

Analysis of the Misalignment of “Wanting” and “Liking” in Chinese Luxury Consumption

Jiachen Huang^{1,a,*}

¹*Suzhou North America High School, Suzhou, Jiangsu, 215000, China*
a. 2595246898@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: China is rapidly becoming one of the most significant luxury goods markets in the world. As people's incomes continue to rise, an increasing number of individuals are inclined to purchase brand products to show their social status or satisfy psychological desires after fulfilling their daily living needs. This paper delves into the physiological and external factors that create a distinction between the emotions of "liking" and "wanting" in the context of luxury consumption. The primary objective of this research is to help consumers better understand their consumption motives, thereby helping them avoid impulsive or blind purchases. By utilizing literature analysis and review methodologies, the study categorizes and synthesizes the existing knowledge, beginning with the definitions of the two emotions to uncover the deeper influencing factors. It is found that from a neuroscience perspective, the brain regions responsible for generating "liking" and "wanting" are distinctly different; In the realm of luxury consumption, social factors, traditional Chinese cultural values, and individual differences play crucial roles in distinguishing between "liking" and "wanting".

Keywords: Luxury, Consumption, Liking, Wanting.

1. Introduction

The term "Luxury" originally comes from the Latin word “Luxus”, which means “excess” or “opulence”. In ancient Rome, “luxus” was used to describe an extravagant lifestyle and often with a negative connotation. Over time, the term evolved to represent high-quality, refined, and rare goods or experiences. The Oxford Advanced Dictionary explains Luxury as a thing that is expensive and enjoyable but not essential [1]. The reason why luxury goods are favored by people is mainly because it has unique qualities that other products do not have [2]. Specifically, they are scarcity and uniqueness, high price and quality, social status and symbolism, brand heritage and cultural significance [3]. Therefore, luxury is a great attraction for consumers around the world. With the rapid development of China's economy and the increase in disposable income, China has become one of the most important and fast-growing luxury markets in the world. Data from Bain & Company shows that in 2021, despite increasingly severe global social and economic challenges, China's domestic luxury market (Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan not included) continued its previous double-digit growth trend, with some brands even growing by more than 70%.

The growth of the luxury market in China has fueled interest among numerous researchers. They have focused their attention on the phenomenon of luxury goods consumption and explore how cherished objects and personal identity narratives influence consumer behavior and self-concept,

how persuasion can be applied to affect consumers' decisions, and how psychological drivers impact preferences for luxury goods [4-6].

Usually, the difference between “wanting” and “liking” in luxury consumption is often overlooked. These two feelings evolved together, and are mediated by intertwined brain mechanisms, so the two processes usually arise together in normal life [7]. It seems that people like what they want and want what they like, but actually, this assumption can be misleading sometimes. In fact, there are differences between these two feelings in both psychological and neuroscience perspectives.

This paper focuses on the complex relationship between emotional satisfaction and material desire in luxury consumption, and analyses how wanting and liking affect consumer behavior. In order to discuss the incomplete consistency of liking and wanting from physiological and psychological perspectives, this paper is based on relevant research by professors in this field. Analyzing the misalignment holds significance for the luxury goods industry. It can be applied to develop targeted marketing strategies to meet the emotional and social needs of buyers and help consumers better understand their desire for luxury, leading to more rational consumption.

2. Basic Mechanism and Factors of the Misalignment

2.1. Physiological Perspective

2.1.1. Cerebral Nerve Reflex

The reward system in the brain plays a central role in luxury consumption, including the nucleus accumbens, the amygdala, and the prefrontal cortex. These regions exhibit distinct neural activity patterns when experiencing feelings of liking and wanting. Some studies have managed to deconstruct reward into separable neural systems involving the “liking” of a reward versus the “wanting” of a reward in humans. In specific, liking refers to the hedonic impact and actual sensory pleasure one experiences, and wanting is related to the motivational aspect of pleasure, or the desire and drive to obtain rewarding stimuli [8].

According to Berridge's study, liking, or pleasure itself, is generated by a smaller set of hedonic hot spots within limbic circuitry [9]. They are specific areas that show heightened neural activity during pleasurable experiences. In contrast, some of the widely known generators of liking, including classic pleasure electrodes and the mesolimbic dopamine system, may not cause pleasure at all and in fact, it is these “hot spots” that indicate the level of actual sensory pleasure. The amygdala is also a crucial region for processing emotions and emotional responses. Studies have shown that when individuals actually experience pleasurable stimuli, such as buying LV bags, there is a significant increase in amygdala activity [10].

In terms of wanting, the nucleus accumbens is a core region of the brain's reward system, closely associated with reward anticipation. Knutson and his colleagues used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to reveal that during reward anticipation, there is a conspicuous nerve activity in nucleus accumbens. This activation enhances the desire for the reward and thus affects consumption decisions [11]. It can be concluded that the nucleus accumbens not only participates in the actual reward processing but also plays a significant role in reward anticipation, thereby influencing the desire (“wanting”).

However, as the center of human activity regulation, the brain is a complex mechanism and often one region is responsible for various functions. Berridge also pointed out that those hot spots can be embedded in broader anatomical patterns of valence organization, such as in a keyboard pattern of nucleus accumbens generators for desire versus dread, which means nucleus accumbens manipulates both desire and pleasure [9]. Similar to it, the prefrontal cortex integrates information

from various brain regions to access and make decisions about rewards. Research by Volkow shows that the prefrontal cortex, through modulation of dopaminergic signals, influences the relationship between wanting and liking [12].

2.1.2. Dopamine System

The mesolimbic dopamine system and endocrines have varying degrees of influence on wanting and liking. When it comes to dopamine, it is well known as a “happiness generator”. Indeed, the mesolimbic dopamine system, which plays a crucial role in wanting, can trigger a strong desire for rewards without necessarily enhancing liking [9]. Wanting is not liking. It is not a sensory pleasure and is not a core process of positive affect in the sense of an intrinsically hedonic state [13]. So it can be concluded that dopamine may be more important to incentive salience (a distinct component of motivation and reward) attributions to the neural representations of reward-related stimuli. In other words, the dopamine system is necessary for “wanting” incentives, but not for “liking” them [14].

2.2. Psychological Perspective

2.2.1. Social Factors

China's rapid social mobility has significantly altered social statuses across its population, contributing to widespread social anxiety and status panic [15-16]. Empirical evidence from CHFS data shows that luxury consumption in China is socially driven, as it not only helps to expand a family's potential social circle but also their actual social network [17]. And status panic has a direct impact on young people's lives, leading to increased luxury consumption [18]. According to positional consumption theory, the price of the goods one possesses partially determines their social class [19]. In this context, consumers often engage in luxury consumption not to express their actual identity, but rather to shape a desired identity through their purchases. This suggests that luxury consumers may not always genuinely like the products themselves; instead, their desire for status drives their demand for luxury goods, which becomes the primary motivation behind their consumption behavior.

The social factors and motivations behind luxury consumption in China are mainly threefold: conspicuous consumption, symbolic consumption, and interpersonal consumption [20]. Conspicuous consumption refers to purchasing luxury goods to show one's uniqueness, status, or wealth, catering to society's elite who seek to affirm their identity. Symbolic consumption, on the other hand, emphasizes the symbolic value of luxury goods as markers of high social status, where visible assets like cars or watches influence trust and business relationships. Interpersonal consumption is closely tied to social interactions, with luxury goods often serving as prestigious gifts that enhance social bonds, reflect social status, and meet identity recognition needs [20].

The cultural roots of luxury consumption in China are deeply intertwined with the nation's emphasis on “face,” conformity, and reward-based purchasing [21-22]. The desire to maintain a social face, the tendency to follow group norms, and the practice of rewarding oneself with luxury items after hard work all drive luxury consumption. Consequently, these cultural and social factors create a divergence between liking and wanting in the consumption of luxury goods, where some consumers are more motivated by the desire for status than by an actual preference for the products themselves.

2.2.2. Individual Factors

Different individuals have varying levels of pursuit of fashion. For trend-conscious young people, they do not want to fall behind so buying luxury goods becomes a goal. However, luxury goods require a higher level of economic capability, leading to a "reward-based purchasing" mentality. For more older practical individuals, luxury consumption is seen as unnecessary spending, and their pursuit of fashion and need for self-identity are not as strong. Additionally, threats to self-identity can enhance consumers' preferences for self-improvement products [23]. Consumers with lower self-esteem may use luxury goods to enhance their self-image. Initially, they may not have a liking for luxury goods, but as they want self-esteem and seek recognition, they discover that luxury goods can provide these things. They then gradually enjoy the feeling of being recognized and holding a higher status, which eventually turns into a liking for luxury goods. Furthermore, individuals who possess knowledge of fashion trends demonstrate a higher propensity to acquire luxury items [24]. In summary, the impact of individual differences on luxury consumption cannot be ignored.

3. Discussion: Shopping Addiction

For shopping addicts, buying becomes uncontrolled and repetitive and leads to severe financial and psychological consequences. Addicts do not buy only items they need or they like. They also experiment craving for buying clothes or other items that they do not use after their purchase. They really need to spend their money and are anxious to miss a good opportunity to buy something [25]. In this situation, the misalignment of liking and wanting is more obvious. A strong desire motivates them to keep shopping, but the anticipating pleasure doesn't appear when they finally have those goods.

4. Conclusion

The misalignment of liking and wanting in luxury consumption is a common phenomenon among Chinese buyers, which is influenced by both physiological and psychological factors. Analysis of the cerebral nerve reflex and dopamine system points out that there is a fundamental difference between liking and wanting. Social and individual factors are more unpredictable, which are crucial in shaping consume behavior.

Due to the limitation of research methods, this study has no data survey and is not convincing enough. The research scope is circumscribed and focuses on specific luxury cultures and categories, but different types of luxury goods and different cultural backgrounds may differ in wanting and liking. Future research can consider original data collection and empirical research; broaden the sample to include more types and backgrounds; add the study of digital and virtual consumption.

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