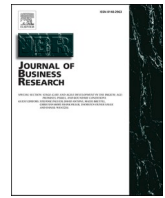




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Redefining “masstige” luxury consumption in the post-COVID era

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ABSTRACT

The concept of “new luxury” has challenged the conventional marketing of luxury goods as prestigious, leading to greater expansion of mass luxury meaning. This has become more evident since the outbreak of COVID-19, which has been a catalyst for consumption in the luxury market. This paper investigates the mass marketing of luxury goods and explores the essence of masstige luxury consumption since the outbreak of COVID-19. An interpretive approach was conducted based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 31 participants. It analyzes four themes of mass luxury: self as content, self as process, self as context, and self–other. We further argue that the mass consumption of luxury reduces cognitive dissonance, with the pandemic resolving the dark side of conventional luxury consumption. Our findings provide important insights for both scholars and practitioners in the development of a more holistic understanding of masstige in the post-COVID era.

1. Introduction

As an accelerator of transformation, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in major changes in the global luxury industry, resetting the priorities of consumers of luxury goods. According to [Bain and Company \(2021\)](#), the luxury market retracted by 23% in 2020 but is currently estimated to be worth €1 trillion worldwide, a return to its 2015 level. Plummeting purchasing power has created massive uncertainty about the ability of luxury brands to rebound and has resulted in shifts in consumption patterns and consumer perspectives that have upset the equilibrium of power (BCG, 2020), making the democratization of luxury a priority. This democratization is consistent with a shift of attention to the theoretical evolution and practical applicability of mass luxury ([Kumar, Paul, & Starčević, 2021](#); [Das et al., 2021](#)). The term “masstige”, meaning the mass consumption of luxury goods, combines the terms “mass”, which refers to the mass accessibility, and “prestige”, which refers to symbolizing luxury through the use of premium prices or conspicuous logos. Masstige represents affordability and availability in the mass market ([Kumar, Paul, & Unnithan, 2020](#)). The mass supply of luxury products has become more prominent and gradually attracted the attention of marketers because, in doing so, luxury brands can maximize their profits and generate additional revenue ([Paul, 2018](#); [Kumar et al., 2020](#)). The past decade has seen many well-known luxury brands, including Louis Vuitton, Tiffany & Co., Burberry, Victoria’s Secret, and

Bath & Body Works adopting the masstige strategy ([Silverstein & Fiske, 2003](#)). This has become particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused economic hardship and resource scarcity, hindering people’s ability to meet their basic needs and causing significant changes in consumption patterns and consumer perceptions ([Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019](#); [Dubois, Jung, & Ordabayeva, 2020](#)). These changes have been seen in a range of areas, from ownership to experiential luxury, from temporary to sustainable investments, and from lavish to ethical lifestyles ([McKinsey, 2021](#)).

The current understanding of masstige, despite its significance, is still lagging. Researchers have begun to explore the masstige strategy in brand management ([Paul, 2018](#)), consumer happiness ([Kumar et al., 2021](#)), and mass prestige value and competition in emerging markets ([Kumar & Paul, 2018](#)). A recent review article stresses the importance of masstige and proposes a mass–luxury continuum. However, the authors state that the nature of masstige needs to be explored further and call for more research in this area ([Kumar et al., 2020](#)). Therefore, this research aims to explore the nature of masstige by adding self-related dimensions grounded in consumer psychology ([Shahid, Islam, Farooqi, & Thomas, 2021](#); [Shukla, Rosendo-Rios, & Khalifa, 2022](#)). Masstige may be understood as a vehicle to achieving one’s desired self-image or self-expression at an affordable price ([Hung & David, 2020](#)). The detailed reason of adopting the self-determined connotation are as follows. First, the notion of prestige has also evolved beyond traditional

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concepts of luxury. For example, living a healthy life or being environmentally friendly have become signs of higher status and cultural capital, transforming from being extrinsic (interpersonal/social) to being intrinsic (self-related) (Loureiro, Jiménez-Barreto, & Romero, 2020; Dubois et al., 2020). However, few empirical studies have been conducted to support this claim. Moreover, these emerging concepts of luxury (e.g., green, healthy, sustainable) appear to contradict the temporary focus and hedonism associated with traditional luxury consumption. Sustainability and luxury have been in conflict for decades, exemplified by notions such as “luxuriousness with enduring quality” (Sun, Bellezza, & Paharia, 2021), but we now need to redefine what luxury means for the masses since the outbreak of the pandemic. Moreover, the traditional consumption of luxury goods and display of prestige have been associated with negative psychological dissonance. This dissonance relates to discrepancies in definitions of luxury and prestige between the self and external audiences, conflicts between the ever-evolving social norms and consumer values, and the negative emotions (e.g., guilt or shame) associated with conspicuous consumption (Dubois et al., 2020). These negative responses have consequently backfired on the hedonic essence of luxury experiences and have largely impaired consumer well-being. Therefore, this heterogeneity in the definition of luxury (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014) requires the consideration of the nature of masstige to mitigate psychological dissonance.

Thus, this research aims to answer the following research questions:

How has the role of “self” transformed the meaning of luxury since the COVID-19 outbreak?

How have mass consumers adapted the meaning of luxury during the pandemic?

How do mass consumers manage their cognitive dissonance in day-to-day life, and how does this influence their perceived meaning of luxury?

To address the research questions, we took an interpretive approach, utilizing participants’ personal experiences gathered via semi-structured interviews from a total sample of 31. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically according to the theoretical constructs in the masstige luxury consumption and cognitive dissonance literature. This research builds on previous research on prestige and mass luxury consumption and makes several contributions to the literature. First, it addresses the existing gaps in the knowledge by exploring the ways in the mass consumers integrate their self-concept (inside-out vs. outside-in) with luxury consumption, thus offers a philosophical position relating mass luxury to dimensions of self. Second, the paper is the first to examine mass luxury consumption in the COVID-19 era. It extends the application of dissonance coping theories to the mass luxury consumption context, which involves tensions between conspicuous mindlessness and mindfulness and between self-extension and essential needs. The paper concludes with theoretical and managerial implications that may shape the ongoing masstige debate in the luxury consumption context.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The following section defines key concepts and theoretical gaps by reviewing the relevant literature in both the masstige and luxury consumption fields. Drawing on this literature review, the research methodology and findings are presented, followed by a reflection on the study and its implications for masstige theory development and luxury goods practitioners.

2. Literature review

The notion of masstige, also known as mass luxury, was initially introduced by Silverstein and Fiske (2003). They posited that luxury is no longer for the affluent classes alone, but rather its audience has expanded to mass segments due to the accelerated aspiration of living a superior life, as well as luxury items’ availability to the majority (Paul, 2019). According to Kumar et al. (2020), distinct from conventional

luxury, masstige (mass + prestige) complements the concept of “accessible luxury,” as mass consumers seek prestige status at an affordable price. This affordability addresses luxury’s new core attribute of mass accessibility, making it different from conventional luxury, which emphasized status symbols and rarity, exclusivity, and discrimination (Veblen & Mills, 2017). In practice, to offer price-based accessibility, luxury retailers could either implement downward brand extensions or develop new brands to execute masstige strategies (Kumar & Paul, 2018)). In fact, different paradigms have been used to study mass luxury, such as the bandwagon luxury consumption model, which underlies social recognition (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014), and the populism paradigm, which emphasizes the acceptability of ideology for masstige (Granot, Russell, & Brashear-Alejandro, 2013). The key points of masstige lie in the balance of prestige limited to luxury symbolism and mass accessibility. What consumers consider as “prestige” has drawn much scholarly attention and has given birth to a new democratized luxury concept in the pandemic era (Kapferer, 2015). Therefore, how marketers execute masstige strategies should focus not only on price reduction, as this diminishes the luxury sentiment and perception. Contrary to the current literature, we consider prestige as an inside-out process, leading to “real hedonism” that reduces psychological dissonance, and we note that accessibility and affordability for the masses has moved beyond monetary presentation forms to a more self-constructive process based on self-oriented motivations. The literature on luxury attributes, as well as the literature gaps, is outlined in the following section.

2.1. The transformation of mass luxury under mint condition

2.1.1. From extrinsically to intrinsically self-oriented luxury

Prior research on luxury consumption has focused on understanding consumers’ extrinsic motivation (Kim, Hyun, & Park, 2020; Shao, Grace, & Ross, 2019) for an impressive exterior (e.g., Dhaliwal, Singh, & Paul, 2020; Wang, Ma, Li, & Zhang, 2020), which reflects the importance of others’ perceptions in luxury consumption. The display of conspicuousness and prestige is the most significant impetus. However, today’s consumers (Shahid & Paul, 2021) have paid increasing attention to their intrinsic motivations that fulfill their “intrinsic self” (e.g., internal desire; Berlyne, 1966), including self-directed pleasure, self-love (Tsai, 2005), and personal goals (Wilcox, Kim, & Sen, 2009) that are unattached to external objects and bring them ultimate happiness. Consumers tend to feel intrinsically the opposite of what they show extrinsically, but still they revolve around their inner thoughts, emotions, and feelings (Wilcox et al., 2009). To be specific on this perspective, Ahuvia (2005) suggested that consumption behavior is only conducted to reflect “self-expression.” Mick and DeMoss (1990) indicated that self-gifting fundamentally increases self-worth. As a result, such intrinsic self-oriented motivations could lead to enhancing subjective happiness, as compared to extrinsic motivations (Hudders & Pandelaere, 2012). However, little is known about which aspects leads to these self-driven motivations that enrich luxury experiences. In addition, previously studied self-oriented luxury values are normally directed at emotional well-being, hedonism (Parks & Guay, 2009), and cognitive well-being (Ahuvia & Wong, 2002) since personal values are originated from self-centric evaluations (Rokeach, 1973) and individuals are oriented towards their inner thoughts and feelings (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). This study will expand on this domain.

The concept of mass luxury is split into “mass” and “luxury.” It is generally portrayed as the idea of sensory pleasure, glossy and conspicuous (Park, Reisinger, & Noh, 2010), and is generally of decent quality and overpriced compared to its functional value (Ko, Costello, & Taylor, 2019). Mass luxury is also associated with traits of uniqueness, symbolism, and innovation (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2018), though the concept of luxury has never been precisely defined. Traditional luxury addresses the delivery of symbolism and expression of social exclusivity. Per the theory of the leisure class (Veblen & Mills, 2017), the core of luxury has been constantly reconstructed and managed for the

preservation of social distinction. The conspicuous nature of luxury helps it to gain prestige, reflected in interpersonal admiration (e.g., mating goals) and social evolutionary demands (e.g., respect of social hierarchy and differentiation afforded by others) (Loureiro et al., 2020). Consistent with this research vein, the state aroused by another being's mere presence magnifies the emotional value of luxury goods (Dubois et al., 2020). Apart from the multi-faceted social perspectives, research of personal luxury mainly refers to the symbolic and hedonic dimensions. The symbolic domains primarily relate to the benefits of enhancing self-esteem, validating self-identity, and promoting social identity by consuming luxury goods (Sirgy, 2018). Such a product-centric approach has emphasized the control power of marketers over what can be conceived as luxury or prestige, through a combination of tactics in pricing and communication strategies (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). The psychological benefits of such can be considered as an outside-in process brought about by external objects in the commercial context, which is extrinsically oriented by nature. However, with the extended scope of luxury consumption beyond traditional luxury categories, consumers are seeking new meanings and benefits of prestige in luxury consumption (Currid-Halkett, 2017). A growing body of literature seeks to perceive luxury as intrinsically oriented, restricted only by consumers' perceptual abilities. For example, Kim, Park, and Dubois (2018) indicated the significance of subjective and aesthetic hedonism when responding to sophisticated intrapersonal desires. von Wallpach, Hemetsberger, Thomsen, and Belk (2020) further raised the issue of subversive customer-defined everyday luxuries, specifically the ephemeral moments that take consumers away from their mundane lives and daily routines. Holmqvist, Wirtz, and Fritze (2020), Holmqvist, Ruiz, and Peñaloza (2020) conceptualized moments of luxury as a transient hedonic escape from the worries or responsibilities of life. In this vein, luxury can be considered a self-perceived concept, transformed into the most unanticipated contexts, triggered economically, and made accessible to the masses (e.g., Kreuzer, Cado, & Raies, 2020; von Wallpach et al., 2020), which implies that luxury can be internalized and self-determined. However, research has just started to investigate this stream, and the deeper rationale between "self" and luxury remains mythical. Whether we can treat mass luxury as an inside-out process within an individual merits our research attention.

2.1.2. Dissonance-induced traditional luxury

Cognitive dissonance is defined as psychological discomfort caused by cognitive discrepancies among one's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and it is closely associated with individual self-domains (Markus & Wurf, 1987) since values and dissonance are uniquely constructed by one's intrinsic self. Cognitive dissonance is a multi-faceted phenomenon (Markus & Wurf, 1987) that reflects understandings of the external world (Hinds & Bailey, 2003). The psychological discrepancies between the positive and negative sociometric and psychological drivers and consequences for luxury consumption were first illustrated by Dubois et al. (2020). The dark side of luxury consumption and prestige display has been identified at different social, economic, and psychological levels.

From the psychological level, one's ownership of luxury goods with high prices heightens his or her pride. Since pride is viewed as antisocial or selfish, it consequently can trigger negative emotions, such as guilt and shame (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014). Recent literature emphasizes the psychological costs of ego-focused luxury consumption (e.g., self-indulgence, vanity-seeking), which generates dissonant feelings such as regret, self-reproach, and buyer's remorse (Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012). This impairs well-being (Harmon-Jones, 2019) and could lead to negative consequences such as product return (Powers & Jack, 2013) and reluctance of repurchase (Wu, Chaney, Chen, Nguyen, & Melewar, 2015). From the economic level, dissonance triggered by the nature of luxury consumption was based upon conspicuousness, excessiveness, or ostentatiousness, which creates conflicts between consumers' desires and aspirations, personal values, responsibilities, or

social norms (e.g., thriftiness) (Borges, 2014). For example, materialism is argued to be against community and affiliation values (Grouzet et al., 2005), which damages consumers' social well-being (Moldes & Ku, 2020). Additionally, luxury consumption driven by sensory satisfactions (e.g., wearing animal fur) is considered extravagant and environmental unfriendly and induces dissonance as a consequence (Rolling, Seifert, Chattaraman, & Sadachar, 2021). Moreover, due to its perceived association with excessive privilege, luxury consumption itself triggers inauthentic feelings from the bottom up, which consequently leads to a lack of confidence (Goor, Ordabayeva, Keinan, & Crener, 2020). Moreover, from the interpersonal (social) level, luxury consumers are perceived as less warm, materialistic, and self-aggrandizing in job settings and mating contexts, and even as culturally insensitive during a time of recession (Goenka & Thomas, 2020). These perceptions may potentially harm interpersonal relationships and may eventually damage the brands being consumed. For example, the perceived conspicuousness of an unearned luxury item may induce adverse psychological responses in the observer (e.g., unfairness). In this way, brand dilution undermines the prestige consumers' attempt to achieve, which warrants the consideration of how to sustain or maintain a nuanced meaning of both luxury and prestige that is relatively dissonance-free.

However, consumers have shown growing concerns towards personal and social issues such as personal well-being, economic recessions, and environmental degradation (Borges, 2014); therefore, a more conscious mode of consumption rises in response to these conditions, one which grants justification for one's spending and thus mitigates dissonance levels while maintaining one's feeling of pleasure. Theoretically, dissonance literature has suggested multi-compensatory behaviors to lessen or reduce such discomforts caused by luxury consumption, such as pro-environmental behavior, disposal (Holland, Meertens, & Vugt, 2002), and recycling (Elgaaied, 2012). Since consumers actually tend to avoid purchasing luxury items as extrinsic means to display their social status, but rather respond more favorably towards luxury consumption that aligns with their intrinsic values (Shahid & Paul, 2021), the question of whether we can moderate inherent dissonance in luxury consumption through altering intrinsic luxury perceptions merits further research.

2.1.3. Core of hedonism and psychological consonance as a result

The hedonic school of thought claims that consumers' motivations are emotional in essence (Bhat & Reddy, 1998). Weijers (2012) considered hedonism as a multi-dimensional concept that is closely tied to one's intrinsic benefits and emotional response concerning indulgence. Psychological or motivational hedonism asserts that human behavior is decided by the inner desire to amplify pleasure and reduce suffering. Current studies of luxury have mainly contributed to this research, focusing on the role of ownership and utility in arousing intensive affective states (e.g., multi-sensory satisfaction, fantasy, and emotive dimensions of product use). Examples include the transient happiness incurred through monetary efforts (e.g., luxury resorts offering superior services) (Hung, Ren, & Qiu, 2021) or a status-seeking purchase that brings satisfaction and pride (Nyadzayo, Johnson, & Rossi, 2020). However, such forms of hedonism could backfire; in fact, recent work sheds light on the psychological costs of luxury consumption that impairs one's well-being and results in dissonant feelings. For example, Goor et al. (2020) found that luxury consumption brings inauthentic feelings on account of undue privilege and consequently, results in an increase in pride, which is often identified as an antisocial or egoistic emotion (Ki, Lee, & Kim, 2017; McFerran, Aquino, & Tracy, 2014). The short-term hedonism of obtaining conspicuous goods triggers negative effects, such as guilt, which generate dissonance. Such a string of negative consequences reminds us of other forms of hedonism that repair such feelings, such as axiological hedonism, which considers pleasure as associated with intrinsic values and as the only constituent part of well-being. The core to axiological hedonism lies in the difference between intrinsic and instrumental value. An entity has intrinsic value if

it is good as itself, instead of serving as a means to achieving something else. In fact, there has been a booming recognition of eudemonic well-being, and particularly self-realization, as a new luxury (Iloranta, 2019). There is also ethical hedonism, which bases pleasure on the rightness of one's behavior. In accordance with self-determination theory, joviality is generated by the fulfillment of one's duty and commitments (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Furthermore, the Epicurean school suggests that a peaceful mind brings ultimate hedonism and helps one achieve a genuinely pleasant life. Such a moderate form of hedonism tends towards spiritual harmony, balance, calmness, and temperance; it is not based on a costly, extravagant experience or on the acceleration of corporal satisfaction, but rather on a deeper understanding of the beauty of one's surroundings, interpersonal relationships, intrapersonal harmony, and the art of avoiding suffering, which is also known as consonance (vs. dissonance).

Consonance and dissonance are two contrary terminologies and can only be defined in respect to each other. As discussed above, dissonance is a negative psychological state generated from cognitive conflicts, which therefore motivates individuals to restore consonance due to their need for consistency (Sirgy, Lee, Johar, & Tidwell, 2008). Up until now, research on the motivations and impacts of psychological consonance in luxury consumption has been rare. According to Hobbs (2007), the hedonism of a soul involves psychic harmony amongst its constituent parts, which leads to a healthy state of mind characterized by peace and contentment (Augustin, 2021). In addition, Veblen's conspicuousness proposition for the leisure class also relies on cognitive consonance (Almeida, 2014).

2.2. The nature of the pandemic and the consequent dissonance

The World Health Organization (WHO) asserted that COVID-19 is a global pandemic arising from the coronavirus SARS-CoV2 (WHO, 2020), and that it is spreading around the world at a fast speed, is prolonged rather than a single traumatic incident, and is a greatly stressful, challenging, and life-altering event. In the widest sense, much like "plague" or "epidemic," "pandemic" refers to the transmission of a particular disease, triggering and sustaining risks and fears, and bringing interruptions to daily life with serious economic and psychosocial consequences. From an economic point of view, COVID-19 has resulted in a convergence towards the emerging market for luxury brands and a paradigm shift for global economic powers. In the global scope, society is facing an economic recession, resource scarcity, and a decrease in purchasing power across all industries. In the luxury domain, *masstige* strategy, which represents the affordability of prestige items for the masses, has become prominent for the major segmentations (e.g., the traditionally middle-income group and young consumers). This is especially true when there is an economic recession, decrease in purchasing power, or a consumption dilemma (Hung & David, 2020). In the era of COVID-19, the increasing death rate, rising cases, and incremental unemployment ratio due to economic hardship and resource scarcity have resulted in major psychological discomfort, such as worries about falling ill and anxiety caused by working continuously in a confined space. The fundamental change raised by social distancing, national lockdowns, and mask-wearing has brought a radical discontinuity to everyday routines and people's lifestyles. It hinders humans' abilities to meet their basic needs in nearly all areas (e.g., reduced social support due to social distancing, decreased activities which satisfy the demands for self-esteem or social approval), and its consequences are significant, long-lasting differences from the life to which people are accustomed. Moreover, understanding the potential threats and risks from the disease, but still feeling challenged by being restricted, generates attitude-behavior discrepancies and leads to dissonance, in addition to the aforementioned negative consequences of luxury consumption (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019). In short, the pandemic has caused dissonance as a result of the following intrapersonal dimensions:

- (a) being cognitively threatened (i.e., deep violation against existing assumptions of the world),
- (b) being chronic (continuous and enduring), and
- (c) being consequential (i.e., causing profound changes to daily functioning) (Brooks et al., 2020).

When dissonance occurs, individuals are motivated to seek strategies to eliminate or release this discomfort, and the stronger the intensity of the dissonance, the stronger the individual's motivation to reduce it (McGrath, 2020). As a consequence, dissonance influences consumers' attitudes, affects their internalization of values, and ramifies their decision-making, as well as impacts their other psychological processes (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019).

In sum, this paper aims to bridge the existing literature gaps by first arguing mass luxury as an intrinsically (self) rather than an extrinsically (interpersonal) oriented process, focusing on the essence of hedonism. In the process, the dissonance caused by the dark side of traditional luxury or prestige-seeking consumption behavior that was aggravated by the pandemic will be mitigated, which also determines the external form of mass luxury in the post-COVID era.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research approach

This research analyzes what consumers perceive to be *masstige* in the luxury context under the pandemic. We seek to select and manifest experiences and feelings that qualify as mass luxury from the consumer's perspective during the pandemic era. In accordance with this objective, our overall research approach is interpretive, and it focuses on participants' lived experiences (Thompson & Haytko, 1997), "striving towards empathetic understanding" (Tracy & Robles, 2013, p143). Enlightened by the criteria of a typical phenomenological investigation, as profiled by Edmund Husserl, our data collection aims to uncover participants' "intentional experience ... which views without presumptions obtained from other objects and experiences (referring to 'Noesis-Noema') just like they are experienced" (Hopkins & Drummond, 2015, p144). It also indicates that as researchers, we suspend our judgment, while paying close attention to how individuals experience the Noesis-Noema correlation (Farina, 2014). Moreover, we conducted semi-structured interviews that allowed researchers to ask probing questions, discover new relevant issues, and increase the rapport between the interviewer and interviewees (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

3.2. Sample, data collection, and analysis

The primary data were collected using the convenience sampling method. This type of non-probability sampling method identifies informants who were selected from a list of the researchers' personal contacts (Sousa & Rocha, 2019). Overall, 40 individuals were contacted and asked the following filter questions: "Can you think of five experiences or moments that captured 'accessible luxury' for you during the last year?" and "Can you think of any changes (in buying luxury) brought about by the pandemic?" A total sample of 31 customers agreed to be interviewed, and the participants ranged in age from 21 to 54 years old (see Table 1). The sample was diverse, with a number of ethnicities, educational backgrounds, and occupations represented. Acknowledgement that interviewees attach a personalized connotation to mass luxury could be comprehended only if it is integrated with contextual sensitivity associated with cultural consensus (Thompson, Gibson, Plewniak, Jeanmougin, & Higgins, 1997). Data were collected from a multi-site empirical area covering five Western countries (the UK, Poland, Finland, the United States of America, and Turkey), and four Eastern countries (China, India, Iran, and Korea).

We used e-mail and Zoom correspondence for participant recruitment, appointment arrangement, and preparing participants with pre-

Table 1
Sample characteristics.

No.	Name	Age	Gender	Nationality	Civil State	Education	Occupation
1	CH1	21	Male	Chinese	Single	Undergraduate	Student
2	CH2	22	Male	Chinese	Relationship	Postgraduate	Student
3	CH3	26	Female	Chinese	Single	Undergraduate	Accountant
4	CH4	32	Female	Chinese	Married	Postgraduate	Teacher
5	CH5	35	Female	Chinese	Married	Postgraduate	Teacher
6	CH6	32	Female	Chinese	Married	Postgraduate	Lecturer
7	BR1	35	Male	British	Single	Postgraduate	Engineer
8	BR2	39	Male	British	Married	Postgraduate	Musician
9	BR3	54	Male	British	Single	Postgraduate	Farmer
10	BR4	40	Female	British	Married	Undergraduate	Civil Servant
11	BR5	23	Male	British	Single	Undergraduate	Photographer
12	BR6	24	Male	British	Single	Undergraduate	Doctor
13	BR7	24	Male	British	Single	Undergraduate	Designer
14	BR8	50	Female	British	Single	Undergraduate	Social Worker
15	BR9	24	Male	British	Single	Undergraduate	Student
16	AM1	45	Male	American	Married	Postgraduate	Language Tutor
17	AM2	31	Female	American	Married	Undergraduate	Pharmacist
18	IN1	23	Male	Indian	Single	Postgraduate	Student
19	IN2	21	Male	Indian	Single	Undergraduate	Student
20	IN3	24	Female	Indian	Single	Undergraduate	Programmer
21	IN4	23	Female	Indian	Single	Postgraduate	Lawyer
22	IN5	24	Female	Indian	Single	Undergraduate	Programmer
23	TU1	25	Female	Turkish	Relationship	Undergraduate	Student
24	KO1	36	Female	Korean	Relationship	Postgraduate	Lecturer
25	KO2	45	Male	Korean	Married	Postgraduate	Estate agent
26	PO1	37	Female	Polish	Relationship	Postgraduate	Writer
27	FI1	28	Male	Finnish	Single	Postgraduate	Engineer
28	IR1	25	Female	Iranian	Single	Undergraduate	Mathematician
29	GE1	26	Male	German	Relationship	Undergraduate	Bank Clerk
30	GE2	42	Female	German	Single	Undergraduate	Social Worker
31	PA1	24	Female	Pakistani	Relationship	Undergraduate	Student

Notes: BR = British, CN = Chinese, IN = Indian, KO = Korean, FI = Finish, AM = United States of American, IR = Iranian, PK = Pakistani, PO = Polish, GE = German, TU = Turkish. The interviewees were randomly numbered.

instructions, including consent forms and the interview questions. This preparatory stage asked participants to think of five experiences or moments that captured “accessible luxury” for them during the last year. Participants were prompted to expound on their actual experiences, temporal feelings, and the meanings they associated with themselves (e. g., they were asked how this experience helped to construct their self-concept). They were also asked to reflect on their perception of the changes brought about by the pandemic. Moreover, participants were encouraged to provide deeper answers by following a soft-laddering approach (Grunert & Grunert, 1995) in order to unravel the self-related meaning attached to mass luxury. Through non-intrusive and non-directive interview techniques, we were able to attain profound insights into consumers’ actual experiences. Interviews took place mainly via Zoom and lasted between 30 and 80 min, with an average duration of 45 min. They were audio recorded and transcribed manually.

Following the recommendations of Grounded Theory methodology (Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2020), data were coded and analyzed to develop properties and concepts. Interview content analysis was carried out to generate open coding. This method allows a clearly defined procedure based on a coding system, including labels, concepts, and words used to produce theories from the interviews, rather than simply to find facts (Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2020). We employed a two-stage coding process: open coding and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). First, in the open coding step, two independent researchers carefully listened to the recorded interviews and transcribed important concepts that could connect to the underlying theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). An inductive coding tree was built based on both the key words generated by “NVivo” and constructed codes. The concepts identified through analysis were related to the participants’ perceptions of self-oriented mass luxury. Second, these first-order concepts were grouped into unified categories or themes. This axial coding step allowed the researchers to draw conclusions about consumer perceptions of masstige luxury during the

pandemic. Four core themes were created: self as content, self as process, self as context, and self as other. Theoretical integration of the themes formed the basis of a theoretical framework of self-concept in the masstige luxury context. The findings redefine mass luxury as an inside-out process within oneself, rather than outside-in process. Regardless of culture, stage of modernization, social class, age, or gender, our findings contributed common themes. Overall, the similarities and differences of the coding procedures were compared, discussed, and revised by two researchers, allowing us to generate consistent findings.

Nevertheless, instead of counting on meaning to appear from axial coding on its own, we also travelled back and forth between the interview data and relevant literature, following an iterative fashion. For instance, we reviewed the literature on how masstige is a proxy for attaining one’s ideal self (Kumar et al., 2020) and a mechanism for building consumers’ identities (Solomon, 2016). We also noted our interpretation of masstige luxury consumption, which manifests as “at peace with myself” and as self-affirmation that demarcates conventional luxury and masstige luxury. The researchers’ different backgrounds (i.e., having extensive experience in psychology or luxury consumption) ensured the triangulation of data and introduced a certain level of “cultural distance” for the interpretation of the themes.

4. Findings

Our iterative readings of the 165 moments or experiences that we recorded, all of which occurred during the pandemic, revealed that the perceived meaning of mass luxury has shifted from extraordinary experiences to different types of self-oriented processes embedded in everyday life. This perception is associated with basic needs fulfillment and is a result of perceived scarcity, whereby consumers tend to pursue a shared ideal state of mind that can be defined as psychological consonance. Specifically, the results redefine mass luxury as an inside-out process within oneself, rather than an outside-in process. Looking into

philosophical rationalizations of the different degrees of self (e.g., self as content, self as process, self as context, and self as other) enables the most flexible way of self-functioning from social, economic, and psychological perspectives, which resonates with our reflective interpretation of self-oriented mass luxury. By consistently associating one’s experiences or feelings with a firm point of reference that endures across time, one can obtain a sense of oneself. A summary of the findings is shown in Fig. 1. The interview themes are shown in Appendix.

4.1. *Masstige as self-context: Observational self as detachment*

According to the theory of acceptance and commitment (Sterba, 1934), humans do not always act as a participant. Rather, one’s consciousness, which experiences given feelings or perceptions and which functions as an observer of one’s inward world, underlines the point that perceptions have no actual power over actions. This observation occurs as a luxury, as a detachment from facts, emotions, and other external stimuli—namely the observational self—and is considered to be a prominent state of self-awareness attained through the mindful extension of one’s awareness. This is an ideal state from which individuals can move forward and progress. Turunen, Cervellon, and Carey (2020) similarly argued that “detachment” is predominant in the transactional evolution of luxury consumption. Specifically, they consider the luxury disposal process a detachment from a highly valued past-self, represented by a costly object, which enables a more empowered and controlled present. In our study, the narratives revealed that this luxury disposal process is accessible in the sense that everyone may have self-awareness, yet not everyone is able to fully understand its meaning. In

other words, it is more than a trendy word, but rather a true privilege to have an internal regulation process which can bring life-long change. This idea surfaced in interviewees’ accounts when they reported access to a transcendent sense of self through meditative activities, such as intellectual contemplation, repetitive movements, or simply keeping a diary (Luchs & Mick, 2018). The observations that individuals make from the angle of another being provide reflective self-affirmation and compassion, as if from a loyal friend, as well a clearer vision of oneself. This offers the individual more control over the external world, resolves their inner conflicts, helps them to attain calmness, and provides them with a form of restoration for upcoming stresses.

It allows individuals to see things from a completely different perspective. For example, the interview participant (IN5, Programmer, age 24) said,

“Writing in my diary, talking to myself is the most luxurious [activity] for me. Talking to my best friend builds up my own confidence, and I can see where to improve. It feels like someone has got your back and supports you.”

In this vein, individuals are free from socially or contextually embedded roles and can see themselves from a third angle. Such detachment from obstacles and constraints leads to the acquisition of a peaceful mind, self-awareness, and free time, each of which is perceived to be scarce in modern life and is thus interpreted as luxury (Hemetsberger et al., 2012). This process helps with achievement of one’s self-actualization goals. In the meantime, our interviewees perceived that they regained their inner peace and reduced burdens in a constructive way:

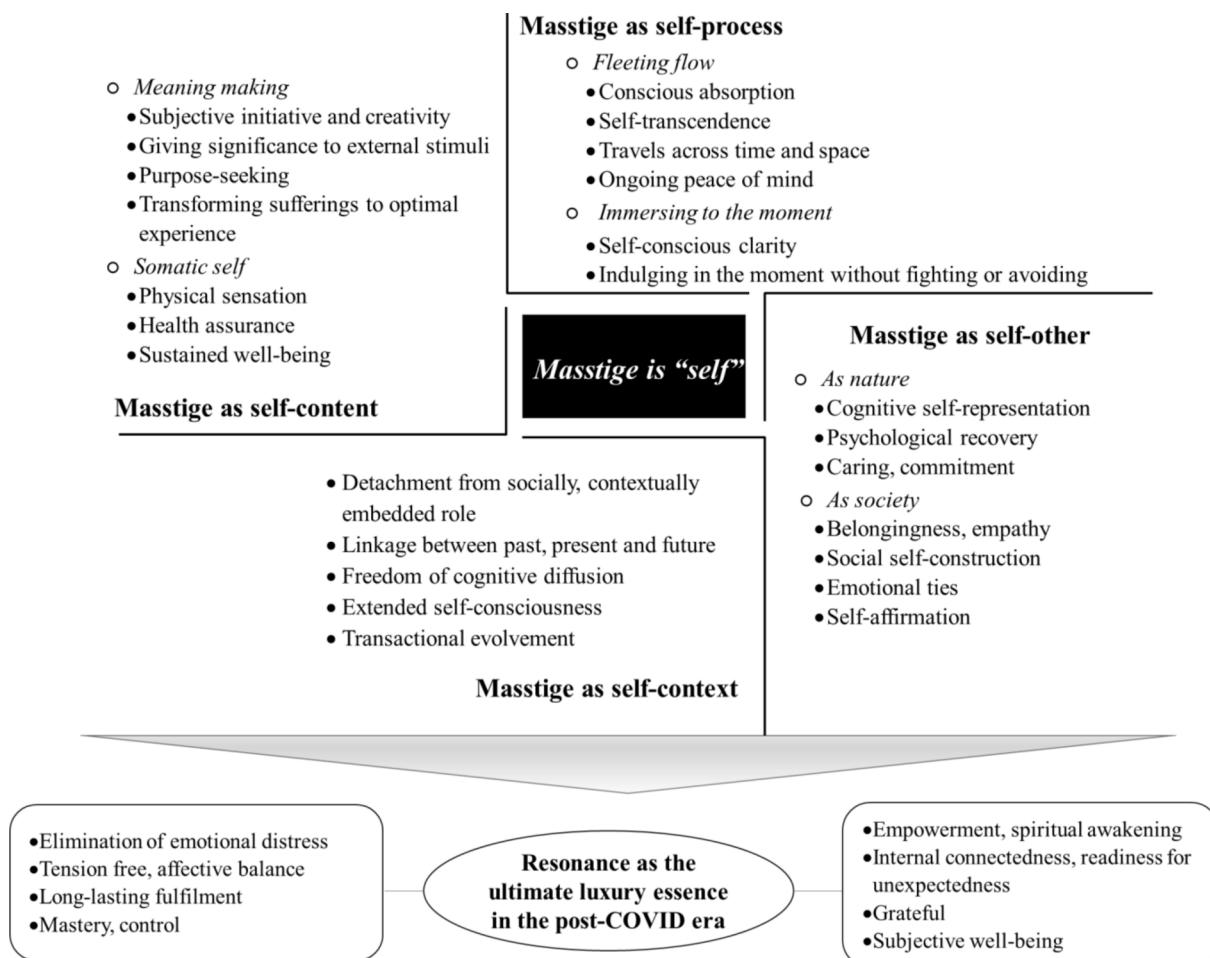


Fig. 1. Summary of findings.

“The most luxurious thing in my life now is to detach myself from my own problems in that way, and my feeling is relief, and I’m better at accepting things, like I’m doing my best already.” (GE2, Social worker, age 42)

This balancing contemplation does not necessarily eliminate emotional distress for individuals. Rather, it keeps them steadily free of affect, and instead ensures a long-lasting calm state of mind and a sense of mastery and control, consequently bringing positive energy to the external world or other beings. Epicurean hedonism also suggests that this life approach aspires to be rational and balanced, and a state of bliss should not involve sensual pleasures, but mainly experiences of the mind (Roubal, 2018). This process of love and calmness was described as “keeping one’s cup full” by (PA1, student, age 24). Such processes make our interviewees feel empowered through an extended self, which is linked to the essence of luxury (Belk, 1988; Freire, 2014). Instead of a feeling of detachment or disassociation from reality, the interviewees reported a feeling of connectedness that emerged paradoxically:

“I think over time, I have been able to connect with myself better and realize when to be hard on myself and when to be nice to myself, just getting that nice balance. So, I’m not just accepting everything that I do, but definitely things are more under control.” (PA1, social worker, age 24)

Apart from the enlightenment of being in a constant state of knowing and mindfulness, some of our interviewees consider the meditative process as a luxury since it brings a spiritual awakening and provides profound insights into life and oneself; thereby, it prepares individuals for the unexpectedness and uncertainty of upcoming events. For example, participant (IR1, Mathematician, age 25) described,

“The practice [meditative activities] feels like an inside-out version of myself. This is actually a luxurious way of life. And it gets me ready for the day because with more awakening of my mind and body, I feel like there’s more space in me, and also in my spirit as well, to help me set up for the challenge or whatever is coming up in the rest of the day.”

In summary, this conscious dissociation of oneself has enabled the person to achieve a harmonious state and look at reality with a calmer, clearer, and more connected state of mind. As Epicureanism suggests, to bring peace into one’s mind helps one to achieve a genuinely pleasant life, accompanied by spiritual harmony, balance, calmness, and temperance, which is not based upon leading a costly, extravagant life or on sensory pleasures, but rather on deeper values of harmony and avoiding suffering (Hobbs, 2007). This is consistent with the research on luxury, which is linked with freedom from distractions, such as different sorts of noises, having to think, or simply trying to subconsciously fit into a particular social context (Llamas & Thomsen, 2016). However, the narratives in our study enlarged the meaning of experiential luxury, which is traditionally defined as freedom from necessity, enforcement, or constraint on choices, actions, and even attachments (Merriam-Webster, 2012). The observational perspective also added new implications to the meaning of freedom through enabling cognitive diffusion, which helps to separate oneself from one’s thoughts. In addition, instead of the escape from reality (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982) as an essential part of the consumption experience, the observational self allows individuals to be more present in the moment and provides them with the internal freedom from being a participant. This observational self is a process of spiritual awakening in which people explore higher levels of love and the self to understand how much more in control a person could be over what they feel or fear. It enables one to feel like another being who acts as a connection or intermediate during any incidents. This is regarded by the masses as a privilege, though it is beyond the traditional meaning of prestige (Kumar et al., 2020). Also distinct from previous studies (Turunen et al., 2020), our study focuses on the simultaneous increase of self-mastery and a longer-lasting luxurious state. In addition, the elements of connectedness (vs. detachment) emerged many times, as with the integrated self or with the past or future. Sarial-Abi, Vohs,

Hamilton, and Ulqinaku (2017) found that the reinforcement of mental connections linking the past, present, and future helped alleviate psychological threats, which in our case refers to the post-pandemic dissonant state.

4.2. Masstige as self-content

Different from self-context, self-content typically refers to a person as the center of everything in which he or she has participated (e.g., activities, places) (McHugh, Stewart, & Almada, 2019). In this category, we found that several dimensions emerged from our interviews, all of which are dominated by individuals’ participation. The content of these activities is based on one’s subjective initiative and creativity in consciousness regardless of the outside world, which offers an optimal luxurious experience during a difficult time.

4.2.1. Thinking self as meaning-making

Within self-content, the thinking self refers to the inner monologue that proactively evaluates, questions, reasons, and rationalizes any given moment, situation, or behavior. We found that the interviewees tend to consider meaningfulness as a sort of attainable luxury, or they tend to embed meaning into small, everyday activities. Meaning-making is the process by which people make sense of their collective experiences by exercising their willpower to find meaning and purpose in life—or to give significance to others’ lives—and to live accordingly (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2018). The motivation for seeking meaning might be the experience of suffering that demands answers to existential doubts, such as “What sort of life is worth living since it is already so hard?” People are more interested in meaning-making in a pandemic since their pre-assumed world is shattered, and how they used to achieve happiness and self-identity has been taken away (Llamas & Thomsen, 2016). This invokes the momentum for individuals to seek their real self and true purpose in life. In line with the latest findings on the influence of COVID-19, meaningful living has a positive impact on resilience and subjective well-being (Yıldırım, Arslan, & Özaslan, 2020). There appears to be a major shift away from situating oneself in a consumeristic reality and towards a transcendental society that serves a greater purpose than oneself, which marks the beginning of a meaningful life (Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014; Wong, 2016) and helps people to bounce back from the challenges of supplementing psychological resources and practicing adaptive flexibility. Rosenberg (2020) also indicated that the need to embrace and transform suffering into a meaningful experience is at the foundation of individual growth, resilience building, and psychological functioning. Expressions such as “painful but rewarding,” “it pays off,” “feeling the constant growth,” and “more open to self-betterments,” are used to describe such processes. As Kunchambo, Lee, and Brace-Govan (2017) suggested, this creation of meaning initiates affection and brings eudemonic hedonisms, which serve one’s self-realization goals (Ryan & Deci, 2001). This is in line with Chitturi, Raghunathan, and Mahajan (2008) viewpoint that consumers tend to associate hedonic product benefits with the fulfillment of promotional goals that a person aspires to meet. In our narratives, in contrast to a short-term focus, interviewees emphasize growth and advancement that results from practices in which they engage with the challenges they meet because this rewards them with long-term contentment and satisfaction. Words like “positive change,” “accomplishment,” and “self-actualize” emerged in the narratives. For example, (BR5, Photographer, age 23) described such an evolving process of luxury and self-actualization,

“If everything you’re doing is too easy, then maybe you’re not pushing yourself as far as usual. That’s maybe something that’s unhealthy for me. I think I have to be constantly testing myself, and I definitely always look at myself as developing, that’s precious.”

Additionally, meaning can come from helping others and creating

values that affirm one's beliefs, bring self-satisfaction, and lead to a real sense of accomplishment and self-realization. According to [Shahid and Paul \(2021\)](#), consumers have the urge to achieve the highest level of need in Maslow's pyramid, "self-actualization." As (BR7, Designer, age 24) described,

"My biggest luxury is to be able to create, in the sense that I might be able to create something that someone who is like me but age 16 could read and feel a bit better about themselves."

Apart from the tendency to take initiative in their activities, our interviewees also found joy through embedding meaning into the everyday activities that they used to ignore. Thus, people tend to feel satisfied and fulfilled when acting in a pro-environmental way. According to ethical hedonism, if an action is morally right, it brings pleasures to an individual ([Boluki & Rodbari, 2016](#)). This is also in line with [Yıldırım and Güler \(2021\)](#) findings concerning psychological resolution toward the pandemic. For example, (KO1, Lecturer, age 36) said,

"Meaning is very important for me. So, always using my own coffee cup is a way for me to save the environment. I found that I am keeping this promise for myself, and even when no one else is watching me, it just makes me feel content and happy."

In sum, being proactive and deliberate with one's actions towards meanings and purposes (e.g., setting goals), embracing resilient resources, and adding meaning to one's actions are all conducive to individuals' sustainable well-being, quality of life, and optimism, each of which are considered luxuries by most of our respondents ([Minkkinen, Auvinen, & Mauno, 2020](#)). Again, these luxuries indicate preparedness for overall life incidents.

4.2.2. Somatic self as eternal property

The notion of the somatic self indicates that the relationship between humans and their physical bodies starts to develop ahead of their inner monologue, which accounts for the sense of consonance and dissonance, and which either attracts or rejects people according to certain aspects of their expressions and feelings. Since one's psychological response can be triggered by the somatic self, it is considered to be the cornerstone of one's self-concept ([Schalk, 2011](#)). In our study, the somatic self mainly emerged around such focuses as health, physical sensation, and taking care of the physical body. However, more important was the focus on long-lasting fulfillment, which adds sustainable value to one's life. This is decidedly distinctive from the materialism and traditional hedonism brought about by luxury consumption. It appears that the pandemic reduced luxury consumption due to biologically rooted uncertainty or stress, which forces humans to focus on development-oriented goals, such as preserving resources for the future, rather than on momentary indulgences ([Griskevicius et al., 2013](#)). This is clearly contrary to the conventional meaning of luxury. In fact, the concept of sustainability has for decades been increasingly associated with luxury and prestige, including the belief that a luxury item has a longer product life cycle (e.g., use, disposal, durability), historical heritage, and other timely attributes ([Gardetti, 2020](#); [Sun et al., 2021](#)). Moreover, living a healthy life for oneself and behaving in an environmentally friendly manner (e.g., purchasing specialized grocery items and fitness equipment) have become new symbols of one's high status and cultural capital. As (CH4, Teacher, age 32) described,

"I just found these things are more sustainable. If I have healthy relationships and good health, the happiness brought from these things can last a long time. But if I buy a nice dress, that happiness doesn't last—it won't make me truly happy."

In fact, it is not only momentary satisfaction, but also lasting benefits that our respondents said were constructive in obtaining premium and sustained well-being ([Taylor-Jackson et al., 2021](#)). The preparedness element also emerged in the idea of being sustainable, as well as the

belief that consistency in health-seeking actions brings permanent change to a person's life. For example, (BR6, Doctor, age 24) mentioned,

"Exercise gets you ready for work and cools your body down intellectually. It changes your mindset and the way you are eventually, through both workouts and diets."

4.3. Masstige as self-process

Human beings are dynamic creatures, and their ongoing sense of self metaphorically promotes the inner experience of coming and going as a natural process (i.e., like the clouds or the weather). If self as content is a solid domination of appointed content, "self as process" can be considered a more flexible flow of such content and of the human experience more generally. Self as process comes into being as an integral part of living a vital life ([Moran & McHugh, 2019](#)). As time flies by, individuals pass from instant to instant throughout their life. We found the following dimensions within this category of self as process.

4.3.1. Self as fleeting flow

[Csikszentmihalyi et al. \(2018\)](#) defined "flow" in the luxury context as the extent to which an experience genuinely satisfies a state of conscious concentration and enables consumers to become focused and absorbed in the activity, which brings deeper joy, transcendence, and perceived improvement in one's quality of life. Within such flow, a limited amount of information is given to cognitive space, with the exception of cognitive representations of self-concepts, which enables individuals to temporarily forget who they are. In this way, individuals are given the chance to expand and enrich themselves without being preoccupied with knowledge. This provisional loss of self-consciousness could direct the individual to self-transcendence, whereby the boundaries of his or her being are pushed forward and time seems to hold still. Time seems to emerge as fleeting instants, reoccurring intervals, or continuous activities appearing in both commercial and non-commercial settings. A "fleeting flow" is defined as a recurring time bucket that is controlled by the individual. Such periods involve the experience of freedom, uniqueness, and rareness, which are all related to luxury ([Kauppinen-Räsänen, Gummerus, von Koskull, & Cristini, 2019](#)). The interviewees immersed themselves in the ongoing process of "going with the flow" by taking a daily walk, running, being in the middle of a lake, or painting, allowing for the expression of their thoughts. They used phrases such as "drifting," "ongoing enjoyment," "following the attention where it feels relaxed," "not trying hard," and "let[ting] your mind wander" to describe the feelings of enlightenment and contentment generated from the flow of consciousness. For example, (BR8, Social worker, age 50) described her experience as follows,

"I tend as much as I can not to use any guide or any formal tools. I just sort of tend to walk, then if I'm staying in a city like Vienna, if I hear some sound that I fancy is coming from somewhere in the city, I might just be redirected suddenly, halfway through. It is just sort of relaxing."

Distinct from the freedom of escapist luxury ([Holmqvist, Wirtz, et al., 2020](#); [Holmqvist, Ruiz, et al., 2020](#)), another important feature of such fleeting processes is their effortlessness, which set people free from cognitive demands, such as "randomly watching funny shows without choosing" and "go[ing] with my will." (KO2, Estate agent, age 45) shared such feelings,

"It's kind of a luxury. I don't really like to plan too much. If I can just kind of decide where to go and follow my will...and it's stressful to even make decisions sometimes."

As opposed to being free from duties and goals, some participants valued taking the initiative to do things that one likes. (CH5, Teacher, age 35) revealed that she actually enjoys always working. Satisfaction and sureness are considered luxuries by this interviewee. From Hegel's philosophical point of view, the self does not "remain what one has become but situates in the absolute movement of becoming" ([Bubbio,](#)

2017, p105). For example, (CH5, Teacher, age 35) said,

“Once I finish this work, there’s always another thing popping up, I kind of enjoy the process of always progressing or being in the middle of something; it brings security.”

One’s aspiration towards luxury is experienced as a manifestation of freedom or flexibility and emerges in everyday life, putting individuals’ minds in an ongoing state of peaceful joy and bringing preparedness to their reality. It is a peaceful state of mind that is not necessarily generated through leisure time, but rather in the process of fulfilling one’s duty.

4.3.2. Immersing the somatic self in the moment

In this category, we find that our interviewees tend to treat themselves as sensory beings who are fully engaged in the moment as a way of self-regulating and freeing themselves from anxieties, worries, and negative emotions. This loss of self-awareness separates individuals from the activities they are engaging in, as they only need to focus on the moment, which aligns with von Wallpach et al. (2020) advocacy for the momentary nature of experiential luxury. In the philosophy of luxury, the moments representing self-conscious clarity (e.g., a pregnant moment) are the ones in which individuals realize their humanity, and in which instrumental behaviors appear as enjoyable symbolic forms. Therefore, the reflective self can be free from biological laws and reason, which Wiesing has connected with the utopianism of luxury (Featherstone, 2020). In addition, Aeberhard, Gössling, Krause, and Meurer (2020) study further supported the idea that consciously experiencing oneself in the moment and falling deeply within oneself is the most luxurious kind of moment. In a salsa dancing context, Holmqvist et al. (2020) suggested that by fully indulging oneself in the moment, one constructs a luxurious hedonism. However, their study emphasized the collective basis of hedonism, whereas here we address the role of the intrinsic self. This differs markedly from the traditional hedonic benefits studied in luxury consumption, which focused on sensory pleasure simulation (De Barnier & Valette-Florence, 2013). Examples of interviewees’ comments include *“smelling the coffee bean,” “looking at the blue sky,”* and *“appreciating the color of food.”* In this way, individuals feel grounded and highly involved, and thus they better appreciate the tiny things in life and the feelings in themselves of being good. This is in line with Disabato, Goodman, Kashdan, Short, and Jarden (2016) subjective well-being model, which revealed a strong relationship between hedonic well-being, happiness, and engagement. However, such immersion is also distinct from the intense involvement studied before as a luxury experience whereby the ego is lost by indulging in the moment, and it becomes disassociated from space and time (Williams, Bargh, Nocera, & Gray, 2009). Carruthers (2020) addressed the “luxury of pensiveness,” arguing that momentary peace and transcendence can be found by experiencing the beauty of sand itself. Being immersed in the moment also refers to living outside of your head and accepting reality, as opposed to spending time and energy thinking about what one wishes his or her situation were like or (even more often) trying to avoid thinking about how it is not what one wishes it were. Instead of fighting, denying, or avoiding discrepancies, being immersed in the moment creates energy and space to enjoy the positive with a calmer mind. This feeling is a luxury, as described by (GE2, Social Worker, age 42):

“The sun shines on your face, and [I am] just being, completely staying with myself. This doesn’t imply we don’t do anything about it, but it just implies that I’m going to be here anyway. Although the external situation changes, I am still here and doing what I like. That’s real and luxurious.”

Moreover, our interviewees emphasize that the sort of content and satisfying feelings they achieve come from the internal self (e.g., self-esteem, self-love, self-compassion) at every moment, rather than from pursuing such feelings through external activities or events in the past or future. This is to appreciate and be grateful for what one already has. An

example is illustrated by (IN3, Programmer, age 24):

“It was like, if I get admitted to a master’s degree, I’m going to be happy. Then I realized that we’re always looking for happiness externally. The moment we get it, we start to look for the next thing that is going to make us happy, and it’s a cycle of never-ending happiness—but now I feel like happiness is rather appreciating what we have.”

In addition, our respondents also indicate the newness of every moment. However, unlike the traditional disruptive features embedded in the meaning of luxury (von Wallpach et al., 2020), we found that the respondents considered affordable or controllable adventures more favorable or precious. This is the opposite of a massive life change free from risks, which is normally the result of financial security or the ability to return to something familiar. Many people enjoy adventures, but in a moderate and controllable way. For example, (BR4, Civil servant, age 40) described himself as a small-scale explorer:

“I don’t mind getting lost during expensive day trips. I love to be curious and to discover anything new, but I hate massive change, and I want to experience some moments that are a bit cooler.”

In summary, given the importance of meaning-making for coping with adverse experiences (e.g., the pandemic), being mindful about the present has been recognized as important, as it helps cultivate emotional well-being and affective balance (Wong, 2012). Differing from previous research in luxury consumption of hedonic immediacy with an intensive temporary focus (Holmqvist, Wirtz, et al., 2020; Holmqvist, Ruiz, et al., 2020), we found that being immersed in the present brings both cognitive and affective calmness, leading to sustainable well-being. Such awareness is enhanced spontaneously by our interviewees. In addition, the paradoxical elements of both newness and familiarity appeared as risk-free or affordable adventures and brought psychological comfort.

4.4. Masstige as self–other

In contextual behavioral science, the term “self” is the result of being able to develop relationships with the world, and “the self is often fundamentally considered as interpersonal and is constituted of a repertoire of relational selves” (Kenny & West, 2010, p120). The binary between oneself and the other is probably one of the most principal theories about consciousness and identity formation, claiming that the presence of another enables the possibility of recognizing oneself, given that other beings are always being incorporated into a person’s self-concept (Schalk, 2011). The connections between nature and human-kind that stem from enhanced mindfulness are experienced as a mass luxury, corroborating an existing thesis on the cultivation of sacred moments (Goldstein, 2007). Following this logic, we categorize the influences of the other as “self with nature” and “self with society.”

4.4.1. Self with nature

Nature has been previously defined as a “mother” who provides food, shelter, beauty, and health, as well as a place to visit to improve personal characteristics (Schultz, 2002). By connecting with nature, one can fulfill basic needs, enhance physical and mental strength, develop his or her personality, and form a positive ecological worldview. Recent research also suggests there is a psychological connection between nature and subjective happiness (Nisbet, Zelenski, & Murphy, 2011), greater life satisfaction (Evans, Sherer, Nick, Nakase-Richardson, & Yablon, 2005), and decreased anxiety and depression levels. Schultz (2002) suggested that connecting to nature is a way to express one’s cognitive representation of self, and the exposure to natural settings facilitates psychological recovery from stressful stimuli. Since the pandemic has created a disconnect from nature and society as we spend significantly more time indoors, engagement with nature, including daily walks in nature or arranged hiking, has become the new luxury for most of the interviewees. This manifests in comments about how they

can “*breathe fresh air*,” “*feel their lives*,” “*clear up [their] mind*,” “*feed the soul*,” and “*be reminded to be grounded*.” These phrases represent novel and rare feelings that the interviewees did not experience before the pandemic. For example, (BR1, Engineer, age 35) said,

“I didn’t go walking previously, but now [during COVID-19] I walk every day when I can. It’s brilliant. It’s like the best thing ever, going to the park and seeing deer, I can’t describe the happiness. The rare feeling is only ever for seconds. But it feels amazing. This is a treasure to me.”

This dimension is in line with von Wallpach et al. (2020) research findings based on subjective daily luxurious moments, one of which is to create a “space for deceleration and retreat in nature.” Apart from the blissful feeling and relaxation achieved, our interviewees also pointed out that the connection between nature and oneself only requires a one-way communication, so they can be their authentic self, letting emotions out without worrying about meeting any human expectations, as described by (BR9, Student, age 24):

“Sometimes when you’re actually talking to another person, what they say to you is not what you actually want to hear. It’s not just them listening and talking, it’s combined with the feedback that they give to you. [In nature] you don’t have to make that effort to make [them] understand or to worry if they are happy. You can even scream when you feel like it, so it is a luxury.”

In addition to sensory and emotional fulfillment, nature also brings eudemonic joy and benefits one’s overall well-being, which corresponds to the essence of living a life that is perceived as desirable and rooted deeply in a core set of virtues and virtue ethics. According to Nartova-Bochaver and Muhortova (2020), the unity with and closeness to nature produces a self-developing balance that includes a concern for nature, harmony between oneself and nature, and an admiration for nature. (TU1, Student, age 25) describes these feelings:

“In the country or local community, everyone’s close to nature. They value nature more. It’s like the soil that is always nice to you; for example, whatever you plant, you get a harvest. It really feeds my soul.”

In Schultz (2002) general paradigm of human–nature relationships, connectedness with nature leads to caring and commitment, such as pro-environmental attitudes and a sense of empathy in terms of unity with nature and the self. Contrarily to egotistical hedonism, which requires an individual to consider only his or her own pleasure in decision-making, altruistic hedonism suggests that the creation of pleasure for all people is the optimal way to measure whether an action is preferable. In accordance with this line and with the meaning-making process that brings luxurious feelings, (KO1, Lecturer, age 36) found that pro-environmental consumption, such as bringing her own cup to a coffee house, was a luxury that brought her contentment and peace:

“My luxury for this year would be bringing my own coffee cup to Starbucks. Knowing that I am contributing to protecting the environment makes me feel so content. It’s like a promise to myself, especially during this pandemic time.”

4.4.2. Self with society

Ratcliffe (2013) asserted that one’s state of mind constitutes how one is perceived in the eyes of others, namely one’s belongingness to the world. A strong positive relation has been found between a person’s sense of interpersonal belonging and the magnitudes of his or her happiness and subjective well-being (McAdams & Bryant, 1987). Since subjective well-being can be considered as a “reflected appraisal” and as socially constructed (Veenhoven, Chiperi, Kang, & Burger, 2021), social capital can produce hedonic benefits, and social participation is rewarding due to its empowerment of self-mastery. The deficiency of social bonds or explicit experiences of social exclusion can trigger anxiety and loneliness. A large body of research has analyzed how luxury

goods help to construct one’s social self as a self-extension, and therefore bring hedonic and emotional benefits (e.g., Kauppinen-Räsänen, Björk, Lönnström, & Jauffret, 2018; Wilcox et al., 2009). Identified by Holmqvist, Wirtz, et al. (2020), Holmqvist, Ruiz, et al. (2020), the collective foundation of hedonism serves as one of the main characteristics of luxurious moments. In fact, we found that most of our interviewees would consider a collective activity with a group of people to be very satisfying, and that simply knowing that you belong to a group brings feelings of “security,” “safety,” “being in control,” and “being in a comfort zone,” each of which is considered a luxury during this special time. Corresponding to Zhang et al. (2020) work, which considers fear of missing out as an emotional response to perceived psychological threats to one’s self-concept, some interviewees suggested that being surrounded by people, instead of being left alone, seems to put them in a luxurious-feeling bubble. In the area of positive psychology, subjective well-being relies on the availability and quality of social ties, which protects individuals from negative labeling (e.g., Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002). Strong emotional ties with family or close friends and the metaphor of “feeling at home” are examples of luxuries for people who are isolated during the pandemic.

“I spend time with my family, and it is very luxurious and very special for me. I feel so complete and full of love. That’s the most important thing, like being in a comfort zone.” (AM2, Pharmacist, age 31)

Another strong benefit of social involvement that is perceived as luxurious during the pandemic is emotional support, including offering one another love, care, sympathy, and mutual understanding (Hwang & Kandampully, 2012). As suggested by Adriansen and Krohn (2011), high levels of support from less intimate ties could also lead to life satisfaction, which can be represented in bidirectional communication, and which benefits psychological construction and eases stress. (FI1, Engineer, age 28) considered physically being with family members and bringing joy to them to be rewarding. Other relational processes, such as hugs, enhanced emotional connectedness, and psychological competence are similarly rewarding, according to (PA1, Student, age 24). She also considers that sustainable healthy relationships suppress desires for conspicuous goods.

“Things have changed. Now a hug is more valuable than that branded thing. Thus, having someone at your back is definitely a luxury.”

Hwang and Kandampully (2012) suggested that emotional connection is at the core of luxury consumption. This is in line with Veenhoven’s (2021) assertion that the feeling of connectedness accompanied by social integration provides conditions for subjective well-being. Connection with other people through love, affection, or empathy provides a fertile ground for the most emotionally luxurious moments in people’s lives, such as the moments characterized by their unified features (Hemetsberger et al., 2012). In this way, people become more empathetic and emotionally connected than ever, and they get to understand one another. They feel non-judgmental sympathy for those who go through hardships, and they show more gratitude for their lives, natural entities, and possessions; moreover, by doing so, they feel more satisfied and less anxious.

“I think this time in lockdown, I’ve been re-evaluating my friendships, and how I make friends and interact with them. This sort of empathy gives you a new perspective on life, and it nourishes the spirit.” (AM1, Language tutor, age 45)

In line with this, Kreuzer et al. (2020) illustrated how moments of care, through their authentic presence and interpersonal synchrony, contribute to luxury experiences. They concluded that “true” luxury lies in the experience of humanity through interpersonal interactions, which surpasses the materialistic and conspicuous aspects of luxury. Apart from the emotional exchange, interaction with others can also have a mirror affect wherein individuals can see themselves or develop new

self-knowledge based on the similarities within humanity. According to Owens (2006), self-concept is formed through social interactions, acting as the outcome of behavior and self-reflection, which has an inherent spiritual or charitable character (Hemetsberger et al., 2012) that potentially converts oneself into a more desired form. The affirmation of one's self-concept is also founded through the collaborative process.

4.5. Consonance as the ultimate essence of luxury

Hedonic benefits are typically associated with highly aroused positive emotions (e.g., excitement and cheerfulness), and are closely tied with aspiration, achievement, and promotion (e.g., Chernev, 2004), which each act as strong drivers for luxury consumption. Contrary to the intense hedonic feelings which are associated with conventional luxury (Kim et al., 2020), our findings suggest that perceived prestige during the time of the pandemic is more about a balanced affect or a peaceful state of mind that is free from attachment (e.g., emotional or material). According to Csikszentmihalyi (2014), rather than depending on external objects, hedonism is ultimately defined as a condition that is prepared, cultivated, and defended by individuals, and that most importantly comes from inner harmony, which leads to a deeper sense of long-lasting exhilaration. We term this balanced, harmonious affective state as “consonance,” and it is associated with comments such as, “at peace with myself,” “calmness,” “harmony,” “content,” “to be settled,” “reduce the strength of emotion,” and “steady”; it also refers to self-resolution, e.g., “more of the inner things to fight,” “the inner battles are just your thoughts,” “making peace with yourself is luxurious,” and “be able to reason with myself.” Moreover, it refers to self-monitoring, e.g., “how you can maintain a healthy mind to have some kind of luxury.” In addition, the formation of self-concepts, such as “feeling very comfortable in myself” and “knowing where one stands,” means that in order to achieve such psychological consonance, our interviewees consider that finding oneself, or the process of exploring oneself, is essential. They expressed this sentiment by saying, “Not knowing yourself is hard,” “everything we do serves the purpose of self-discovery,” and “happiness is attained within ourselves.” In this way, they are able to gain more control, be more prepared for unexpectedness and uncertainty, and gain adaptability and resilience in the face of hardships. In turn, this brings sustainability over one's psychological well-being, which supports previous studies (Arslan, 2021; Du, King, & Chi, 2017) For example, (GE2, Social worker, age 42) mentioned,

“Be at peace with myself, what I'm looking for is whatever ups and downs happen, inside I will always stay calm. Even when storms come outside, there is still a blue sky that remains in my mind.”

5. Discussion

Our findings address the relationship between luxury and the self and argue for finding luxury in oneself. This involves transgressing the boundaries between necessities and instrumental rationality to redefine attributes of traditional “luxury” and transfer the focus of luxury from a non-human, economic perspective into self-dimensions beyond monetary exchange. This is further based on the joint point of psychological consonance as a cornerstone of luxury, which enables timeless, placeless, transcendent, and interconnected qualities. The following sections detail such a path. In the next section, we discuss *masstige* in both its components; that is, mass accessibility and luxury prestige. The essence of such an inside-out process and the role of the pandemic are also elaborated.

5.1. Luxury prestige as an inside-out (vs. outside-in) self-concept

We asked the interviewees questions in a reflective and mindful way and found that each individual tended to think or rationalize in a similar

manner. It could be argued that the pandemic has influenced people's mindsets and their ways of thinking. It is more important that luxury is possessed and experienced by a person in terms of internalization and self-relevance (Belk, 1988) rather than through ownership. The definition of mass luxury is changing, and the search for the simple and authentic pleasures in life make us content with who we are and what we stand for. A firm belief has arisen that luxury derives from being rather than from having, a shift from luxury as extrinsically (e.g., symbolism display) oriented to intrinsically (e.g., psychological consonance) oriented. Traditionally, luxury or prestige has been typically associated with high financial costs and perceived as “extravagant,” and generally is a bad word in conservative culture. However, it has transformed into a good concept, as investment in self-care and overall well-being has become the new symbol of prestige. As inferred by extant findings (e.g., Dubois et al., 2020), the pursuit of status-driven prestige constantly evolves along with the ever-changing norms or group values in different contexts; this brings tension and requires consumers to adapt. However, such an inside-out, self-oriented process does not have the same boundedness, or constancy, that mitigates the dissonance of traditional *masstige* consumption.

5.2. Redefining mass accessibility and potential paradoxes

The recent democratization and popularization of luxury consumption has made it more accessible to broader segmentations of the global market (Cristini, Kauppinen-Räsänen, Barthod-Prothade, & Woodside, 2017). In line with idea that luxury encounters are accessible to many as long as people are mindful of them, luxury can be found in unexpected contexts and triggered inexpensively (e.g., Banister, Roper, & Potavich, 2020; Holmqvist, Wirtz, et al., 2020; Holmqvist, Ruiz, et al., 2020; Kreuzer et al., 2020). In this way, mass accessibility can be defined far beyond traditional monetary efforts. In fact, accessibility has not really been framed experientially before, apart from being considered as the main concern in Cristini and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2020) work on transforming common resources into luxuries. Opposed to the most conventional conceptualizations of luxury, they argued that luxuries do not always fall into a sphere beyond necessities. The case can be the other way around, since today's luxuries spread to the accessibility of global commons and elementary resources, such as clean air, water, and food. Such resources are excessively depleted, and many cannot get access to, which adds nuance to the concept of everyday luxury. In addition, our research indicates that accessibility is closely related to personal self-awareness and mindful ability in a self-constructive way, one that cannot be afforded by monetary efforts or conspicuousness. Although the experiences that emerge as self-oriented mass luxury are generally rooted in everyday life and in routine, there remains paradoxes in the dynamic attributes among them, such as

- control vs. lack of control;
- preparedness (control over uncertainty, self-restoration) vs. unexpectedness (e.g., affordable adventure);
- connectedness (e.g., immersion in the present, connection with oneself and with other beings that promotes growth and affirms one's self-identity) vs. detachment (e.g., escaping from the facts);
- motion (e.g., self as a fleeting process) vs. stillness (e.g., safety, security seeking); and,
- familiarity vs. newness.

5.3. The role of the pandemic and dissonance coping

Since the prerequisites for self-functioning and the existence of basic human needs that serve as the foundation of one's well-being have become rare, exclusive only to increasingly smaller groups of social elites (Cristinia and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2020), dissatisfaction and discomfort have become a common psychological state for the masses. Due to the pandemic, which at the time of writing (June 2021) is still

causing ongoing uncertainties, compared to typical promotion-focused hedonism involving high emotional gratification of desires, aspirations, and fulfillment (Chitturi et al., 2008), the hedonic benefits we found are more closely associated with a prevention-focused process which emphasizes mental preparedness, perceived control, and a sense of security. Second, in line with Banister et al. (2020) work, by arguing that luxury experience is rooted in everyday practice, different levels of the self have been categorized in terms that conceptualize the attainable luxurious experience in our study. All of these experiences involve an internal attitudinal shift towards a current situation in order to regain psychological consonance. Other than the extrinsic goals of gaining social praise and rewards through financial success, social recognition, and appealing appearance, mass luxury is intrinsically oriented and includes personal growth, group affiliation, and alignment with the authentic and integrated self; this enriches the hedonistic meaning of luxury and also indicates that luxury is very much an inside-out process. Third, due to cognitive conflicts and emotional discomfort concerning the nature of the pandemic, *masstige* is considered as a dissonance coping strategy that impairs the aftereffects of traditional luxury consumption (e.g., guilt or shame), as well as critical challenges caused by the pandemic.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Theoretical contributions

This paper investigates the new meaning of *masstige* under pandemic conditions. We have redefined mass luxury with four self-as-dimensional psychological processes, namely self as content, self as process, self as context, and self–other. We argue that *masstige* is a self-oriented concept in this transformative era. The ultimate goal that consumers pursue is to reduce dissonance and regain consonance, which is a continuous consonant state of mind, and which initially expands the momentary nature of experiential luxury (von Wallpach et al., 2020). Rooted in consumerism, our study transforms the meaning of luxury from being politically useful into focusing on the psychological well-beings of customers. Specifically, this study contributes to the literature of *masstige*, cognitive dissonance theory, and luxury transformation in the following domains. First, although the current literature has addressed the attainment of status and the ideal self as reasons behind *masstige* consumption, the theoretical foundation of *masstige* is relatively weak considering the psychological meaning underpinning such consumption patterns (e.g., Kumar & Paul, 2018; Paul, 2019). Our study advances the meaning of prestige and mass accessibility overtop of economic measure (Granot et al., 2013) by broadening its dimensions of time and personal efforts (psychic energy, attention, and mindfulness), which goes against conventional luxuries that emphasize achieving status symbols through their rarity, exclusivity, and discrimination (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014). This meaning of prestige moves away from monetary presentation forms to a more self-constructive process based on self-oriented motivations. Furthermore, our findings reconstruct mass luxury as an inside-out process (intrapersonal) rather than an outside-in process that is traditionally based on extrinsic motivation (Kim et al., 2020; Shao et al., 2019) and an impressive exterior (Dhaliwal et al., 2020) and they expand the argument that self-oriented luxury values are directed at emotional being and hedonism (Parks & Guay, 2009) as well as cognitive being (Ahuvia & Wong, 2002). Second, we contribute to both the antecedents and coping of cognitive dissonance literature. Specifically, our study advances new mass luxury as a novel process for dissonance mitigation instead of passive coping, and therefore, it resolves the inherent dissonant backfire on the hedonic essence of the luxury experience through altering intrinsic luxury perceptions (Shahid & Paul, 2021), which improves consumers' well-being (Harmon-Jones, 2019). By doing so, we also expand the hedonism realm in conventional luxury consumption, which is normally accompanied by a temporal focus (Ki et al., 2017; von Wallpach et al., 2020), to a more moderate form (e.g., axiological hedonism, ethical hedonism) that

moves towards spiritual harmony, balance, calmness, and temperance, rather than extravagance or acceleration of corporal satisfaction (Iloranta, 2019). Third, our study is original in its revelation of the consequences of the pandemic on a perceived shift in the concept of mass luxury and consumption patterns (Sanderson et al., 2020). Since the pandemic has resulted in a convergence towards the emerging market for luxury brands and a paradigm shift for global economic powers, we have explored contextuality (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Wiedmann, Hennigs, & Siebels, 2007) and subjectivity in consumer-perceived luxury under such conditions and found them to be catalysts and interventions, thus broadening the theoretical and applicable boundaries of cognitive dissonance theory. In particular, people perceived that activities that bring inner peace and calmness enable basic functions to be deemed as luxuries. Fourth, this study adds nuanced luxury attributes based on existing literature (Holmqvist, Wirtz, et al., 2020; Holmqvist, Ruiz, et al., 2020; von Wallpach et al., 2020) by discovering a potential paradox in the pandemic context. The key terms identified are preparedness vs. unexpectedness (e.g., affordable adventure), connectedness (e.g., immersion in the present) vs. detachment (e.g., escaping from the facts), motion (e.g., flexibility) vs. stillness (e.g., ongoing peace), and familiarity vs. newness. Further investigation is merited since these terms bring new supplements and substitutes to traditional *masstige* meanings.

6.2. Managerial contributions

In general, the findings of our study suggest a fundamental change of mass luxury perception driven by intrinsic self-oriented dimensions and psychological well-being and posit luxury as a new normal of living for the mass audiences. Therefore, this paper provides four managerial implications for luxury marketers and practitioners. First, the displays of exclusivity, prestige, and conspicuousness that used to satisfy others' perceptions are no longer conceived of as appealing to mass audiences. Accessibility is no longer monetarily based, but rather privilege is created on the basis of mindfulness ability. Self-awareness should be the concern of managers, especially when targeting downward segmentations. Although mindfulness-based programs for stress reduction have recently been very popular (e.g., spa retreats or luxury resorts) (Buck, 2018), the masses have neither the luxury of time nor the economic ability to attend regularly. Therefore, our research provides new insights that suggest marketers could embed elements which arouse self-awareness through strategy-making or could add such elements to product innovation, such as developing telework and home entertainment (fitness-centered video games, zoom yoga) during the pandemic. Regarding marketing communication, managers could create media stories, advertising images, and message content to embed these elements, including embedding self-as-dimensions into media content and self-care methods. For example, this could include using more "I" concepts to empower consumers' self-dimensions rather than passively focusing on the product characteristics. Luxury marketers could also simply use hedonic message appeals to increase perceived luxuriousness, especially when targeting consumers whose approach to luxury is internalized rather than externalized.

Second, today's marketers are facing innumerable challenges regarding how to meaningfully engage with mass audiences and sustain their loyalty, which indicates a need to adapt their offerings to supplement and substitute the growing wellness mentality of the mass consumers instead of targeting the middle-income group and young consumers. Practitioners could also rethink how to communicate well-being credentials in authentic ways that empower consumers to subscribe to a healthier, more refined lifestyle. For example, this could be done by making value propositions in order to connect more deeply with consumers and by grasping the concepts of "meaning-making", "rewards" or "goal achievement" in their marketing plans. In addition, practitioners could satisfy the essential needs of the masses by embracing perceived scarcity and luxuriousness, improving the credibility of brands' ethical commitments, and developing brand equity

based on these commitments. Managers could also reinforce their brands' value proposition and socially-responsible positioning by integrating the profound moral implications for society and the natural environment. To give an idea of healthy living and mindful brand perception, the quality of the used material, ingredients, or objective performance data can be disclosed. Moreover, social connection is of utmost importance during the pandemic, a prevalent aspect of the "new normal." This could involve the utilization of video conferencing platforms and embedding more human touch into these platforms by adopting new technologies such as artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and virtual reality to optimize experiential value.

Third, marketers need to manage unprecedented levels of uncertainty by rewiring their operational models to improve adaptability and create a faster decision-making process. They also need to balance speed against discipline in pursuit of future innovations, since the influence of the pandemic is recognized as being permanent (Bain & Company, 2021). Fourth, in order to maximize the benefits of a masstige strategy, luxury brands must return to their roots and make adjustments to reinforce brand perceptions anchored in meaning-making for the consumers' well-being and psychological consonance, thereby eventually achieving a sustainable shift to a demand-focused business model in order to survive in this fluid market environment.

6.3. Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study that need to be addressed. First, the interview topics were intentionally set experiences rooted in everyday life during the pandemic; the interviews were conducted in a reflective question format to ensure that they would be optimally accessible to the masses. However, it is worth investigating how to embed such mindful elements into luxury consumption settings and deliver a resonant experiential essence to the mass consumer. For example, how can marketers exert control to maximize consumers' self-efficiency or affirm their sense of self or inner state? Moreover, we detected several paradoxical elements that emerged in perceived

masstige under the new era, including familiarity vs. newness, motion vs. stillness, connectedness vs. detachment, and preparedness vs. unexpectedness. However, the concrete relationships and interactions between each construct, as well as the specific content included in each construct, remain unclear. Further analysis could advance our knowledge in this area. Finally, the pandemic that has informed our study, and to which we mainly refer, is COVID-19. Its impact and influence vary on a global scale (e.g., there are different government policies in different countries), and some areas have been affected only to a minimal degree. Although we do not assume that our findings differ in terms of their overall direction, other factors may exert some influence. For example, factors such as a location's level of modernization and urbanization may exert similar influences and cause anxiety and dissonance. Should we conceptualize these terms as well, and how do we differentiate these contextual features? Future research could contrast samples from more diverse groups (e.g., rural areas). Other demographic traits should be considered for the same reason.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Zi Wang: Writing – original draft. **Ruizhi Yuan:** Methodology, Writing – review & editing. **Jun Luo:** Validation. **Martin J. Liu:** Supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix. Key concept/themes of our research findings

Sample citations	Codes	Categories	Theme
IN5: "Writing in my diary, talking to myself is the most luxurious [activity] for me. Talking to my best friend builds up my own confidence, and I can see where to improve. It feels like someone has got your back and supports you."	Self-awareness; mindful activities	Observational self as detachment	Masstige as self-context: detachment from facts, emotions, and other external stimuli.
BR5: "If everything you're doing is too easy, then maybe you're not pushing yourself as far as usual. That's maybe something that's unhealthy for me. I think I have to be constantly testing myself, and I definitely always look at myself as developing, that's precious."	Positive change; accomplishment; self-actualization	Thinking self as meaning-making	Masstige as self-content: subjective initiative and creativity in consciousness regardless of the outside world, which offers an optimal luxurious experience during a difficult time
CH4: "just found these things are more sustainable. If I have healthy relationships and good health, the happiness brought from these things can last a long time. But if I buy a nice dress, that happiness doesn't last—it won't make me truly happy."	Behaving in a sustainable manner; sustained well-being	Somatic self as eternal property	
BR8: "I tend as much as I can not to use any guide or any formal tools. I just sort of tend to walk, then if I'm staying in a city like Vienna, if I hear some sound that I fancy is coming from somewhere in the city, I might just be redirected suddenly, halfway through. It is just sort of relaxing."	Ongoing enjoyment; feelings of enlightenment; freedom or flexibility	Self as fleeting flow	Masstige as self-process: a more flexible flow of human experience, which comes into being as an integral constitution to living a vital life.
GE2: "The sun shines on your face, and [I am] just being, completely staying with myself. This doesn't imply we don't do anything about it, but it just implies that I'm going to be here anyway. Although the external situation changes, I am still here and doing what I like. That's real and luxurious."	Self-regulating; momentary peace; love adventures	Immersing the somatic self in the moment	
BR1: "I didn't go walking previously, but now [during COVID-19] I walk every day when I can. It's brilliant. It's like the best thing ever, going to the park and seeing deer, I	Engagement with nature; blissful feeling and relaxation; altruistic hedonism	Self with nature	Masstige as self-other: the presence of another enables the possibility of recognizing oneself, given that other beings are always being incorporated into a person's self-concept

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Sample citations	Codes	Categories	Theme
can't describe the happiness. The rare feeling is only ever for seconds. But it feels amazing. This is a treasure to me." AM2: "I spend time with my family, and it is very luxurious and very special for me. I feel so complete and full of love. That's the most important thing, like being in a comfort zone."	Interpersonal belonging; emotional connectedness	Self with society	
GE2: "Be at peace with myself, what I'm looking for is whatever ups and downs happen, inside I will always stay calm. Even when storms come outside, there is still a blue sky that remains in my mind."	Self-monitoring; harmonious affective state	Adaptability and resilience	Consonance as the ultimate essence of luxury: a condition that is prepared, cultivated, and defended by individuals, and that most importantly comes from inner harmony, which leads to a deeper sense of long-lasting exhilaration.

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