

The Influence of Overconsumption and Luxury Consumption on Mental Health

Yulin Tan *

School of WLSA Shanghai Academy, Shanghai, 200000, China

* Corresponding Author Email: tyl2278171232@gmail.com

Abstract. In face of the recent problems of adolescent's mental health, such as depression and suicide, this study aims to explore the relationships between adolescent overconsumption (including overconsumption and luxury consumption) and mental health, so as to find out the poor mental health causal factors and offer corresponding countermeasures. Firstly, the main concept of overconsumption and healthy adolescent mental health will be defined. Methodologically, the study takes a method of defining six typical studies (3 about overconsumption, 3 about luxury consumption) as reference, and the methods include thematic synthesis, cross-sectional survey and statistical method (chi-square test, Pearson correlation). The results are as follows: overconsumption caused by social comparison, "face culture" and media will lead to anxiety, low self-esteem and compulsive buying; joint family pressure will promote overconsumption and depression. Luxury consumption will bring about two types of effects, the former being that it makes materialists feel satisfied in status establishment in the short term, while the latter is that it will cause inauthenticity in the long run and reduce social warmth; Western-centric samples will limit the generalization of samples. Conclusions are as follows: proposing mitigation strategies (value education, media regulation, consumer literacy integration), and suggesting future researches to explore causality issues and expand the generalization of non-Western samples. This study is conducive to promoting healthy adolescent consumption and protecting mental health.

Keywords: Overconsumption, luxury consumption, mental health.

1. Introduction

Recently, the problems of adolescent, such as depression and suicide, have become one of the current focuses. Research results show that individuals' perception of daily life and activities play an important role in their mental health and overall well-being. Therefore, understanding how important it is to individuals to view their experiences can serve as a window to their mental health status [1]. For example, the "Balancing Everyday Life" (BEL) intervention has found that the following core internal variables as well as some external social support variables play a significant role in individuals' attitudes toward life: self-esteem, self-mastery, etc [1].

In modern society, luxury consumption is often used by adolescents as the main way to display their social identity, because there is an implicit psychological association between luxury consumption and social status as well as the self-reward feeling it brings, which can have a great impact on adolescents' mental health, that is, the impact on how they socialize and get along with others [2]. The relationship between luxury consumption and mental health is not simple, but complicated; in other words, it will bring about negative impact, which brings heavy pressure to adolescents [2]. The study aims to explore how the growing pressure from excessively luxury consumption interacts with adolescents' mental health, which is connected to the social trend in the past; analyzes how does pressure cause depression even lead to suicide [2].

2. Introduction to Core Concepts

2.1. Overconsumption

2.1.1. Definition of overconsumption

As defined in Li and Zeng's framework of consumption dynamics, overconsumption is consumption that exceeds need for utility or sustainable resource consumption [2]. This definition extends Hirschman and Holbrook's conception of hedonic consumption--- which emphasizes consumption for pleasure---to emphasize the concept of immoderation [2]. Unlike necessary consumption (such as consumption for survival), and developmental consumption (such as education and health care), overconsumption is driven more by a desire to feel pleasure, happy, and to make social comparisons than by a need for utility or practicality [2].

2.1.2. Causes of overconsumption

The phenomenon of overconsumption exists because of characteristics inherent to society today and this era. Social media promotes horizontal consumerist cultures to individuals through visual and symbolic consumption through exposure that increases cross-individual consumption behaviors [2]. Furthermore, "Face culture" which is particularly prominent in China, attaches the hedonic consumption of jewelry and luxury goods to social status and perpetuates the emotional dependence on face validation by material achievements which can bring joy to individuals effectively and drastically [2]. The behaviors of overconsumption include buying hedonic consumption goods that are not needed, consuming more than what can be afforded, and repeated consumption to make social comparisons rather than true needs [2]. All of these behaviors are a form of consumption that is not true to well-being [2, 3].

2.2. Definition of a Mental Health Condition

As defined by Bustomi et al., sound mental health in adolescents is their ability to deal with life pressures, function in their daily lives, and contribute to their surrounding environments [1]. This is consistent with the definition of mental health by World Health Organization which is a "state of complete well-being" [4]. This definition builds upon Aloysius and Salvia's differentiation of internal and external factors influencing mental health, with an emphasis on the biological, psychological, social, and economic factors [5].

Characteristics of a healthy mental state in adolescents include their ability to adapt to academic pressure, bullying, and other stressors, to have positive social relationships, and to control their mood [1]. This is in direct contrast with poor mental health, which is characterized by the presence of depressive mood, anxiety, and self-efficacy low [1]. Mental health is influenced by a number of different factors, including individual factors (such as heredity, trauma), family factors (such as stability, support), school factors (such as peer relationships, support from teachers), and social factors (such as social media, accessibility of mental health services) [1]. For example, good parents and easy access to mental health services can effectively improve mental health [1]. Poor mental health can also occur when there is stigma towards mental health and academic pressure is too high [1].

3. The Relationship between Overconsumption and Mental Health – How Overconsumption Could Affect Mental Health

Overconsumption is the excessive acquisition and use of goods or services beyond one's needs [6]. Its effects on mental health include emotional distress and psychological disorders as well as lowered well-being [6]. In this section, we will explore two relatively long reviews and one short one on this topic, then compare and contrast their similarities and differences as well as their methodologies and limitations [6].

3.1. Soares & Moniz – Overconsumption's Psychological and Clinical Impacts

In their review, Soares and Moniz studied a large and diverse population of people, with special attention paid to groups who are particularly vulnerable to overconsumption: adolescents, adults with high materialism, and people with impulsive buying behaviors [6]. In doing so, they demonstrated cross-cultural relevance by using information from Portugal and Colombia to draw conclusions that were generalizable and showed that consumption-driven stress, together with avoid the limitations of one culture, were relevant in different societies [6]. They synthesized information from studies conducted from 1982 to 2023 [6]. Overconsumption was assessed using the concept of "impulsive buying behavior," and "materialism" [6]. Mental health status was assessed using the proxies of subjective well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, happiness) [6], psychological distress (e.g., anxiety, depression) [6], and clinical conditions (e.g., compulsive buying disorder, oniomania) [6]. They used thematic synthesis to reach their conclusions, where they found that: there was a negative association between materialism and well-being [6]; impulsive buying behavior mediated the relationship between emotional vulnerability and mental health (i.e., adolescents with low emotional intelligence were 2.3 times more likely to buy impulsively) [6].

This review had some limitations as well: because it used mostly observational studies, it limited the ability to make causal inferences, which is an important component of understanding intervention effects (i.e., it could not definitively show that overconsumption leads to poor mental health) [6]. In addition, it underplayed the relevance of non-Western relevance, which limited the applicability of the findings to collectivist cultures [6]. Finally, because there are no standardized criteria for diagnosing clinical conditions like oniomania, there is variability in the measurer, which leads to limitations in the measurements across studies [6].

3.2. Fashion Overconsumption and Self-Esteem/Well-Being

This study was an extension of overconsumption to fashion-related overconsumption, i.e. binges on fast fashion and/or clothes bought to signal status, in Indian consumers [3]. The sample comprised of 513 participants, who were 34.9% 18–25 years of age, i.e. the workforce population that is newly exposed to consumerist pressures, 56.5% were private sector employees, 70.2% were male and 55% nuclear and 45% joint families, i.e. this population was targeted which was from the start highly influenced by “face culture” and fashion trends on social media [3]. The study employed a cross-sectional survey design, where data was collected through a structured questionnaire with 5-point Likert scales [3]. The measures were: fashion overconsumption (measured using “status consumption” scales such as “I buy fashion to signal my social status” and adapted measures of “impulsive fashion purchases” from Rook’s framework); mental health outcomes (self-esteem and well-being); and mediators/moderators (fashion consciousness and cultural norms) [3]. The statistical analyses included chi-square tests, Pearson correlations and multiple regression tests [3]. The results of the study were: fashion consciousness mediated the relationship between ideal self-image and overconsumption, i.e. individuals trying to shape their wardrobes to meet their “ideal fashion standards” were 2.1 times more likely to overconsume and also reported higher anxiety levels ($\beta = -0.138$, $p < 0.05$); overconsumption of fashion had a direct negative effect on self-esteem; and cultural norms significantly increased this negative impact [3].

The limitations of the study were: since the study design was cross-sectional, it cannot establish causal relationships and therefore future studies should be longitudinal [3]. Another limitation was sample bias, in that, the males constituted 70.2% and private sector employees were 56.5%, therefore the marginalized population such as the low-income group strata had a smaller proportion in the sample and females (who also face pressures related to overconsumption) were underrepresented [3].

3.3. Internal/External Factors Linking Overconsumption and Youth Mental Health

Tripathi defined overconsumption as the state of being overconsumptive, which he studied in Indian youth 15–24 years of age. He examined how the combination of internal and external factors links overconsumption to mental health [7]. With a sample of 500 adolescents, he measured overconsumption using "peer-influenced spending" (e.g., "I buy things because my friends do") and mental health using depression symptoms (measured using the CES-D Scale) [7]. Thus, he concluded that external factors cause overconsumption by increasing internal vulnerabilities, and in turn, overconsumption increases depressive symptoms ($r = 0.32$, $p < 0.1$) [7]. Overconsumption was more likely among youth from joint families because of family pressure to consume, meaning that social environment plays a mediating role, and youth from joint families were 21% more likely to be depressed when compared to those from nuclear families [7].

The next section will compare and contrast these three studies in terms of their conclusions, methods, and limitations. Suganya et al. and Soares & Moniz both found a negative relationship between overconsumption and mental health in different cultural settings, identified social comparison as a major driver of these relationships, and used self-report scales to measure two subjective constructs—overconsumption and well-being [3,6]. Culturally, Suganya et al. identified "face culture" as the driver of fashion overconsumption in India, whereas Soares & Moniz pointed out that the concern with social status in Western cultures drives excessive consumption [3,6]. Differences between these studies were in scope: Soares & Moniz's review looked at overconsumption in different goods and services in relation to clinical outcomes (e.g., oniomania) in different age groups [6]; Suganya et al.'s study looked at fashion overconsumption in particular and self-esteem in Indian adults [3]. Similar limitations of these studies were: the limitations in inferring causality (because these were observational designs) and the possibility of self-report bias [3,6]. Differences in limitations were: the underrepresentation of non-Western data [6]; and sample bias (overrepresentation of males) and narrow focus on fashion [3].

4. The Relationship between Luxury Consumption and Mental Health – How Luxury Consumption Could Affect Mental Health

Luxury consumption has complex and dualistic effects on mental health; some studies have found psychological benefits from luxury consumption and others have found psychological costs. In the next section, we will discuss three such studies---two detailed analyses and one brief review---that have focused on this aspect of luxury consumption, and then analyze their similarities, differences, methods, and limitations.

4.1. The "Impostor Syndrome" of Luxury Consumption.

Goor et al. surveyed populations spanning from luxury-focused communities (e.g. The Metropolitan Opera, vacationers on Martha's Vineyard, Upper East Siders) to general populations (MTurk workers, high-income American women over \$100k/yr income) [8]. They used a mix of field studies and lab studies where participants were exposed to luxury stimuli (e.g. a towel from Hermès vs. Zara, a necklace from Tiffany vs. Pandora), and then measured inauthENTIC feelings (5 item scale e.g. "fake", "like an impostor") and inauthENTIC perceptions (4 item scale e.g. "I feel unworthy of this product") along with other mental health outcomes (in the form of confident behavior, 7 item scale e.g. "standing up for oneself", "expressing opinions") [8]. Chronic psychological entitlement was also measured as a conclusion [8].

Methodologically, the study had several limitations. First and foremost, the authors used self-report scales to measure the study's dependent variables, which are subject to social desirability bias (i.e. people tend to under-report feelings of inauthenticity) [8]. Second, most of the samples were Western (specifically, U.S., Belgium), so the results may not generalize well to other populations [8].

4.2. "Luxury as a 'Silver Lining'" for Materialists

This study recruited 2,206 adults in Flanders, Dutch speaking Belgium (mean age=40.12, 50% male), with a representative age-gender distribution compared to the Belgian population [9]. The study investigated "materialistic consumers" because this population is more likely to display luxury consumption behaviors in the pursuit of self-validation, but has a lower baseline well-being [9]. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design to measure materialism, luxury consumption and mental health [9]. Main conclusions were: materialism positively predicted luxury consumption ($\beta=0.58$, $p<0.001$) [9]; luxury consumption positively improved mental health by increasing positive affect ($\beta=0.187$, $p<0.001$) and life satisfaction ($\beta=0.140$, $p<0.001$), while decreasing negative affect ($\beta=-0.120$, $p=0.002$) [9]; and in turn, materialists positively benefited from luxury consumption [9]. Compared to the study by Goor et al., the study focuses on the short-term benefits of luxury consumption (while we argue this benefits trap them in the long-term) [8, 9]. Limitations of the study were: a cross-sectional design, hence no causal relationships can be established [9]; and the measurement of luxury (measured as "perceived luxury"), which might reflect individual differences in brand communication and consumer behavior [9].

Concise Analysis: Dubois et al. – The Knots in Luxury's Psychological Effects Dubois et al. reviewed 45 studies to investigate the drivers, forms, and consequences of luxury consumption, providing an overview of the psychological impact of luxury on mental health [10]. The global sample used in the study included the French nobility and U.S. consumers in states with high inequality [10]. The study concluded that: luxury consumption positively increases the perceived competence and protects consumers from negative feedback [10]; it negatively inflates hubristic pride (regarded as "selfish") and increases social warmth [10]; the effects of luxury consumption vary according to the context. For instance, luxury helps create a professional image in the workplace, but harms interpersonal trust [10].

The following part will integrate the above three studies. In terms of conclusion, method and limitation, they have what in common? Dubois et al., Goor et al. and Hudders & Pandelaere have two similarities in common: all can confirm the dual effects of luxury consumption on mental health, and all depend on the PANAS scale and life satisfaction scale to measure mental health and luxury consumption [8-10]. As for the scope, Goor et al. is focused on the inauthenticity induced by luxury [8]. Hudders & Pandelaere is focused on the well-being of materialists [9]. Dubois et al. is focused on the other kinds of tensions (for instance, biological and socio-psychological drivers of the desire for luxury) [10]. In addition, the four studies have what in common in terms of participant group. All limit in the sense of generalizability of findings to other cultures: Goor et al. is based on luxury consumers [8]. Hudders & Pandelaere is based on a general Belgian population [9]. Dubois et al. is based on cross-cultural samples [10]. All the three studies have limitations: The gap in promoting causality existing in the observational or cross-sectional studies [8-10]. The domination of Western sample represents the absence of non-Western samples. And the impact of "face culture" on the symbolic meaning of luxury may exist to reshape the impact on mental health [8-10].

5. Discussion and Suggestion

Extending previous researches, Wang's research reaches three overall conclusions about the impact of consumerism on modern college students' consumption psychology and strategies to help them reduce the impact of consumerism [11].

First, consumerism has complex negative effects on students' psychology and behavior: encouraging students to focus on brand symbols and making them engage in extreme social comparison, which make students prefer to spend on luxury goods to show off rather than on their needs; promoting impulsive, personalized consumption and premature consumption by college students (such as consuming on credit) becoming more and more popular, as students seek for instant gratification without considering future risks; leading to "infinite consumption addiction", that is,

over-relying on material consumption to build image leads to anxiety and poor self-identity as well as bad interpersonal relationship - threatening mental health [11].

Second, the reasons for above-mentioned impacts are as follows: consumerism meets students' needs for identity and social belonging during their development in college, so its values are easy to be absorbed; lack of consumer education in higher education (such as disorderly and supplementary education content) makes students unable to resist consumerism [11]; mass media, through extreme advertising and consumers' information fed back by algorithms, strengthen the material values by exaggerating the symbolic value of commodities [11].

Third, the following strategies are effective to eliminate the above-mentioned impacts: guide students to absorb socialist core values to rebuild rational consumption ethics (such as respecting labor and hating hedonism); increase social responsibility of media through government and self-censorship of industry to lower the proportion of misleading consumers; combine systematic consumer education in colleges ideological and politics courses and online education to increase college students' ability of critical consumers [11].

In total, the study believes that fighting against the evil of consumerism needs cooperation of society, education and media, and the media and education should focus on online media literacy in the future, while the society should help college students establish a healthy consumption psychology and build values for sustainable development [11].

6. Conclusion

This essay focus on the relationship between consumerism and college students, and improve college students' consumption psychology and healthy values. This essay examines the associations and mitigating relationships between adolescent overconsumption (i.e., overconsumption and luxury consumption) and mental health. Results indicate that overconsumption (i.e., affected by social comparison, "face culture, " and media influence), which worsens mental health through causing anxiety, low self-esteem, and even clinical mental health problems, has profound implications. Luxury consumption (even if it provides transient status satisfaction) worsens mental health through inauthenticity and decreasing social warmth; thus, materialistic adolescents are more likely to suffer long-term well-being declines. Practical mitigations include helping adolescents rationally consume through value education, limiting media's excessive materialism promotion, and incorporating consumer literacy into education. In terms of research, future studies should examine causality and enlarge non-Western samples. The study is meaningful because it examines the associations between consumption and adolescent mental health--which is essential to help adolescents achieve better mental health in the face of increasing consumption. Through addressing these issues, we can help adolescents establish healthy consumption habits and better mental states; that is, we can help them build better "towers. "

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