract advertising and sponsorship opportunities.

I partly agree, not entirely disagree, because some businesses might think you are very suitable for this luxury after sharing and connecting with you to advertise their products. (Participant 232)

4.6 Luxury consumption constructs self-identity and is a sign of vanity

8.5 % of respondents indicated that owning and showing off their luxury goods depends on personal taste and style, viewing it as a reflection of aesthetic preferences. They considered luxuries as self-indulgence rather than solely as a marker of status or wealth.

It makes people think I have good taste. (Participant 222)

It's just a matter of feeling good about yourself in a way. (Participant 148)

However, some respondents perceived luxury goods as symbols of personal identity just as much as vanity. Thus, the sharing of luxury goods not only satisfies their ego but also helps them construct an aspirational self-image.

It is a valuable self-image construction. (Participant 90)

It helps to satisfy oneself with vanity. (Participant 91)

However, a few respondents expressed that perception can also be seen as a show-off or snobbery. A respondent suggested that sharing luxury goods boosts one's self-esteem or gives a sense of superiority. This could relate to being able to afford what others cannot or displaying one's "extraordinary purchasing power."

It is a way of showing off. (Participant 294)

It brings a sense of superiority. (Participant 147)

Not everyone can buy luxury goods; if they can, there will be more sharing, making people feel better about themselves because they can enjoy the material before others. (Participant 316)

4.7 Luxury consumption is a misrepresentation of one's identity

4.9 % of respondents viewed luxury displays as misrepresentations, raising concerns about false portrayals of socioeconomic status. Some noted that luxury items shared on social media may not even be owned by the sharer, emphasizing the prevalence of borrowed goods or counterfeit products, the items shared may not even be genuinely owned by the sharer.

The images might be borrowed somewhere else. (Participant 213)

Nowadays, there are so many counterfeit products that the luxury products shared are not necessarily authentic. (Participant 29)

I disagree with that. Because social status depends not on luxuries but on jobs or tangible possessions. Luxury items shared on social media are not necessarily actually owned. (Participant 300)

4.8 Criticisms on luxury consumption

5.5 % of respondents were generally dissatisfied with the flaunting of luxury goods, criticizing it as materialistic, superficial or indicative of "herd mentality" or "excessive commercialization."

It is a blind herd mentality. (Participant 70)

This is an outward manifestation of the excessive commercialization of the international community. (Participant 24)

Privilege is not earned by showing off. (Participant 304)
I disagree; this is brainwashing resulting from consumerism, especially for students without income; loving to share luxury goods will only make people think that he is out of their minds. (Participant 258)

Some respondents either showed indifference to luxury goods or shared negative opinions, suggesting that only some are interested in or admire luxury consumption. Some mentioned that displaying luxury goods could attract criticism or even hatred, particularly in periods of economic downturn.

I do not share on social media, so I do not feel privileged to do anything. (Participant 8)
I do not think it will bring privilege. Luxury goods gradually come into the public, but the public will not change their attitude towards others just because they buy luxury goods. Today's economic downturn may bring some hatred towards the rich, which will make others feel that the person put on an act. (Participant 70)

The composition of the data is categorized. See Table 2.

Table 2: Respondents' perceptions towards the display of luxury goods consumption on social media (N = 329).

Perceptions towards display of luxury goods on social media	Respondents	Percentage
Not related to social status	69	21 %
Not related to privilege	81	24.6 %
Marker of wealth and economic power	58	17.6 %
Facilitate connection and social network	31	9.4 %
Increase publicity and fame	28	8.5 %
Expression of self-identity and vanity	28	8.5 %
Misrepresentation	16	4.9 %
Criticisms	18	5.5 %

5 Discussion

This study investigated how Chinese university students perceive the display of luxury goods on social media, focusing on its implications for identity construction, social status, and privilege. The findings illuminate the intersection of digital self-presentation, cultural values, and theoretical constructs, offering significant contributions to social media studies. Social media platforms have amplified image-sharing practices, encouraging users to showcase their luxury purchases to a broader, geographically unrestricted audience (Bell 2019;

Kemper et al. 2022). The following key perspectives emerge from the findings, shedding light on the nuanced perceptions of luxury consumption among Chinese university students.

5.1 The display of luxury consumption on social media is perceived as unrelated to one's social status and privilege

The findings reveal ambivalence among participants regarding the connection between luxury consumption and social status. While some viewed luxury goods as markers of affluence and sophistication, others criticized their performative nature, questioning whether such displays genuinely reflect privilege. These insights challenge Veblen's (1899) theory of conspicuous consumption, suggesting that in a digital age, the symbolic value of luxury goods is increasingly mediated by audience interpretation and platform dynamics. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital remains relevant, as luxury consumption acts as a visible marker of social positioning (Bourdieu 1984). However, university students from the study expressed skepticism, seeing such displays as superficial and disconnected from authentic indicators of privilege. This skepticism reflects a broader trend among younger generations, who may be critical of consumerism and aware of the performative aspects of social media. While luxury brands have traditionally symbolized exclusivity and privilege, the democratization of these displays via social media appears to dilute their impact as status markers (Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling 2006; Siepmann et al. 2022). By democratizing the display of luxury, social media may challenge the exclusivity that once defined these symbols, leading to a re-evaluation of what constitutes genuine privilege. Similarly, the findings indicate that privilege is not perceived as relevant in the online display of luxury consumption. One plausible interpretation for this outcome could be attributed to the notion of privilege in contrast to social status among university students, particularly within the context of Chinese socialist society. Participant 183 argued that "the existence of privilege is absent within the political system of the People's Republic of China." However, this statement contradicts the findings of Peng (2019), who argued that the consumption values of young Chinese urban dwellers are influenced by the culture of consumerism from the West. The observed disparity could be further examined with a larger sample size. Since prior research was exclusively carried out in Shanghai, the most economically advanced region in China, the outcomes may exhibit variation with the current study.

5.2 The display of luxury consumption on social media is perceived as a construction of affluent image, recognizable taste, and self-identity

Conspicuous consumption serve as a symbolic act, enabling individuals to communicate a curated self-image to their audience (Roy Chaudhuri et al. 2011). Aligning with previous studies (Cohen et al. 2022; Leban et al. 2021), the findings suggest that luxury consumption display on social media is a way to project affluence and sophistication. This practice resonates with Bourdieu (1984), concept of ‘taste’ serves as a ‘social instrument’ that distinguishes social classes across various consumption domains. Participants also highlighted the link between luxury consumption and self-identity, with findings echoing earlier research that associates online display of luxury with identity performance (Bazi et al. 2020; Ilich and Hardey 2020). In particular, this study expands on prior work by identifying dimensions such as vanity and self-indulgence as central to the act of luxury consumption display. The projection of a desired self-image through luxury consumption also aligns with Goffman’s (1971) impression management theory, where individuals curate their self-presentation to control how others perceive them. For many participants, sharing luxury items was not merely about status or privilege but a means of identity expression and connecting with like-minded individuals, reflecting a need for belonging within specific social groups.

5.3 The display of luxury consumption on social media is perceived as a tool for social presence and social connection

The findings from the research support this argument, as respondents reportedly believe that social media can help them expand their network by presenting themselves as a luxury brand enthusiast, thus facilitating their connection with others who share their interests and purchasing power. Therefore, Chinese university students perceive the presence of luxury-related content as a crucial step to finding and connecting with people who use and can afford luxury purchases. This aligns with social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), which posits that individuals derive part of their identity from their affiliations with social groups. By sharing luxury items, participants are signaling wealth and attempting to align with desirable social groups, constructing identities that reflect their aspirational goals. The findings resonate with existing studies indicating that luxury consumption on social media can foster a sense of belonging and connection, as individuals use luxury symbols to establish social bonds based on shared tastes (Kietzmann et al. 2011; Michaelidou et al. 2022). Our study confirms that Chinese university students

perceive sharing luxury consumption on social media as an effective way to gain followers and build social connections. This practice is considered a form of social capital, which has been shown to have various benefits in studies. This aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) theoretical framework of social capital, which emphasizes the importance of social connections in human behavior and socialization. Displaying luxury purchases on social media allows individuals to project an image of themselves as knowledgeable about luxury brands or aspirational lifestyles, thereby increasing their followers and reinforcing their social connections.

5.4 The display of luxury consumption on social media is perceived as materialistic, worthy of criticism

The research reveals a somewhat unexpected findings that Chinese university students were critical of the display of luxury consumption on social media. This factor could be attributed to the economic decline observed in recent years, particularly during the post-pandemic period. Participants expressed criticisms of luxury consumption on social media, highlighting issues of vanity, inauthenticity, and social pressure. This reflects a growing awareness of the potential superficiality of materialistic displays, especially in digital spaces where images are curated and, in some cases, staged (Leban et al. 2021). The criticism of the display of luxury purchases as a 'misrepresentation' draws attention to the gap between digital identity and actual socioeconomic status, where luxury displays may not genuinely reflect a user's reality. This critique aligns with literature on digital identity performance, which highlights the potential for misrepresentation in social media contexts (Perez et al. 2010; Vraga and Tully 2021). The findings suggest that university students are critically engaged with these dynamics, recognizing that luxury consumption display on social media may not reflect genuine social status. Additionally, participants' criticism may reveal a recent trends in the luxury market, where younger consumers are increasingly moving away from overt displays of wealth toward more discreet and sustainable forms of consumption (Leban et al. 2021; Michaelidou et al. 2022). These findings highlight a shift in attitudes, with materialistic displays being perceived less favourably among university students in post-pandemic China.

5.5 Policy recommendations

To address the complexities and challenges associated with the promotion of luxury goods on social media, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. **Regulation of Influencer Content:** Policymakers should establish comprehensive guidelines for influencers and brands regarding the promotion of luxury items. Mandatory disclosure of sponsorships and advertising partnerships can enhance transparency and reduce the risk of misrepresentation. Such measures can help discourage unsustainable consumption patterns and protect younger audiences from developing unrealistic aspirations influenced by curated luxury lifestyles.
2. **Addressing Socioeconomic Inequality:** Governments and social media platforms should be vigilant about the role digital spaces play in amplifying perceptions of socioeconomic inequality. Policies such as restrictions on excessively promoting luxury goods to vulnerable groups or enforcing stricter advertising guidelines, could mitigate the psychological impacts of unattainable aspirations. These efforts would help to create a more balanced and equitable online environment.
3. **Educational Initiatives:** Collaboration between policymakers, educational institutions, and social media companies is essential to promote media literacy among young users. Introducing educational programs can equip students with the tools to critically evaluate social media content and better understand the cultural and commercial dynamics driving luxury consumption trends. This approach could foster a more informed and mindful digital consumer culture.

5.6 Limitations of the study

While this study offers valuable insights into how Chinese university students perceive luxury consumption displays on social media, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the use of convenience sampling, while practical, limits the generalizability of the findings. Participants were primarily recruited through digital platforms, which may not fully represent the broader population of Chinese university students, especially those with limited access to or engagement with social media. Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, as participants may have tailored their responses to align with societal expectations or norms. Additionally, the study focuses exclusively on university students, whose consumption behaviours and perceptions may differ significantly from those of other age or socio-economic groups. Future research could expand the scope to include diverse demographics, such as working professionals or older consumers, to provide a more comprehensive perspective. Furthermore, while the mixed methods approach enriched the study, the reliance on open-ended survey questions may not fully capture the depth of participants' lived experiences. Future research could incorporate qualitative interviews or focus groups to provide richer, more nuanced insights into the motivations and interpretations behind luxury consumption behaviors.

Another limitation of this study is its inability to differentiate between public and private display of luxury consumption on social media. Public sharing often reflect aspirations to project an influential or aspirational persona to a broad audience, whereas private sharing within close-knit circles, such as friends or family, may focus on relational positioning and social validation. By not explicitly distinguishing between these contexts, the study may have overlooked how audience segmentation and platform affordances influence the online display of luxury goods. Platforms like Xiaohongshu or Instagram, which are oriented toward public sharing, may encourage different behaviors compared to WeChat, which is oriented toward private interactions. Future research could investigate these distinctions to explore how audience segmentation and platform influence the display of luxury consumption. Lastly, the study primarily examines luxury consumption primarily through the lens of Chinese cultural values and localized platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Weibo. While this provides a culturally specific perspective, the findings may not directly applicable to other cultural or geographical contexts. Comparative cross-cultural studies could provide a broader understanding of how global and local factors shape luxury consumption behaviors on social media. These limitations highlight areas for further investigation to deepen the understanding of this evolving phenomenon.

6 Conclusion

This study explored how Chinese university students perceive and interpret the display of luxury goods on social media, focusing on its role in self-presentation, identity construction, social status, and privilege. Using a mixed methods approach, the research uncovered insights into the interaction between digital platforms, cultural values, and theoretical frameworks related to conspicuous consumption, cultural capital, and impression management. The findings support Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption by showing how social media enhances the visibility of luxury goods as symbols of wealth and status. Respondents indicated that the display of luxury goods is often driven by a desire to signal affluence and project an aspirational image. Furthermore, the research extends Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital by demonstrating that luxury goods symbolize economic wealth, taste, and social belonging. Participants highlighted that balancing luxury goods consumption with aesthetic refinement enhances one's digital and social credibility. With social media algorithms and influencer dynamics increasingly mediating perception of privilege, the symbolic value of luxury is no longer static but shaped by platform affordances and audience interpretations.

The cultural concept of ‘face’ (mianzi) in the Chinese context helps explain certain behaviors related to luxury consumption. Displaying luxury goods is often functions as a way to maintain or enhance social recognition, which aligns with collectivist values and the importance of relational positioning. However, some participants criticized these behaviors, viewing them as performative and disconnected from genuine privilege. This raises questions about the validity of such displays as accurate indicators of social status. This study adds to the growing research on digital luxury consumption by demonstrating how cultural and societal factors influence global theoretical constructs. While previous studies have primarily focused on Western views of luxury and social media, this research highlights the significance of cultural specificity, especially in collectivist societies like China. It also connects classical theories of consumption with contemporary digital practices, providing insights into how social media transforms traditional concepts of identity, status, and privilege.

The findings of this study have significant implications for both academia and industry. Firstly, for scholars, this research highlights the necessity of integrating cultural frameworks into discussions surrounding luxury consumption and social media. Future studies should investigate how emerging platform features, such as virtual reality and AI-driven personalization, influence identity construction. The results have implications for luxury brands and marketers targeting Chinese consumers. Platforms like Xiaohongshu, which blend social networking with e-commerce, provide unique opportunities for brands to engage with consumers in a manner that supports self-expression and social validation. Additionally, understanding the importance of ‘face’ can help brands tailor messaging that aligns with cultural values, fostering deeper connections with their target audience.

In conclusion, the display of luxury consumption on social media represents a complex interplay of digital affordances, cultural values, and individual aspirations. By situating the findings within established theoretical frameworks of conspicuous consumption, cultural capital, and impression management, this study offers an understanding of how young Chinese consumers navigate the intricacies of identity and status in an increasingly digital world. These insights pave the way for further exploration into the cultural and technological dimensions of digital luxury consumption, contributing to the ongoing evolution of consumer behaviour in the global digital era.

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