

Aspirational luxury consumption among young bottom-of-pyramid consumers

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Abstract

This study investigates the paradox of luxury brand consumption among young consumers at the bottom of the pyramid (BoP), with a focus on Generation Z (Gen-Z) in China. Despite limited financial means, these consumers actively engage with luxury brands in digital spaces. Drawing on a netnographic approach, the research analyzes online interactions and user-generated content on Rednote and Zhihu to explore the dimensions of brand value that underpin their aspirational consumption. Through thematic analysis, five core luxury brand value dimensions are identified—functional, symbolic, experiential, emotional, and aspirational. Based on these values, the study proposes a typology of Gen-Z BoP consumers that illustrates distinct patterns of luxury engagement. By extending luxury brand value theory into the BoP context, this research contributes to the understanding of digitally mediated aspirational consumption and offers a nuanced perspective on how economic constraints intersect with symbolic consumption in online environments.

Keywords: Aspirational consumption, Luxury brands, BoP consumers, Generation Z, Social media, Status signaling.

Introduction

Once reserved for the affluent elite, luxury brands are now embraced by digitally savvy younger consumers, including those at the bottom of the pyramid (BoP). Recent industry reports highlight China's Generation Z (Gen-Z) as one of the fastest-growing segments in the global luxury market (Bain and Company, 2024). This shift is closely linked to the rise of social media, where young consumers showcase luxury possessions through unboxings, reviews, and symbolic displays on platforms such as Rednote and Zhihu (Park and Chun, 2025). These digital spaces have become hubs of aspirational self-expression and peer validation.

Notably, a subset of these young luxury consumers come from modest economic backgrounds, including low-income earners, students, and recent graduates (Battistella-Lima and Veludo-de-Oliveira, 2024). Despite limited savings, they often express willingness to take loans to purchase luxury goods (Zhang et al., 2022). This phenomenon, commonly described as "refined poverty," reflects a cultural shift in which symbolic capital is valued over material wealth (Wang and Li, 2023). Luxury goods, therefore, serve as tools for constructing an illusion of affluence and masking financial vulnerability.

The appeal of luxury consumption lies primarily in its social and symbolic value (Shukla et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2024). Prior research identifies multiple drivers of aspirational consumption among lower-income consumers, including the pursuit of social status, self-esteem, and an upper-class lifestyle (Jaikumar et al., 2018; Srivastava et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2018). Jain et al. (2021) further argue that aspirational consumption is most prevalent among new or status-seeking entrants, who aspire to luxury but lack the purchasing power to fully access it. As young consumers increasingly shape the trajectory of the luxury industry, it becomes crucial to understand how Gen-Z BoP consumers form purchase intentions in digital environments (Lu et al., 2022). Social media interactions, in particular, play a critical role in shaping their perceptions and behaviors (Agarwal and Kumra, 2024; Ramadan et al., 2018; Saldivar et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2019).

Despite recognition of social media's influence, few studies have systematically examined how BoP Gen-Z consumers use digital platforms to express, negotiate, or justify aspirational consumption. This study addresses that gap through a netnographic analysis of two leading Chinese platforms. Using user-generated content from Rednote and Zhihu, we identify five distinct dimensions of luxury brand value—functional, symbolic, experiential, emotional, and aspirational—and propose a typology of BoP Gen-Z consumers based on their patterns of engagement. By situating the luxury brand value framework within the BoP context, this study advances luxury marketing and consumer culture theory. It offers new insights into how digital environments shape symbolic consumption under financial constraint, particularly within China's hyper-connected Gen-Z demographic.

Literature Review

The literature review has two sections. The first section reviews the consumption pattern of aspirational consumption at the BoP. The second section reviews the luxury

brands consumption which consist of brand value and typology of luxury brands consumers.

Aspirational Consumption at the BoP

Aspirational consumption describes a distinctive pattern in which individuals with limited financial resources seek to align with higher social classes by acquiring status-oriented goods (Duffy, 2016). Scholars have applied several theoretical perspectives to explain this behavior, including social comparison theory, compensatory consumption, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Srivastava et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2018). These frameworks suggest that economically disadvantaged consumers often allocate disproportionate resources toward goods that symbolize upward mobility. Mnisi (2015), for instance, observes that most aspirational brand purchasers cannot afford them, yet pursue these products for the social prestige they convey (Mnisi, 2015; Srivastava et al., 2020). Thus, aspirational consumption reflects discretionary rather than necessary spending, as individuals prioritize status-laden goods over essential needs (Brun and Castelli, 2013; Wall and Large, 2010; Srivastava et al., 2021).

BoP Consumers Characteristics

BoP consumers are typically defined by low socioeconomic status and limited purchasing power. Existing literature shows that aspirational consumption is particularly prevalent in lower-income groups (Jaiswal and Gupta, 2015; Subrahmanyam and Tomas Gomez-Arias, 2008; Yu et al., 2023). Compensatory consumption theory explains this tendency as a psychological mechanism that offsets perceived deficiencies in self-worth or social standing (Srivastava et al., 2020). Through aspirational purchases, BoP consumers may temporarily enhance confidence and achieve social legitimacy within their reference groups (Mnisi, 2015).

Another paradoxical feature is their dual focus on subsistence and status-driven consumption. While BoP consumers often struggle to meet basic needs, some actively pursue luxury goods. Srivastava et al. (2020) argue that status-oriented purchases may even take precedence over essentials. This highlights the heterogeneity of the BoP market, where motivations extend beyond survival to include symbolic and emotional aspirations (Howell et al., 2019). Understanding these dynamics is therefore essential for analyzing luxury consumption within this segment.

Drivers of Aspirational Consumption at the BoP

Two primary motivations underpin aspirational consumption at the BoP: the pursuit of social recognition and the aspiration to emulate affluent lifestyles (Jaiswal and Gupta, 2015). The appeal of aspirational goods lies less in functional utility than in their ability to signal prestige and upward mobility (Mnisi, 2015).

Self-presentation is a central driver. To cultivate an attractive social image, BoP consumers may reduce spending on essentials in order to acquire aspirational products (Jaikumar et al., 2018). Such purchases, ranging from beauty products and jewelry to branded footwear, prioritize symbolic value over functionality (Srivastava et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2019).

In the digital era, social media further amplifies these aspirations. Exposure to elite lifestyles and visible consumption patterns intensifies comparison with wealthier peers, encouraging imitation of their consumption practices (Zheng et al., 2018). This extends beyond products to include experiences such as fine dining, private transport, and luxury leisure activities (Candra and Abadi, 2018; Fawcett and Waller, 2015). As a result, aspirational consumption at the BoP is increasingly shaped by digital visibility and peer comparison.

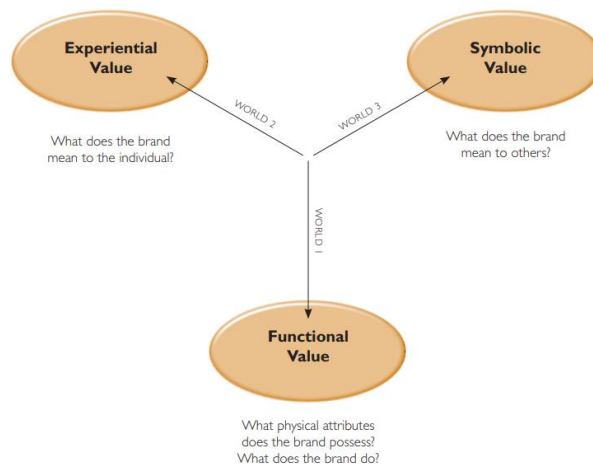
Luxury Brands Consumption

Aspiration consumption is a critical factor contributing to the success of luxury brands in emerging markets (Jain et al., 2021). The subsequent section will explore theories that elucidate the luxury brands value and typology of luxury brands consumers.

Luxury Brand Value

Luxury brand value theory provides a foundational lens for understanding how consumers perceive and engage with luxury brands (Lau et al., 2023; Han and Kim, 2020). Past research has shown that luxury brand value has three dimensions: functional, experience and symbolism (Berthon et al., 2009). This tripartite framework, often referred to as the “Luxury Brand Value Triangle,” has been widely adopted in marketing literature to explore consumer motivations, segmentation, and value co-creation in luxury contexts (Sharma et al., 2021; Lau et al., 2023; Mrad et al., 2022). These dimensions are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The three values of luxury brands (Berthon et al., 2009)



Functional value refers to the tangible attributes of luxury products, including superior quality, craftsmanship, and service performance. Symbolic value encompasses the social meanings embedded in luxury goods, such as status signaling and identity construction (Han and Kim, 2020). Experiential value captures hedonic enjoyment, aesthetic pleasure, and multisensory engagement associated with luxury consumption (Sharma et al., 2021).

Recent scholarship has further expanded this framework by distinguishing emotional

value as a separate category. Emotional value reflects affective gratification, including feelings of pride, joy, or empowerment associated with luxury consumption (Sharma et al., 2021; Mrad et al., 2022). Chaney et al. (2018) emphasize that experiential value is often shaped by immersive service environments and brand interactions, while emotional value is tied more directly to personal and psychological states.

This study builds upon these developments by identifying a fifth dimension: aspirational value. For BoP consumers, both emotional fulfillment and aspirational identification are heightened due to the symbolic distance between their socioeconomic realities and the luxury products they desire. By adapting Berthon et al.'s (2009) model, we propose a five-dimensional framework—functional, symbolic, experiential, emotional, and aspirational—that better captures how Gen-Z BoP consumers engage with luxury brands in digital environments. This theoretical refinement enables a more nuanced understanding of symbolic consumption under economic constraint.

Typology of Luxury Brands Consumers

Identifying different consumer types can help luxury brand marketing (Ramadan et al., 2018). Henninger et al. (2017) categorize Chinese consumers into four types: translators, exceptors, selectors, and indulgers, based on their motivations and intentions to buy luxury goods in the UK. Ramadan et al. (2018) classified luxury consumer types into six categories based on consumer participation and purchasing tendencies: pragmatists, bystanders, trend followers, image seekers, passionate owners and quality consumers. Each type of consumer has specific engagement and purchasing tendencies. However, this study mainly focused on online luxury buyers and did not involve offline luxury consumers. Zhao et al. (2019) believe that understanding different groups of luxury brand consumers will help the correct positioning and communication strategies of luxury brands. Therefore, our study will combine online and offline luxury consumers' purchasing behaviours and poor economic conditions in order to integrate the typology of young luxury consumers for BoP.

Methodology

In our study, we employed the netnographic methodology to investigate the factors that motivate Gen-Z consumers to purchase luxury goods. Netnography, first conceptualized by Kozinets (2010), is a qualitative research method adapted from ethnography, specifically designed to study the cultures and communities emerging through online communications (Yu, 2025; Parrott et al., 2015). The role of the researcher is 'observers-as-participants' (MacCarthy, 2023, p.2783). We chose netnography for the following reasons: a) Gen Z are social media natives who are keen to use social media to share their buying experiences (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021). The use of netnography helps researchers to gain a more intuitive and in-depth understanding of Gen Z consumers' perspectives on luxury purchases; b) The methodology of netnography is not limited by geographic space and time, and can help researchers access a wide and diverse range of data to minimize data errors; c) In contrast to other methods, netnography allows researchers to immersively observe or participate in discussions on the topic of luxury purchases in online communities.

Sampling

The online communities selected for data collection for this study were The Rednote and Zhihu. These websites are widely recognized in China as popular and high-quality online communities. In 2019, the users of Rednote were more than 300 million, and it had 10 million active users every day and 85 million active users every month (Chen et al., 2021). Zhihu is a question and answer (Q&A) online community with over 19,795 million monthly active users (Ao et al., 2021). They offer diverse discussion forums that facilitate interaction among users. Notably, Gen-Z constitutes a significant user base on online platforms, where they freely share their lifestyles and experiences and provide insights into the luxury consumption behaviours of young consumers (Baykal, 2020; Chaudhary and Bhargava, 2021). By fostering engagement and interaction, these websites offer an appropriate and well-suited platform for exploring our research questions.

To ensure the relevance of the collected posts, we established specific filtering criteria based on the research topic. The following conditions were required for posts to be included in the analysis: (1) The content must pertain to Gen-Z, which refers to individuals born between 1995 and 2009. (2) The posts must originate from low-income groups, defined as those with a monthly disposable income below 5,000 yuan, as the minimum tax standard in China is 5,000 yuan per month. (3) The content of the posts should focus on luxury consumption. Information such as the age and income of the posts was verified through publicly available profiles or posted content (Xharavina et al., 2020). Our collection of luxury brands is included in the list of the top 10 most valuable luxury brands in the world, published by the World Luxury Association. It consists of Hermes, Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Dior, Ferragamo, Versace, Prada, Fendi, Armani and Ermenegildo Zegna (World Luxury Association, 2023).

Data Collection

The posts were specifically focused on luxury consumption and young consumers, and they were directly collected from the selected online communities. This meticulous approach aimed to ensure the validity and reliability of the data by gathering detailed and highly relevant information pertaining to the research topic (Lam et al., 2022). Researchers adopted the role of an observer during online data collection, becoming a dedicated lurker was an essential step in deepening our understanding of the subject (Kozinets et al., 2014). Adhering to ethical and moral standards, all the posts analysed were publicly available to observers.

To facilitate data access, the basic search function of the websites was utilized. The keyword search method was employed to retrieve more relevant posts by searching for specific keywords such as “Gen-Z” or “Post 95”, “buying luxury” or “buying light luxury”, and “monthly disposable income 5000/4000/3000”. As a result, the discussion forum was accessed by approximately 960,000 people in general. Posts lacking personal insights on luxury consumption, such as those merely mentioning the items purchased without further elaboration on feelings or lifestyle, were excluded. The post included in the search was published between January 2019 and March 2023. Following detailed comparisons, 70 article-type posts from The Rednote and 35 article-type posts from Zhihu were selected, resulting in a total of 105 article-type meaningful posts and including over 10,030 items of comments for further analysis, which then proceeded to

the coding process.

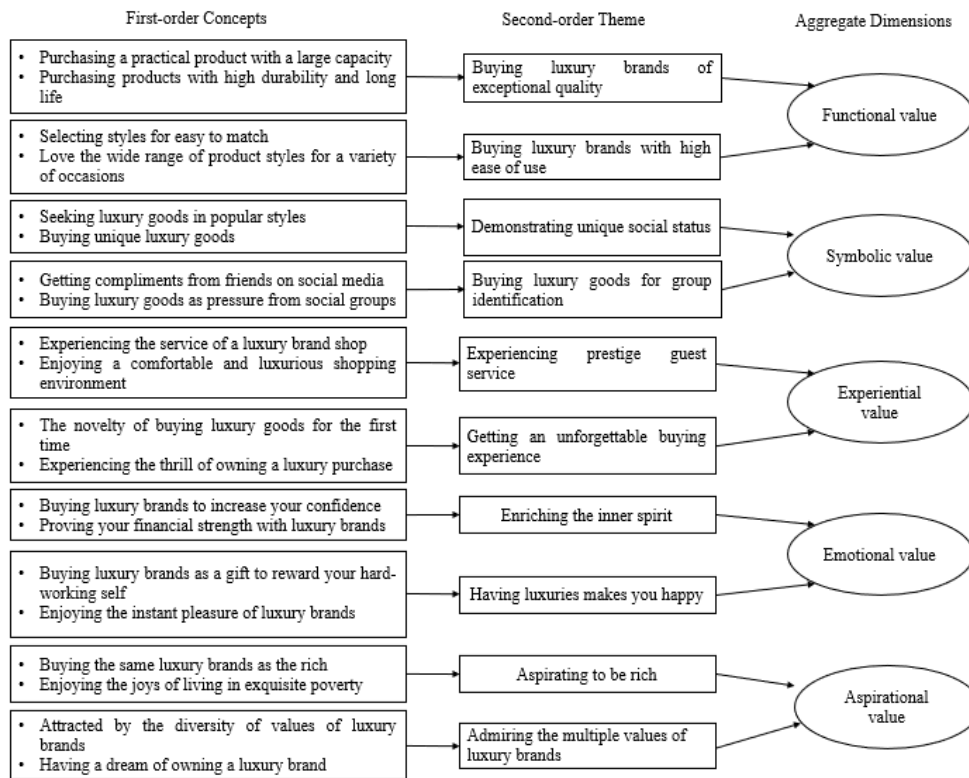
Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the collected data. This widely used approach enabled us to identify recurring themes and perspectives related to luxury consumption among numerous young consumers, particularly those at the bottom of the Gen-Z demographic (Ting et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2020). Thematic analysis is particularly valuable in gaining a deeper understanding of the factors influencing motivations for luxury purchases among this specific group. Previous research has successfully employed thematic analysis to uncover various aspects of luxury consumption behaviour among young consumers, such as celebrity endorsements in luxury brands, brand loyalty based on high quality (Ghosh and Bhattacharya, 2022; Chaudhary and Bhargava, 2021), and luxury fashion in diverse environments (Lee et al., 2020). Therefore, we deemed thematic analysis appropriate for this section of our study.

During the interactive coding process, analysis and interpretation involved the classification, coding analysis, and contextualization of communicative acts (Kozinets, 2010). There are 105 article-type posts and more than 10,030 comments as the raw materials. To ensure the completeness and rigor of the data analysis, the classification process was conducted independently by the first author and another two postgraduate researchers, adhering to systematic and rigorous procedures (Kozinets, 2010). After marking a rich and detailed set of information, three rounds of coding were performed based on the two value dimensions (Kozinets, 2010). The data was analysed separately by two authors.

We adopted the inductive approach to find new themes, with coding the data in three stages (Corley and Gioia, 2004). The first stage was initial reading and identification. We read the codes and marked important words. Content related to luxury brands value for young BoP consumers was identified and coded. The second step was grouping and relating concepts to similar meanings. In the third step, the second-order themes were summarized and aggregated into dimensions. Totally, we identified five aggregated dimensions: functional value, symbolic value, experiential value, emotional value and aspirational value. Figure 2 shows the data structure of the first-level concepts, second-level themes, and aggregated dimensions. Table A1 (in the appendix) presents more details on the first-order concepts and second-order themes by representative quotations.

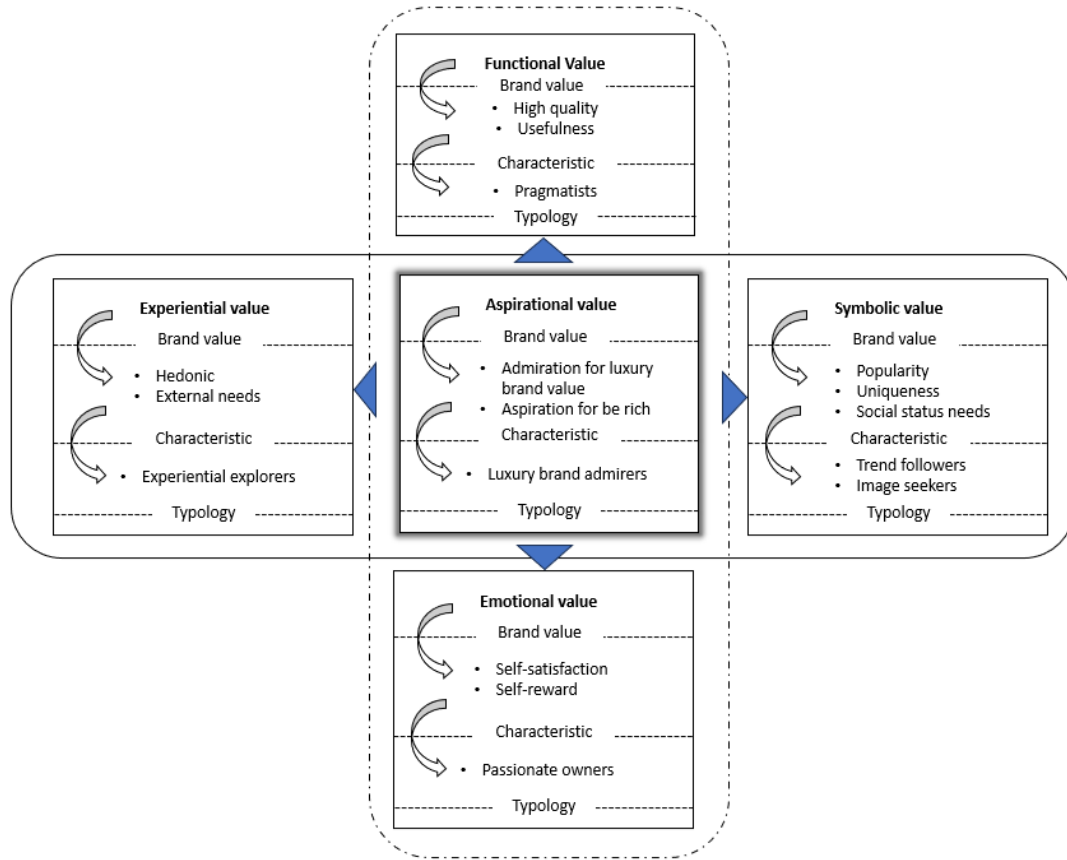
Figure 2: Data structure



Results

In this section, we present two parts. The first part is about luxury brand value, and the second part is about the type of young BoP consumers who buy luxury brands. These outline in a conceptual framework for Figure 3.

Figure 3: Conceptual framework (authors own creation)



Luxury Brands Value

In this section, we found five dimensions for luxury brands, consisting of functional value, symbolic value, experimental value, emotional value and aspirational value.

Functional Value

Young BOP consumers purchase luxury brands out of functional value considerations. Luxury brands are often associated with high quality. High-quality luxury brands are practical and durable. Practicality is mainly reflected in the capacity of the product, while durability is mainly related to the service life of the product. Some informants mentioned that they need to bring a lot of things when going out in the summer, such as umbrellas, sunscreen, and sunglasses. Therefore, purchasing practical luxury brand handbags can provide convenience for them. Informants also said that luxury brand bags are of very good quality and have a very long service life. Respondents stated the following:

The quality of luxury brand bags is really very good, and a bag can be used for many years (T161).

Luxury brand bags are really super practical. When I go out in the summer, I can carry an umbrella and sunscreen (T31).

In addition, the functional value of luxury brands is also reflected in high ease of use. Luxury brands not only have a beautiful appearance, but more importantly, they are easy to match with clothes of different seasons and styles, and can be used on different occasions. For example, some respondents stated:

*The style of this bag is very versatile and suitable for use all year round (T247).
The use occasions of luxury brands are by no means single. I can use them in daily appointments and coping with some formal occasions (T16).*

Symbolic Value

The symbolic value of luxury brands is one of the reasons that attracts young BoP consumers to buy luxury brands. The symbolic value of luxury brands can help young BoP consumers gain group attention and demonstrate their distinctive social status. Informants said they tend to buy luxury brands with popular styles and unique styles to gain a unique social status. For example:

I think no one will compete with me in this style, it is a unique look for me (T77).

More importantly, the symbols of luxury brands are symbols of social identity and groups. Using the same brand of luxury goods as the group in which they belong can increase the group identity of young BoP consumers. Wu et al. (2017) states that individuals will develop an idealized identity under the influence of the group, which is formed privately and displayed selectively. We found that participants hope to gain praise from friends on social media, so they will selectively share photos on social media and use photos to help them establish a luxurious identity in the online community. Informants said, “*Every time I post photos of my exquisite life in WeChat, I get admiration from my friends, and I feel very happy (T149).*” However, the group symbolic value of luxury brand symbols may create psychological pressure on young BoP consumers, and this pressure may lead young BoP consumers to purchase luxury goods. Informants said they felt lose face and out of place in the group if they did not use the same luxury brands as their peers. For example:

*Sometimes when I go to a party with my friends and everyone else is carrying LV bags, I feel lose face with carrying a canvas bag (T181).
When I looked at the company and saw that everyone had a LV, I felt that the only way I could feel truly included in the group was to carry a luxury brand bag every day (T218).*

Experiential Value

Young BoP consumers are related to the experience value of luxury brands. The findings showed that the experiential value of luxury brands is an external hedonic purchase value for young BoP consumers. In the process of purchasing luxury brands, young BoP consumers receive a distinguished guest service experience. This experience value drives them to prefer buying genuine luxury brands rather than counterfeit luxury brands. Specifically, this distinguished guest service experience is mainly related to the service and shopping environment of luxury brand offline stores. Informants mentioned that exclusive and considerate customer service can give them a safe and pleasant shopping experience, and the beautiful store environment creates a

fashionable shopping atmosphere for them. For example:

The Chanel counter lady was very patient with me and her gentle smile made me feel super at ease throughout the process (T238).

Luxury brands must be bought at counters and genuine products should not be bought fake, because luxury brand stores have a wonderful feeling. Walking into the store is like walking into a fashion wonderland (T234).

Furthermore, hedonic purchasing experience allows young BoP consumers to have an unforgettable shopping experience. Interestingly, memorable shopping experiences are primarily associated with first-time purchases from luxury brands. We found that informants were involved in buying luxury brands for the first time, and they were full of curiosity about owning luxury brands. Therefore, they buy luxury brands hoping to experience the pleasure and novelty of owning luxury brands. For example:

The first experience of choosing a bag in a luxury store added more meaningfulness and memories to my life (T243).

Emotional Value

Our analysis shows that luxury brands have emotional value for young BoP consumers. In other words, luxury brands can provide intrinsic value to young BoP consumers. Informants purchase luxury brands to enrich their inner spiritual world and realize their self-worth. Atkinson and Kang (2021) believe that BoP consumers buy luxury goods because luxury brands help enhance their self-esteem and self-confidence. Our study found that informants had characteristics of low self-esteem. Therefore, they rely on purchasing luxury brands to prove their financial strength and improve their self-confidence. For example:

These luxury bags are the foundation for us to work hard in the workplace. In fact, our spiritual world is not fulfilling, so we can only rely on external packaging to fill and prove it (T221).

The act of buying luxury goods is proof that I am getting better and better about my income. So, I want to buy a lot of luxury goods (T49).

Owning luxury brands can give them a sense of self-satisfaction. Specifically, luxury brands can make participants feel happy and happy during the purchase process. Informants were fans of luxury brands and viewed luxury goods as gifts to reward themselves, whether it was a birthday gift or recognition of their hard work, thereby giving them a sense of accomplishment. For example:

Although the salary is not much, I still want to buy myself an expensive bag to satisfy myself, as a birthday gift and a reward for hard work (T86).

We found that the emotional value of luxury brands was related to personal values of carpe diem. Young consumers are willing to spend money on luxury goods in order to get immediate happiness (Jochemczyk et al., 2017). Our research showed that informants refused to sacrifice immediate happiness in order to withstand uncertain future risks, and they focused more on enjoying present happiness when purchasing luxury brands. For example:

I only know that luxury brands should be bought early and enjoyed early, and carpe diem (T110).

Aspirational Value

Informants aspired to luxury brands that would help them become upper-class individuals. We found that informants were willing to purchase luxury brands used by wealthy people, even if they suffered financial hardship. This is due to their desire to become rich and escape from the economic situation of real poverty. In theory, this is called aspirational consumption (Srivastava et al., 2021), which means that BoP consumers desire to have the image and lifestyle of wealthy people, so they imitate and use the luxury brands used by wealthy people. In addition, we found that BoP consumers' desire to buy luxury brands was related to social media influence. Informants were first seeing luxury brands used by rich people on social media before buying the same luxury brands as them. Informants said, *"I really want to be rich. After seeing on the social media that wealthy people use Chanel bags, I also bought a Chanel bag (T257)."*

However, we found that informants cannot really afford the high cost of luxury brands, and purchasing luxury brands can even cost them several months of salary. Surprisingly, informants believed that spending several months of their salary on luxury brands was an exquisite pleasure in life. Specifically, luxury brands can help them hide the real economic situation of poverty, make them feel like they are rich, and satisfy their desire to become rich. Informants stated:

I think exquisite poverty is a joy of life. I am willing to spend several months of my salary on luxury brands because it makes me feel like a rich person (T263).

In addition, we found that the aspirational value of luxury brands comes from informants' admiration for luxury brands, which overrides the previously mentioned values. Desire represents consumers' hopes and desires to purchase luxury brands (Srivastava et al., 2020). We found that informants grew up in a poor living environment. For them, luxury brands are a scarce product and a spiritual source of their yearning for a better life. In the perspective of these informants, luxury brands have a variety of values, including the previously mentioned: functional value, symbolic value, experiential value and emotional value. These values possessed by luxury brands deeply attracted the participants and made them admire the luxury brands. Some participants stated:

I have particularly admired luxury brands since I was a child, and buying luxury brands has been my dream since I was a child. In my views, luxury brands are like a piece of sparkling gold, which can bring me functional value, replenish my emotional and spiritual energy, obtain hedonic experiences, and expand social connections (T262).

Typology of Young BoP Consumers and Luxury Brands Value

We linked the value of luxury brands to consumer characteristics and discovered a typology of young BoP consumers targeting luxury brands. Consumers purchasing

behavior will be affected by their personal personalities, and they are more inclined to choose brands that have the same values as themselves (Bairrada et al., 2019). Table 1 shows the type and characteristics of young BoP consumers.

Table 1: Type and characteristics of young BoP consumers for luxury brands

Type	Characteristic
Pragmatists	Focuses on the functionality and quality of luxury brands.
Trend followers	Pursuing popular styles of luxury brands. Have a need for personalisation and like unique styles of goods.
Status seekers	Demonstrating social status with luxury brands. Purchase high-profile styles of goods.
Experience explorers	Holding a hedonic view of luxury consumption. Satisfying external needs.
Passionate owners	Buying luxury brands to satisfy and reward yourself. Luxury brands as a birthday gift for yourself.
Luxury brand admirers	Admiration for the multiple values of luxury brands. Aspire to use the same luxury brands as the rich.

First, we found that the functional value of luxury brands is primarily aimed at pragmatists. The reason why these people buy luxury brands is more because luxury brands have excellent quality and strong applicability. In addition, they are more inclined to buy classic models from luxury brands because the style of classic models is versatile and not easy to go out of style. One informant said, *“When I buy luxury brands, I buy classic styles that are easy to match and durable (T65).”*

Second, we found that the symbolic value of luxury brands is more inclined to trend followers and status seekers. Specifically, trend followers love trends and follow the popular styles from luxury brands. Therefore, they prefer to buy fashionable luxury brands to show off. New luxury brand styles are more popular among trend followers. One informant said, *“I like to buy trendy styles because it shows off my unique personality (T264).”*

In contrast, status seekers prefer classic models from luxury brands. Such people associate luxury brands with social status and group identity. They believe that the classic styles of luxury brands have higher status value in the group because they are highly famous and recognizable. Luxury brands with this style are more likely to be recognized among groups, which helps them gain a sense of group identity. For example:

The classic bag is just so recognisable, every colleague around me knows it, even celebrities carry it. When I carry it to work, I feel like I have status in front of my colleagues (T264).

Third, we found that the experiential value of luxury brands is more favoured by experience explorers. This type of people not only pay attention to the function and quality of the product itself when shopping, but also pay more attention to the experience during the shopping process. Specifically, they prefer to shop in stores with a comfortable store environment, good service attitude, and a sense of freshness. One informant said, *“This was the first time in my life that I purchased a luxury bag in a*

shop. The service in the shop was excellent! The shop assistant stayed with me the whole time and was very polite. The environment of the shop was also very comfortable! The experience of buying a luxury brand for the first time was happy and innovative (T236).”

Fourth, the emotional value of luxury brands is associated with passionate owners. They are characterized by a strong passion for owning luxury brands and associate luxury brands with self-satisfaction and self-reward. Luxury brands are regarded as symbols of certain events and transitions that need to be obtained, depicting the realization of certain goals or desires (Wu et al., 2015). Informants buy luxury brands as their birthday gifts and use luxury brands to reward themselves for their hard work. For example:

For my birthday this year, I rewarded myself with a handbag of LV (T78).

The fifth category is luxury brand admirers, which is related to the aspirational value of luxury brands. Admiring luxury brands is their characteristic. These consumers are deeply attracted by the various values attached to luxury brands and are very eager to own luxury brands. For example:

I am an admirer of luxury brands! What attracts me is the various values behind luxury brands (T265).

Discussion

This study offers new insights into the luxury consumption behaviors of young BoP consumers in China, a segment that has received limited attention in the luxury branding literature. Using a netnographic approach, we identified five dimensions of luxury brand value—functional, symbolic, experiential, emotional, and aspirational—that shape how these consumers interact with and interpret luxury brands. In addition, we developed a typology of BoP Gen-Z consumers that captures different modes of luxury engagement. Together, these findings contribute to an understanding of aspirational consumption under financial constraint.

While symbolic value has long been recognized as central to luxury consumption (Sharma et al., 2021), our findings reveal that functional value also plays an important role for BoP consumers. Functional value refers to the physical and utilitarian benefits offered by a luxury brand, such as quality, service, and product performance (Seo and Buchanan-Oliver, 2019). Participants in our study emphasized that certain luxury products—particularly cosmetics, skincare, or accessories—offered tangible benefits worth the cost. For instance, luxury skincare was perceived as an “investment” that enhanced personal appearance in ways that were seen as socially and professionally advantageous. This indicates that functional value is not only a product feature but also a rational justification for discretionary spending among economically constrained consumers.

Symbolic value, as widely acknowledged in previous studies (Han and Kim, 2020; Sharma et al., 2021), remains a dominant driver of luxury consumption in this group. It refers to the social meaning associated with luxury brands, particularly in signaling status, taste, and distinction. Our study found that young BoP consumers frequently described luxury items as tools to enhance self-image and increase social recognition.

This is consistent with the idea that symbolic consumption helps consumers position themselves favorably within peer groups and broader social hierarchies.

Experiential value, which involves hedonic, sensory, and affective experiences (Sharma et al., 2021), was also highly relevant. Participants expressed satisfaction and emotional uplift from visiting luxury stores, unboxing items, or receiving high-end service. These experiences were often described as rare or transformative, especially in contrast to their everyday economic realities. According to Han and Kim (2020), experiential value is influenced by service, environment, and communication. Our findings affirm this and extend it to the digital context, where even virtual experiences such as watching unboxing videos or following luxury influencers can create a sense of immersion.

Emotional value, identified by Sharma et al. (2021) and further elaborated in our study, refers to intrinsic psychological rewards such as confidence, satisfaction, and mood enhancement. In our data, emotional value was linked to self-identity and personal expression (Shahid and Paul, 2021). Several participants stated that simply interacting with or viewing luxury products made them feel validated, proud, or optimistic. We also observed that emotional value was strongly shaped by temporal orientation. Many BoP consumers emphasized the importance of enjoying the present rather than postponing pleasure, reflecting a mindset consistent with the concept of “carpe diem” or “you only live once” (YOLO) (Jochemczyk et al., 2017). This indicates that emotional value supports immediate gratification and psychological resilience in the face of uncertainty.

Finally, we identified a new dimension: aspirational value. This dimension reflects the perceived ability of luxury brands to help BoP consumers imagine or project an idealized version of themselves. It also extends existing theories of social comparison and aspirational consumption into the digital context, while prior research has focused primarily on offline experiences (Zheng et al., 2018). In our data, participants frequently admired luxury brands showcased by wealthy individuals on social media and described how they aspired to bridge the gap between reality and ideal self-image by engaging with these brands. This supports findings from Srivastava et al. (2021) and Zheng et al. (2018), who argue that aspirational consumption enables status signaling, self-esteem enhancement, and the pursuit of a more privileged lifestyle. We found that aspirational value is not limited to ownership. Instead, it encompasses symbolic alignment, browsing, digital expression, and imagined consumption, all of which allow BoP consumers to participate in luxury culture without material acquisition.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, it extends the luxury brand value theory proposed by Berthon et al. (2009) by identifying two additional value dimensions—emotional and aspirational—that are particularly salient in the BoP context. While Sharma et al. (2021) identified emotional value in emerging markets such as India, our study confirms its relevance among BoP Gen-Z consumers in China. Moreover, we conceptualize aspirational value as a distinct and integrative dimension that connects other values and enables symbolic participation in luxury consumption without ownership.

Second, this study contributes to the literature on aspirational consumption at the BoP.

Prior research has emphasized the desire for status and recognition (Jaikumar et al., 2018; Srivastava et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2018). Our findings deepen this understanding by showing how BoP consumers interpret luxury brand value through digital content and social comparison, and how this shapes their consumption logic. We highlight that luxury consumption is not necessarily irrational or imitative. Rather, it is embedded in everyday efforts to construct meaning, dignity, and hope in economically constrained lives.

Third, our study adds conceptual clarity to luxury consumer typologies within the BoP market. Building on Ramadan et al. (2018), we extend the typology to account for consumers who do not purchase frequently but engage with luxury brands in affective and symbolic ways. Specifically, we identified two new types: experience explorers, who are drawn to hedonic and short-lived luxury experiences; and brand admirers, who engage in digital aspiration and symbolic alignment. These types account for the unique motivations of BoP consumers in online environments and expand existing models that focus primarily on transactional or material engagement.

Practical Implications for Asian Business

The findings of this study offer actionable insights for luxury brand management in Asia, particularly in addressing the rise of young Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP) consumers as an emerging luxury consumer segment. First, our research explores the diversity within this group, identifying distinct consumer types among young BoP individuals—an approach grounded in the understanding that recognizing consumer specificities is critical for effective marketing (Witell et al., 2020). This segmentation provides luxury brand managers with a comprehensive view of Asian consumer needs and preferences, enabling them to adapt to a market increasingly characterized by younger, more diverse luxury buyers. For instance, in markets like India and Indonesia, where youthful demographics dominate and disposable incomes are rising, brands such as Gucci or Louis Vuitton could tailor offerings—perhaps through affordable luxury lines or limited-edition collaborations—to appeal to aspirational BoP consumers while retaining exclusivity. The co-branding campaign between Fendi and Heytea represents a good example in the Chinese market, where young BoP consumers claim that this co-branded bubble tea is their first luxury purchase ever. This adaptability is vital as Asia's luxury market evolves, projected to account for over 40% of global luxury sales by 2030, driven partly by these emerging segments.

Second, our study employed netnography to examine online communities and digital marketplaces, revealing the pivotal role of social media in shaping young BoP consumers' perceptions of luxury. These consumers, often from less affluent backgrounds, use platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Rednote to explore wealthy lifestyles and cultivate admiration for luxury brands. This aligns with prior research highlighting social media's capacity for interactive and personalized engagement (Beuckels and Hudders, 2016). For Asian luxury managers, this presents a clear opportunity to leverage digital platforms strategically. For example, in China, where Rednote boasts over 200 million users, brands could partner with influencers who embody upper-class lifestyles—such as celebrities or key opinion leaders (KOLs)—to showcase products authentically. Similarly, in Southeast Asia, platforms like Lazada or Shopee could host live-streamed luxury events, blending entertainment with

aspirational storytelling to forge connections with diverse BoP consumer types. By strategically enhancing digital touchpoints, brands can cultivate trust and strengthen perceived relevance among young Asian consumers, who are increasingly dependent on online interactions to guide their purchasing decisions.

Third, our findings highlight that young BoP consumers admire the values embodied by luxury brands, such as prestige, heritage, and exclusivity. This insight provides practical guidance for promoting brand image in Asia. Luxury managers should prioritize multidimensional storytelling that highlights the brand's core values, such as craftsmanship, sustainability, or cultural resonance, and integrate these narratives into marketing campaigns. For instance, a brand like Prada could promote its legacy through short films or social media series that resonate with South Korea's trend-savvy youth, while in Thailand, campaigns could tie luxury to local traditions, enhancing emotional appeal. Story marketing strategies, such as highlighting a brand's journey or its impact on artisans, can leave a lasting impression on young BoP consumers, fostering loyalty and establishing a positive brand image. In practice, this may involve organizing workshops or hosting pop-up events in metropolitan centers such as Manila or Jakarta, where consumers can engage directly with the brand narrative, thereby bridging the gap between aspiration and accessibility.

In summary, these implications urge Asian luxury businesses to segment and understand young BoP consumers, harness social media's influence, and craft compelling brand narratives. By doing so, they can strengthen their foothold in a competitive, fast-evolving market, cultivating relationships with a demographic poised to redefine luxury consumption in the region.

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Appendix

Table A1: Representative quotations (authors own creation)

Representative quotations	
<u>Second-order themes: Buying luxury brands of exceptional quality</u>	
Purchasing a practical product with a large capacity	Chanel’s bag is really super practical, it can throw my mobile phone, rechargeable treasure, card bag, car keys and so on. I like it very much as it can hold a lot of things! (T28) This luxury brand bag is practical, and I love it so much! (T51)
Purchasing products with high durability and long life	I want to buy a branded, better quality bag that lasts longer. (T53) Luxury brand bags are really good quality and a bag can last for years! (T74)
<u>Second-order themes: Buying luxury brands with high ease of use</u>	
Selecting styles for easy to match	This luxury brand’s bags are really easy to match. (T173) I like to buy bags that are easy to mix and match. (T65)
Love the wide range of product styles for a variety of occasions	This bag is just the right size and versatile enough for all my occasions! (T80) I like a lightweight bag that can be used for commuting and travelling. (T81)
<u>Second-order themes: Demonstrating unique social status</u>	
Seeking luxury goods in popular styles	Even at a premium I’d get it in a hot colour! (T85) This year’s hottest bag is it, which can be seen in Rednote every day! It’s very recognizable when I take it out. (T93)
Buying unique luxury goods	I figured that no one would have the same bags with me in this style. It makes me look unique. (T77) I love the distinctive luxury brand styles. (T94)
<u>Second-order themes: Buying luxury goods for group identification</u>	
Getting compliments from friends on social media	Sharing luxury brand bags on social media can make me feel identified with the group. (T95) I buy luxury brands just to get compliments from WeChat. (T106)
Buying luxury brands as pressure from friends	When I found out that all my colleagues in the company used luxury brand bags, I had a very inferior feeling inside. So I bought a luxury brand bag too, even though my monthly salary was less than \$5,000. (T207)
<u>Second-order themes: Experiencing prestige guest service</u>	
Experiencing the service of a luxury brand shop	The counter girl was really polite and gave me a place to release my consternation and insecurity. (T239)

Representative quotations	
Enjoying a comfortable and luxurious shopping environment	I want to go into a shop and feel the luxury shopping environment of a luxury brand. (T64)
<u>Second-order themes: Getting an unforgettable buying experience</u>	
The novelty of buying luxury goods for the first time	The feeling of buying a luxury bag for the first time in my life is both happy and nervous at the same time. (T243) It was such a fun experience picking out a bag for the first time in a luxury shop, it is an unforgettable buying experience! (T251)
Experiencing the thrill of owning a luxury purchase	I really want to experience the joy of owning Chanel. (T66) Having luxury is a joy like no other in my life. (T253)
<u>Second-order themes: Enriching the inner spirit</u>	
Buying luxury brands to increase your confidence	Luxury bags make me feel more confident in my workplace struggles. (T228)
Proving your financial strength with luxury brands	The act of buying luxury goods is a testament to the fact that I am getting better and better with my income. So, I like to buy a lot of luxury brands. (T49)
<u>Second-order themes: Having luxuries makes you happy</u>	
Buying luxury brands as a gift to reward your hard-working self	My underlying logic for buying luxury goods is to reward myself for my efforts. (T48)
Enjoying the instant pleasure of luxury brands	I think luxury brands should be bought early and enjoyed in time. (T110) My point of view on buying luxury brands is to enjoy instant pleasure. You only live once, and if you don't buy now, you might die one day. (T117)
<u>Second-order themes: Aspirating to be rich</u>	
Buying the same luxury brands as the rich	I want to be rich very much, but I don't have enough money. After seeing on the internet that people from the affluent class use Chanel bags, I also bought a Chanel. (T257)
Enjoying the joys of living in exquisite poverty	Luxury brands can help me hide my poor living conditions, and going out with a luxury brand bag can make people think I'm rich. (T258)
<u>Second-order themes: Admiring the multiple values of luxury brands</u>	

Representative quotations	
Attracted by the diversity of values of luxury brands	The appeal of luxury brands to me is that they make me feel like I've become rich, and that they have diverse values such as: good functional quality, emotional-spiritual energy, experiential value, and social interaction value, rather than just an ordinary bag. (T254)
Having a dream of owning a luxury brand	I've admired luxury brands since I was a kid and buying them is my dream and my motivation to work hard! (T255)



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