

Internal and External Factors Influencing (Luxury/Sustainability/Pleasure) Consumption Behaviour- The Relationship Between Social Comparison and Appearance and Consumption Behaviour

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Abstract. This paper proposes that the emerging consumer behavior, especially in the context of luxury, sustainability, and indulgence, is influenced by a dynamic relationship between internal psychological forces and external social forces. It emphasizes the role of personal concept, self-esteem, body image, and psychological needs, which push consumers to demand products that help them in maintaining identity, authenticity, and emotional comfort. Luxury goods are used as self-expression as well as social status, and indulgent consumption gives short-term satisfaction, while long-term sustainable decisions are based on long-term moral identity. Consumer choices are greatly influenced by external forces like social comparisons, peer pressure, cultural beliefs, and media. The upward and downward comparisons are bred by social media, and the appearance motivations and exclusivity preferences are magnified. Wider influences, such as income inequality, also have an effect on consumption as they heighten demand for status-oriented luxury goods and constrain the use of sustainable alternatives. On the whole, this paper argues that consumption can never be functional in any way; it is a result of the current bargaining between the identity of the internal world and the external society. The primary mediators, the links between personal desires and social justifications, are the social comparison and appearance issues. To the businesses, it implies matching the products to identity values and observable sustainability. To policymakers, the solution should be to ensure that sustainability is a dream that is to be achieved despite the social barriers.

Keywords: Consumer behavior, Sustainability, Self-concept, Social status.

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, the consumption trends in the luxury, sustainability, and indulgence fields have been more complex than it was before, driven by the combination of psychological, social, and cultural factors. Luxury goods attract consumers because they are interested in demonstrating their social status, identities, and as hedonic consumption. Conversely, the trend towards mindful and responsible consumption has been developed due to a global focus on sustainability and ethical consumption. The two seemingly contradictory trends, the luxury of indulging and the sustainability of restraining, then form a paradox that still catches the attention of scholars [1].

These behaviors show the tension between individual factors such as self-concept, self-esteem, and personal identity, and social factors like peer influence, cultural norms, and social comparisons. These dynamics have been broadened by social media, in which mediated digital identities boost the status-driven consumption and the appearance concerns [2]. At the same time, the messages of sustainability have reformulated the meaning of value to consumers going beyond the material satisfaction to moral and environmental responsibility [3].

In this paper, the external and internal forces that influence consumption behaviours are discussed in the luxury, sustainability, and indulgence contexts. The role of social comparisons and appearance related issues as mediators between individual identity and consumer decision-making is given a special focus. The review considers the changing nature of consumer psychology by combining the results of the recent empirical studies and providing future research directions.

2. Core Concepts

2.1. Luxury Consumption

Conspicuous consumption has always been linked to luxury consumption in which people show wealth to obtain social status. Nonetheless, the change to individualized and immersive luxury, in which personal authenticity and customization contribute to subjective well-being, is emphasized in recent studies. Luxury now denotes social value (status signifying, recognition) as well as self-oriented value (self-expression, emotional gratification). In one instance, the research has shown that luxury items that are viewed as distinctive or customizable create a greater sense of self-authenticity and emotional fulfilment, outgrowing social signaling.

2.2. Sustainable Consumption

Sustainable consumption can be defined as the decisions that attempt to minimize the environmental and social damage and the trade-offs are usually between personal needs and moral issues. Researchers believe that self-identity models play a key role in sustainable purchasing, as individuals tend to align their consumption with identity-consistent values [4]. Nevertheless, the concept of sustainability in luxury has its contradictions: it is implied that luxury items imply excess, but they may also focus on the idea of durability, heritage, and responsible sourcing. Sustainability in consumption is, therefore, a morally and identity-based behaviour that encompasses both hedonic and social motivations.

2.3. Indulgence Consumption

Indulgence is commonly described as hedonic consumption, which is focused on pleasure-pursuing, emotional satisfaction, and sensualized gratification. Fashion, fine foods or activities that improve mood and give an escape may be considered as indulgent consumption. The psychology of hedonism usually intersects with the issue of appearance- the buying of items can be driven by the need to treat oneself or conform to aspirational lifestyles promoted by media [5].

2.4. Appearance and Social Comparison.

The central theme of Social Comparison Theory, originally proposed by Festinger, has been expanded in modern research to explain consumer motivations in digital environments [6]. Within the contemporary consumption setting, luxury consumption and appearance-enhancing purchases are motivated by upward social comparisons (with richer or nicer-looking people), whereas downward comparisons can lead to a sense that being indulgent is also justified. Recent research shows that the need for exclusive goods is enhanced by scarcity signals, FoMO, and peer pressure, though the intensity of these drivers may vary across cultures [1]. The aspect of appearance has a two-fold dimension; as a stimulator of luxury consumption in order to elevate self-presentation, and as a source of sustainable decisions in line with moral beauty and socially responsible identities. Luxury, sustainability and indulgence are the areas of consumption that are interrelated in a sense that they are defined by the needs of identity, social comparison, and beauty. By knowing these basic concepts, it would be possible to analyze the internal and external forces of consumer behaviour.

3. Internal Factors and Consumer Behaviour

3.1. Self-Concept and Identity

Self-concept remains as one of the most significant internal motivators of consumer behaviour. It is the way people view themselves and the way people want others to view them and this influences the way people make purchases in different categories like luxury, sustainability, and indulgence. Consumers are not purchasing products solely for functional utility; they utilize consumption as a symbolic resource for identity formation and expression. With luxury consumption, a product value

is likely to be less about utility, and more about the level of compatibility to the self-concept of the consumer. Indicatively, luxury market personalization and customization have become more prevalent as they enable the consumers to incorporate personal significance into products. Choi state that a personalized luxury product can make an individual feel important to themselves, for example, the consumer thinks that that object is a part of his or her real self [2]. The subjective well-being can be promoted through this alignment, because people experience justified in their identity expression, the brand attachment and loyalty.

Sustainable consumption also has a lot of meaning in identity. Salient environmental self-identity consumers are more likely to switch to products that are in line with their pro-environmental values, despite the less convenient or higher costs of these products. Ruby showed that self-identity does not solely predict green behaviour, but also creates spillover effects: sustainable decisions in one area of consumption can lead to environmentally responsible behaviour in another, e.g. diet or transport [4]. This illustrates the power of self-concept as a mechanism shaping recurrent consumer behaviours, such as brand loyalty and consistent green choices.

Indulgence consumption that is frequently presented in self-reward terms is also closely related to self-concept. People can spend on hedonic products like fancy foods or a spa treatment as a reward to support their self-esteem or reward their achievement. Therefore, regardless of the descriptors of the behaviour (whether responsible sustainability, aspirational luxury, or hedonic indulgence), self-concept is the unifying, but contextually analytically differentiated factor that drives consumer behavior.

3.2. Self-Image, Image and body

Self-esteem is another important internal determinant that is tightly connected with the appearance and body image [7]. Self-esteem is a driving force as well as a behavior controller in consumer psychology. Compensatory consumption trends are usually aroused by low self-esteem or body dissatisfaction where people look into goods that symbolically mend or augment their self-perception. Abdrabbo discovered that those who are not satisfied with body image can indulgently consume, e.g., comfort food, cosmetics, or hedonic fashion, as a coping strategy to overcome negative mood [1]. On the other hand, those who have greater body satisfaction are more critical in matching their consumption with aspirational self-images, and tend to be attracted towards luxury fashion that helps them sustain an idealized image of themselves. In this context, luxury items are a symbolic capital, which gives the consumer the opportunity to express attractiveness, desirability and success.

In the meantime, the appearance-related motives also drift to the sphere of sustainability. Though the meaning of luxury is generally related to the external validation of physical looks, the sustainable consumption has been linked to what is characterized by White et al. as a moral beauty [8]. This concept is underpinned by the fact that doing things that are environmentally friendly will not only make one more moral, it will also make him or her more appealing in the eyes of other people. To place it in perspective when the people purchased sustainable fashion they were rated more in terms of social and moral appeal to the peers and it is possible to observe that the appearance is not confined to physical appearance but extends into moral and reputational appearance. As this expands what it means by appearance, the different modalities in which self-esteem and body image are connected to consumption are emphasized.

Digital culture intensifies these processes since the social media networks maximise the exposure to standards of beauty, wealthy living and stories of sustainability. Influencers and peers are very powerful referents and they reinforce appearance-based motives and shape consumption norms, particularly among younger consumers who are more susceptible to peer influence. In that, self-esteem and body image are not fixed psychological traits but rather dynamic constructions that are influenced by cultural and online realities and also tie them to the indulgent, luxury and sustainable consumption trends.

3.3. Psychological Needs: Uniqueness and Hedonic Gratification.

Besides self-concept and appearance, psychological needs that underlie them are significant consumers in decision making. The wants of hedonic contentment and individuality are some of the most conspicuous. Luxury or indulgent consumption by the consumer is typically a means of satisfying non-material utility needs. The symbolic value of luxury products is enhanced with exclusivity, rarity and newness, and this enables individuals to fulfil their wish to be different. According to Abdrabbo, the scarcity signs such as limited editions enhance the ego of exclusivity which is highly gratifying to a consumer that needs to be singled out among the crowd [1]. The effect of individuality-oriented behaviour is further reinforced through marketing tactics such as fear of missing out (FoMO), though these practices raise ethical concerns.

The other significant aspect in indulgence consumption is the hedonistic gratification or search of pleasure. This may be via fine dining, luxury vacation or even high-end fashion but in any one of the cases it is the experience that brings emotional satisfaction, offering both sensory and affective rewards. These consumption habits cannot be associated with the satisfaction of material needs as it is strictly interrelated with the regulation of the mood, relieving stress and experiencing enjoyment.

Sustainable consumption on the other hand is not always hedonistic pleasure and rather more has a tendency of being intrinsic psychological needs such as purpose, growth and valuation consistency. Choi, confirmed the more predictive value of intrinsic motivation, including personal development and mindfulness in comparison with extrinsic motivation, including social status or financial savings, on sustainable tourism behaviours [2]. This reflects one of the most important distinctions, that the consumption of indulgence is usually short term and hedonic and sustainable consumption is future oriented and is founded on personal values and is reflective of long-term, psychological contentment. When the consumer indulges in what is socially approved by his/her environmental values the consumer will derive a sense of coherence and integrity that will lead to substantive and long-term satisfaction as opposed to the momentary hedonic gratification.

Thus, the psychological needs are internal structures that enable one to differentiate consumer behaviours. Consumption of luxury and indulgence gives immediate satisfaction in terms of pleasure and exclusivity and sustainability consumption gives intrinsic satisfaction in terms of significance, responsibility and self-consistency. Together, self-concept, self-esteem, body image, and psychological needs form a multidimensional framework explaining consumer behavior in the luxury, indulgence and sustainability setting. These notes reveal the message that the consumption is never purely functional, yet it is tightly connected with self-construction, personal agency, and identity expression.

4. External Factors and Consumer Behavior

4.1. Social Comparison and Peer Influence

Festinger's Social Comparison Theory is a significant model in the current consumption environment; however, present research illustrates its dynamic effect across environments and cultures [6]. A cross-cultural study conducted by Pillai and Nair, 2021, research revealed that social comparison orientation has a significant role in shaping the luxury purchase intention in the UK [9].

However, this has been moderated in India considering the collectivist cultural context that turns to different decisions. This points at the fact that the strength of social comparison is different depending on the cultural and social structures.

Social media platforms make upward social comparisons much more severe, especially among younger consumers. Influencer-driven marketing promotes aspirational lifestyles with the emphasis to having luxurious products and indulgent consumption. It has been empirically shown that positive experience through peer luxury consumption on Instagram has a significant Jensen's law-between this and purchase intentions despite the lack of financial resources of consumers to afford such purchases.

At the same time, marketing strategies that depend on scarcity exploit the phenomenon of social comparison by causing the consumer to be afraid of being excluded from desirable trends [1].

4.2. Cultural Norms and the Language of Sustainability

Cultural values also act as a set of external factors in which sustainability is viewed in regards to consumption. For instance, Kong compared consumer response to sustainability message in Germany and South Korea [10]. They discovered that in collectivist settings, sustainability campaigns would be better received if framed with reference to group benefits and when individuals were in individualist cultures, self-benefit framing would be more convincing. This highlights the importance of tailoring sustainability communication to cultural contexts, where external societal norms dictate whether sustainable behaviours are motivated by personal values or social expectations.

Furthermore, studies indicate that face consciousness—concern for social evaluation—plays a role in sustainable luxury consumption. Islam showed that face-conscious consumers in Asian markets engaged in sustainable luxury purchases to project moral responsibility and avoid embarrassment, demonstrating how external social evaluation pressures shape ethical consumption [11].

4.3. Marketing, Media, and Appearance Ideals

External media influences extend beyond traditional advertising into social identity construction. Digital influencers now act as cultural intermediaries, setting beauty and lifestyle standards that fuel both luxury and indulgence consumption [12]. These appearance ideals are particularly impactful among consumers with high social comparison orientation, as they amplify the drive to purchase appearance-enhancing goods.

In sustainability marketing, transparency and authenticity have emerged as critical factors. A conjoint analysis by Chang, revealed that consumers in Asia preferred sustainable luxury products emphasizing heritage, quality, and transparency, while mere “green” claims were insufficient [13]. This suggests that in the external environment, sustainability must be communicated not as an abstract ideal but as a concrete attribute tied to quality and cultural meaning.

4.4. Economic and Social Structures

Beyond culture and media, broader structural factors such as income inequality and access to goods also shape consumption. Studies demonstrate that in contexts of high inequality, luxury consumption is intensified as consumers seek to signal status and close perceived social gaps. By contrast, sustainable consumption may be limited in such contexts, as price sensitivity outweighs moral identity. This illustrates how macroeconomic conditions act as external moderators of consumer behaviour.

4.5. Summary of External Factors

External factors—spanning social comparison, peer influence, cultural norms, media, and economic structures—directly shape consumer behaviour in luxury, sustainability, and indulgence contexts. Unlike internal drivers, which are rooted in identity and psychological needs, external factors often trigger, amplify, or constrain these motives. Importantly, the rise of digital culture and global inequality has made external influences more pervasive, pushing consumers towards aspirational lifestyles and symbolic consumption while simultaneously creating pressures for sustainable accountability.

5. Discussion and Suggestions

The reviewed literature emphasizes the hypothesis that consumer behaviour related to luxury, sustainability and indulgence is mediated by a dynamic interplay of internal and external factors, with social comparison, and concerns about appearance, acting as central mediators. From the internal side, self-concept and self-authenticity emerge as steady predictive consumption parameters. Consumers

seek to buy luxury items not simply to signal wealth but also to reassert a sense of self-alignment, often magnified by the possibility for customization. Appearance-related concerns, such as body image and ideals of attractiveness, further spur indulgence and luxury purchases, while in sustainability contexts, moral identity and "moral attractiveness" bolster pro environmental consumption.

On the outside, social comparison and cultural norms figures prominently. Cross-cultural research shows wide divergence: in collectivist contexts, sustainability consumption is guided by group-focused messaging; whereas in individualist cultures, self-benefit messaging proves more effective [13]. Social media platforms contribute to the amplification of upward comparisons, fostering a greater desire for indulgence and luxury goods, while the platform also provides a platform for influencers to promote sustainable practices. Economic structures, especially income inequality, further modulate these behaviours by rendering luxury consumption a compensatory mechanism for status gaps, while sustainability is less accessible in resource constrained environments.

Practical implications flow directly from these insights. Marketers should be mindful of the duality of consumer motives: while luxury and indulgence appeal to hedonic and identity needs, sustainable consumption demands authenticity and compatibility with moral identity [13]. Policy interventions can centre on re-framing sustainability as aspirational and identity-affirming, bridging the gap between indulgence and responsibility. Furthermore, future studies should examine emerging variables such as digital avatars, AI influencers, and immersive technologies, as they may alter both internal identity frameworks and external comparison dynamics.

6. Conclusion

This review considered the internal and external factors affecting consumption behaviours in luxury, sustainability, and indulgence industries, with particular emphasis on the mediating roles of social comparisons and body appearance concerns. Internal drivers such as self-concept, self-esteem, and intrinsic motivations were found to shape consumption choices, whereas external forces such as peer influence, cultural norms, and media affected the accessibility and desirable characteristics of products.

The findings underscore that consumer behaviour cannot be explained by isolated perspectives. Instead, it is this interplay between internal identity needs and external societal pressures that results in unique consumption outcomes. Luxury goods fulfil the self-demands of authenticity and social validation; while indulgence offers emotional escape and hedonic satisfaction, sustainability meets the morality-based demands of the self and also navigates social accountability.

By combining conceptual and empirical insights, this paper will contribute to a deeper understanding of consumer behaviour in the 2020s. It is crucial for businesses to align products with identity-driven values, coupled with transparent sustainability claims. For policymakers, designing messages that balance social responsibility with aspirational appeal will help advance sustainable consumption. Ultimately, the future of consumer behaviour will be about reconciling indulgence and responsibility, mediated by the interplay between identity, comparison, and appearance in an increasingly digitalized world.

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