

Consumer Culture and Romantic Relationships: Luxury Fashion Consumption, Urban Women and their New Types of Relationships

Yuxuan Li

Milton International School, Qingdao, 266000, China

Abstract

The consumers do not pay for just a product but to satisfy their needs and desires, which are always embedded within cultural, and social symbols and structures. Thus, when the ideology in which the meanings of daily life are to be found by purchasing goods is spreading widely in society. The concept of "consumerism" shifts into a type of popular culture that might influence both the economy and patterns of social interactions. How does consumerism culture have an impact on the two aspects above? What is the relationship between them? To answer the questions, this paper chooses two representative research objects that can specifically reflect current characteristics of society, particularly the group of urban young women, respectively luxury fashion consumption for economy and diversities of intimacy for interpersonal relationships, and tries to analyze the two separately, and then find their correlations. The main results are as follows: first, with the unpopularity trend of traditional "marriage oriented" relationships, there's a positive correlation between changes in women's spending power and diversities of romantic relationships; Besides, the shifts in urban women's attitudes towards romantic love have similar motivations to the increase in sales volume of luxury goods; Then, this paper has a further discussion of a new and highly discussed concept "commercialization of intimacy", and find its close connections with the consumer culture spreading in women's lives.

Keywords

Consumer Culture; Romantic Relationships; Luxury Fashion Consumption; Urban Women; New Types of Relationships.

1. Introduction

Consumption is not only a simple activity in that people exchange goods with currencies but a cultural and social procedure including cultural symbols and signs beyond a utilitarian and economic process (Bocock, 2005). As Slater said, "core social practices and cultural values, ideas, aspirations, and densities are defined and oriented about consumption rather than other social dimensions such as work or citizenship (Slater, 1997)." People in modern society tend to weigh subjective things in their daily lives, involving relationships and future planning, with their practical values more and more frequently. Nowadays, one of the most apparent phenomena of consumerism is the increasing luxury consumption volumes. In 2024, the luxury goods market is anticipated to generate a revenue of US \$387bn. This market is projected to grow at an annual rate of 3.22% (CAGR 2024-2028). In this market, the largest segment is luxury fashion, which is reported to reach a market volume of US\$115.90bn in 2024 (Bain, 2024).

With the rise in the women's employment rate, women around the world earn higher incomes and have more rights to decide how to consume with their incomes. Women, who control 75% of discretionary spending (Forbes, 2024) and purchase much more luxury goods for themselves

than males (Havas Media Network, 2023), strongly contribute to the expansion of the luxury industry, particularly with women of Gen Z paying their rapidly increasing incomes for this industry (NIQ Global Consumer Outlook, 2024). For young women, luxury goods are not just common but expensive objects that can be used in daily lives, they are also perfect instances of "symbolic consumption" goods and "conspicuous Consumption" goods (Veblen, 1899), with its association of exclusiveness, social visibility, high prices and uniqueness (Giovannini, Xu, & Thomas, 2015). Therefore, the psychological motivations behind this activity and the related trend are worth studying further.

Surprisingly, the author finds that there might be a close correlation between consumerism: the trend in consumption, and some interesting new phenomena in urban women's romantic relationships. The young tend to consider personal growth and well-being as their priority (Tinder, 2023), which means they prefer to pay more attention to their feelings instead of following a conventional lifestyle. That may be one of the reasons why they consume a large amount of luxury fashion goods and try to diversify types of romantic relationships that may suit them better. For example, according to the world's biggest dating app Tinder, the shift to utilizing dating as a method of self-fulfillment has become the top dating trend, which can be called "Not Attached to an Outcome". Both activities in consumption and relationships indicate a similar motivation: to gain more personal happiness.

The overall rate of marriage and fertility declines (Sassler & Lichter, 2020), which is particularly in countries with high average incomes (the UN, 2024). This is evidence that women don't need to depend on marriage to make their livings (Becker, 1981) due to their chances and abilities to work just like males can do. Independence in finance gives women more liberty to buy things they want, especially something expensive and unnecessary, such as luxury goods.

Besides that, this paper will refer to a popular word in these years "commercialization of love" (Illouz, 1997), which involves the definitions of romantic love and consumerism. This word can be explained on many occasions: couples exchange expensive gifts at festivals (Hochschild, 2012), people use dating apps to find partners, and some young people offer sexual values and emotional services to their sugar daddies/mommies to get financial benefits or investment in their human capital (Kuate-Defo, 2004). It is worth noting that, as a new social practice, sugaring is not the same as sex work: the main gap between the two is that the two parties may keep in long-term romantic companionship (Seeking.com, 2021). Also in this paper, I try to use a brand-new view to study short-term and casual relationships, seeing hook-ups, situationship, and flings as a trade: usually, the goods in this trade are not money and the monetary equivalent, but other invisible values, such as emotional values and sexual pleasure. From this perspective, the popularity of new types of relationships can be connected to the consumer culture these days more closely. The reason why the attitudes of young women towards relationships become opener, more casual, pluralistic, and acceptable might be further analyzed.

2. Hypotheses Development

Recently, with the increase in female employment rate and the progress in gender equality (the UN, 2024), the spending power of women now become a crucial force in stimulating the recovery from recession and creating new prosperity (Harvard Business Review, 2009). Women also find that they are positioned at the crossroads of choosing their suitable identities. They are attempting to balance the feminine identities constructed by commercial cultures, the conventional expectations for femininity, and their identities (Quyen, 2019). This characteristic can be shown by the purchasing behaviors and the way urban women gain and keep relationships.

Traditional academic communities generally accepted that the image of women in consumption behaviors depends on the role they play in the households that make proxy consumption,

rather than the standard of their spending power (Donohue, 1999). Citizens also used to believe that it was women's task to spend on daily necessities that maintained the well-being of families and satisfied all the family members' needs (Loeb, 1994): not only substantial goods like food but also an investment to keep their beauty for husbands' satisfaction and care about their bodies for baby born (Boden, 2003). This might be closely relevant to gender inequality at that time, when many occupations, especially ones with high incomes, did not accept women, and women had fewer means to get senior education than males (Stanton, 1848). So, as subordinates of males (Guo, 2022), women had no alternatives but to get married for a living (Coontz, 2013). That could be why most women chose to get married when there was great inequality between the sexes.

However, things have changed a lot recently. A large number of women attend college and get greater influence, confidence, and skills, which helps them do well in the workplace and command better pay. Women now have enormous control over their consumer wealth and incomes, and it's still increasing rapidly (Fona, 2014). In the consumption field, they tend to use their resources to pay for experiences and goods that bring happiness to them, instead of just making decisions to buy traditional goods for family members (Heggness, 2023).

Interesting changes come to their attitudes towards relationships, too. The young nowadays see gender, sexuality, and dating as more self-aware, open, and natural things than any other generation older than them. As the traditional gender division of labor has been dissipated (Raddatz, 2019), women have much more control and power in their daily lives. Thus, they pay less attention to "commitment" it's important in the conventional sense, and explore more types of relationships without the pressure of labels and marriages (Tinder, 2022). The rising age of first marriage, the declining rate of marriage (Sassler & Lichter, 2020), and the popularity of short-term and casual relationships are all good evidence of these changes.

Except for objective reasons, some women also forgo traditional relationships for other subjective motivations. Research finds that some women have the willingness and ability to avoid their romantic involvements from being further senior, to focus on their career development and other aspects of lives (Arnett, 2015).

Therefore, it can be seen that recently the spending power of women has increased, and the diversities of new types of relationships have taken place at the same time. Based on the elementary theoretical explanations above, hypothesis 1 comes up:

Hypothesis 1: The spending power of urban women is negatively correlated to traditional types of relationships but positively related to the acceptance and diversities of new types of relationships.

Fashion is to mimic some given examples and meet the needs for social adaption. It differentiates one period from another and social classes (Simmel, 2020). The proliferation of cultures, which is stimulated by consumerism, seems that personal value attaches to material value: fashion consumption introduces personal identities (Dittmar, 1992). It also has made the diversity and dynamics of the fashion industry ascendingly relevant to the study of social relationships (Featherstone, 1991). Luxury, as an important and typical fashion consumption industry, its trends of development, and the motivations of consumers that cause these trends are valuable to study.

In the last century, one of the most well-known sociological theories on fashion is the theory of the "shifting erogenous zone." (Laver, 1937). According to this, men's interest in the parts of female bodies that are not easy to see drives the shift of fashion for women. Also, until recent years, there are still theories that believe the reason why females purchase luxury fashion goods is to increase the attractiveness to their potential mates (Sundie et al., 2011) and succeed in intrasexual competitions (Hudders et al., 2014). This paper will not completely deny these

points that connect female fashion with male aesthetics to a big extent, however, I have to say they might be too lopsided and patriarchal.

Other existing literature have discussed about the motivations from a more objective and comprehensive sight. For example, Ma et al. (2012) have divided luxury fashion consumption into two categories by classifying motivations: social and individual consumption motives. Social motivations include the aim of conformity, ostentation, symbols of status, and socialization (Zhu, 2006). Consuming these expensive goods is vital for some utilitarian social purposes like social acceptance, gaining and maintaining relationships, and even having more competitiveness to chase opportunities (Isaksen & Roper, 2012). For example, people tend to be more compliant and friendly (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). Additionally, when the traffic lights turn green, individuals are less likely to honk if the cars in front of them are expensive (Doob & Gross, 1968). Another category of motivations, called individual motives, refers to the pursuit of good quality, self-gifting, and self-enjoyment (Zhu, 2006).

Even more interesting is that, out of other similar psychological reasons, studies on romantic relationships see changes. These years, the renaissance of sugar dating, is usually defined as a quasi-romantic relationship between a financially successful person and a less successful person (Pardiwalla, 2016). It should be noted that the sugaring that we talk about here has the biggest difference from traditional marriages that women in the past made a living by is that, the young have the options to choose whether to feed themselves on their own or search for support from someone. The elderly successful individual often offers material benefits, like luxury goods, leisure holidays, and good dining: which can provide high-quality of emotional entertainment, in exchange for companionship, affection, and intimacy from the younger one (Upadhyay, 2021). However, there comes a tendency that can't be ignored: more sugar babies start to emphasize the enhancement in their education and employment that their "sugar daddies" could provide (Kuate-Defo, B, 2004). For them, "dream value" becomes an important component that they can gain from consumption and sugaring (Phau & Prendergast, 2000), which assists them in temporarily escaping from a dull daily routine (Yang, 2011). As the CEO of Gucci said they "sell dreams instead of handbags" (Bowman, 2008).

On the other hand, as for non-utilitarian social goals, according to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), people define themselves by comparing with others, which reflects the ideas of consumers behind the simple behaviors: they want to show differences from others, achieve self-esteem and feel they are valuable. These feelings can also be gained from relationships with wealthy and powerful people when they enjoy something beyond their spending power or experience a high-standard occasion (Pepi, 2021).

Both behaviors about relationships and consumption have similar characteristics: they are very beneficial for young women's material enjoyment, personal happiness, and future development. These might be the common motivations for the shifts in relationships and luxury consumption. Thus, the second hypothesis could come out:

Hypothesis 2: The increase in the sales volume of luxury fashion goods for urban women has some similar motivations to the shifts in relationships.

Today in the age of social media and consumerism, the concept of love appears to transform into a commodity that can be bought and sold in the market of relationships (Medium, 2024).

Talking about the "commercialization of intimacy", the evolution of romantic love is an essential topic. For most of human history, marriage was an economic corporation purely, which promoted the prosperity and survival of both families, finishing the task of reproduction (Manson, 2021). It wasn't until the 19th century that things began to change, when the level of productivity improved exponentially, the ideas of individual rights and the chase for personal happiness came to fashion. The new perspective was to marry just for love and "happily ever after" (Schneider, 2007). These years, a new notion: "commercialization of intimacy", which

means an ongoing procedure that economic and commercial stimuli infiltrate romantic relationships (Wikipedia, 2015), seems to be a new trend in intimacy: the intensity of love is usually measured in positive percentage to the price of Valentine's gifts (Jimenez, 2020), dating apps use simple labels to help people find potential partners efficiently, cloth advertisement shows couples with his-and-hers clothes hugging together (Teo, 2009).

According to Marx's arguments, capitalism transforms relationships that were formerly not tainted by commerce, into commercial relationships of exchange (Marx, 1844). It is noticeable that the "commercialization" of relationships doesn't talk about the trade of purely financial values just like prostitution, but the values that can be seen by a quick and shallow understanding, like an idealized version of one's extravagant life with performative on Instagram and Facebook. Nowadays, internet dating, as a new love mall, is popular among the young (Klinenberg & Ansari, 2015). In this dating mode, everyone participants as consumers and the good itself simultaneously: people pay attention to the utilitarian value just like a marketplace set of metrics businessmen hold (mariepierrecleret, 2024): what others can do for "me", how do people look ...This mode does not only appear on a dating app but also takes place in daily actual lives: hookers find each other just for sexual pleasure exchange (Anders, et al., 2020), short-term partners search for someone suitable for short-run companion (Mengzhen, 2024), sugar babies use their emotional services and beautiful bodies as currencies to change for wealth and status (Egan, 2003). This paper believes that they are all normal situations: no registration stipulates every couple in every relationship should love each other purely and deeply until the end of their lives!

As a result, we can get Hypothesis 3:

Hypothesis 3: The popularity of consumer culture has significant effects on the intimacy of urban women.

3. Research Method

3.1. Literature Review Method

Building a new direction of research and connecting it to previous literature and theories is the basis of every academic research (Snyder, 2019) because science is a cumulative endeavor (Brocke et al., 2009). The Literature review method is universally described as a systematic means of gathering and synthesizing existing studies (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003).

This paper reviews two types of major literature. The first section synthesizes the existing sociological, psychological, and economic theories and aggregates empirical results to support evidence-based practices, which summarizes the total trends or modes of the study. This section can justify the presence and necessity of the problem and gather valid approaches for the research, with collections of primary evidence and data. Another section mainly consists of evaluative abstracts that are full of subjective opinions of scholars. The paper will critically analyze the rationality of these opinions and identify the gap that can be further explored, such as the field of commercialization of romantic relationships. In the end, information from the literature has been categorized into three subjects: the characteristics of urban women, attitudes towards consumption, and relationships respectively, applying with my own opinions.

3.2. Comparative Study Method

The comparison focuses on the contrasts and similarities among cases, playing a central role in concept formation and testing hypotheses (Collier, 1991). This paper mainly uses three aspects of comparison. First is a cross-national comparison, showing the influence that spending power can have on women's consumption and relationships from different countries. The second has to do with historical evolutions, like the changes in the employment rate and marriage rate of women, consumption of luxury goods, and the leisure time people have taken in the past few

years and now, to facilitate testing the hypothesis. This is usually illustrated in line charts and bar graphs. The last one makes a comparison among different groups of people, divided by gender or age, demonstrating different characteristics and discussing the reason why these differences occur.

3.3. Case Study Method

The case study is a field research method that is a specific investigation of phenomena when they are not significantly intervened by investigators (Fidel, 1984). From conducting a case study, "one can properly acquire knowledge of phenomena from an intensive exploration of a single case" (Becher, 1970).

In this paper, as a whole, I choose the luxury industry and certain types of popular relationships as typical study cases and observe them deeply, trying to find the total characteristics of urban women. From the details, I collect information that comes largely from archival records, documentation, and interviews indirectly and extract effective evidence.

3.4. Statistical Study Method

Statistical study involves gathering, organizing, and analyzing data that is based on established principles for the identification of trends, patterns, and characteristics (Indeed Editorial Team, 2024).

There are two types of statistical study in this paper. First is the descriptive statistical analysis, transferring large data sets into more compact and simple forms for easy understanding. For instance, it could be found the changes in women's incomes as tables to show evidence of increases in women's spending power. The other is associational statistics, as a tool to explore correlations among variables. This paper finds the correlation between consumerism and changes in romantic relationships by generalizing similar trends of the objects. Besides that, this method helps to prove there are the same motivations that affect romantic love and consumption structures.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The proof of hypothesis 1

According to Catalyst (2020), women control \$31.9 trillion of worldwide spending, which means they have a significant influence on 70%-80% of consumer spending. In recent years, women have spent more than ever before, especially on goods and services specifically made for them, showing their substantial role in the economy (The Week, 2023). For instance, the Beauty and Health industry, as an area that women are mostly engaged in, is worth more than \$100 billion and remains growing (NIQ, 2023). As for tourism, about 70% of all travelers are women who show a growing preference for solo travel (Road Scholar, 2023). The same trends also take place in the entertainment area. Taylor Swift's and Beyonce's" tours are representatives of hot events, bringing billions of revenues, thanks, in large part, to women's spending (Forbes, 2023).

These changes might be significantly caused by the progress in gender equality and the increase in women's financial power. More than 9 million firms are owned by women and occupy over 50% of all, growing by 58% from the number of 2007, while overall businesses have grown by only 12% (Forbes, 2019). As for education, compared with just 38% of males, 44% of females aged 18-24 are studying in college (Pew Research Centre, 2010). The number of rich women investors in America rises much faster than that of males, with 68% growth in women, surpassing only 36% of men in two years (LinkedIn, 2014). At the same time, women have chances to open up their minds beyond a limited number of jobs like nurses, teachers, or secretaries (FONA, 2014). There are positive tendencies in women's employment across most

of the countries: a sustained and substantial increase in female labor force participation rate, especially in rich countries, maintains a striking feature of social change (OECD, 2017), indicated by Figure 1 below:

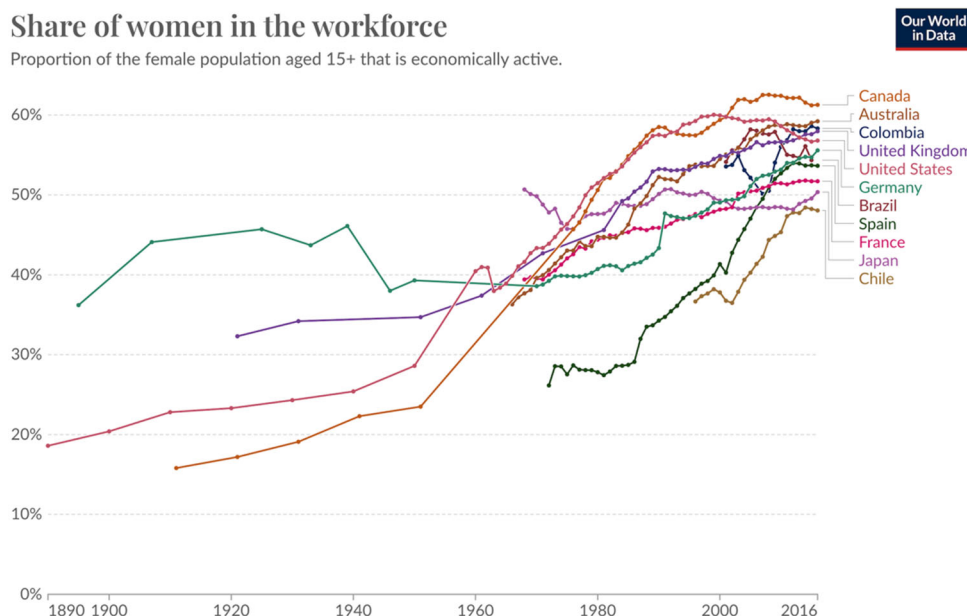


Figure 1. Share of women in the workforce (Resources from Our World Data)

Observing Table 1 below, it could be found that earnings per hour for women have grown apparently, with a higher change rate than men in the same period. As a typical index of traditional relationship mode, fertility rates in developed countries, like countries in Western Europe, remain at a low point or rise a bit. Despite fertility rates in developing countries are always much higher than in developed countries, they still decrease substantially due to the positive shifts broadly in women's attitudes and incomes, showing a negative correlation to earnings for women. As for another important index, marriage rates, have decreased globally as a whole, except for some special or extreme data, illustrating a negative relation with women's income, neither.

Combined with the analysis of Figure 1, we can conclude that, the spending power of urban women is negatively correlated to the popularity of traditional relationships.

Table 1. Relationships of earnings, fertility, and marriage for women

country	earnings per hour for women in \$			comparison men%	fertility rate			marriage rate per 1000 population per year		
	2001	2016	relative change (women)		2001	2016	relative change	2001	2016	relative change
Spain	\$10.00	\$20.98	110%	91%	1.2318	1.3347	8.35%	5.1	3.7	-27%
Germany	\$13.77	\$20.12	46%	40%	1.3498	1.4897	10.23%	4.7	5	6%
France	\$14.18	\$19.72	39%	37%	1.8792	1.8911	0.63%	4.8	3.5	-27%
South Korea	\$12.84	\$15.91	24%	21%	1.3008	1.1468	-11.84%	6.7	5.5	-18%
Chile	\$4.60	\$8.82	92%	79%	1.9607	1.6756	-28.51%	4.1	3.4	-17%
Brazil	\$4.11	\$6.92	68%	65%	2.1826	1.7085	-21.72%		5.3	
Colombia	\$3.96	\$5.57	41%	40%	2.5164	1.8435	-26.74%			
Mexico	\$3.31	\$4.39	33%	24%	2.6689	2.0856	-21.86%	6.5	4.4	-32%

(Resources from the UN & Our World Data)

However, the fact that people are less keen on traditional relationships does not mean people ask less for love. Romantic relationships are necessarily positive contributors to habitats' lives, bringing friendship, love, a sense of security, happiness, companionship (Markey, et, al., 2023),

and even health benefits (Berkman & Syme, 1979). Thus, new patterns of relationships, which might be more casual or without deliberate pursuit, take the place of traditional ones gradually. Nowadays, individuals desire a purer relationship where they have the freedom to keep in a relationship that satisfies their sexual and emotional needs without traditional restrictions and anticipations (Giddens, 2013). For example, in a survey of Chinese college students, only 15.9% of males and 6.21% of females have a strong willingness to get into a romantic relationship, while the largest number of them think "Just let it be", with 50.54% of males and 60.4% of females respectively. Also, 95.95% of males and 89.14% of females can accept premarital sex, proving that the young are more open to relationships and sex (Health Research Center, Tsinghua University, 2020). With the popularity of dating websites and apps like Bumble and Tinder, as demonstrated by Figure 2, casual relationships have become more accessible and prevalent (Vares, 2022). According to research on British youths aged 18-24 in 2022, over 29% of them admit to using dating apps, and 14% experience face-to-face meetings (YouGov, 2022).

Global dating app users 2015 to 2023 (mm)

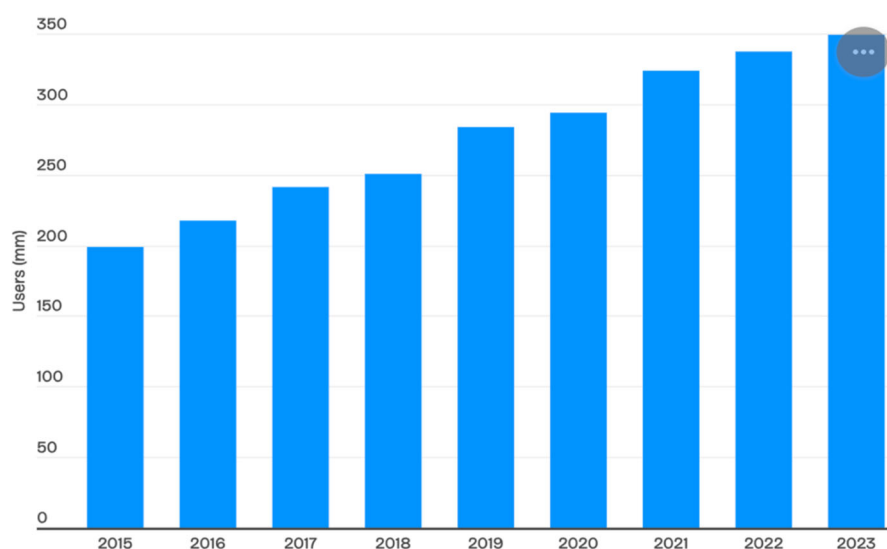


Figure 2. Global dating app users 2015 to 2023
(Resources from App Annie, Dating Site Reviews, Match Group)

Situationships, accounting for 15%-23% of all relationships (Roberson, 2017), always emerge when individuals are less interested in committed relationships and focused on other goals (Anders, 2020). Gen Z women, the youngest and most dynamic group of urban women, show good evidence of the phenomena above, with 58% saying that career promotion and development is more important than forming a family (Meredith Data Studio, 2020). In addition, top goals for their future are: becoming financially independent (31%), doing well in school (26%), and finding a suitable job (20%), which mostly have to do with personal development and financial power (Girlpower Marketing, 2021). Interestingly, these data have one thing in common: they have no concern with romantic relationships.

Figure 3 is strong proof of the statement above although family-friendly policies in Denmark, known as one of the most advanced countries in gender equality, have contributed to improving female labor rights of fertility and reducing the gender gap for many years, women still suffer from significant job insecurity and decreases in incomes after childbirth (Kleven, et, al.,2018). So, more women choose to form DINK families or other types of relationships without children: they believe self-fulfillment is more important.

Impacts of Children in a Difference-in-Differences Event Study Design

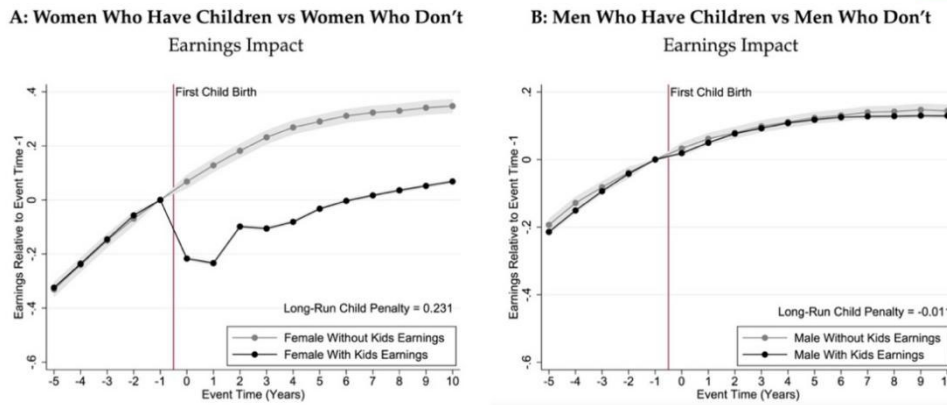


Figure 3. Impacts of Children in a Difference-in-Differences Event Study Design (Resources from Denmark, NBER Working Paper, 2018)

Thus, the financial power of urban women is positively related to the popularity of new types of relationships. Additionally, due to sustained economic development and social changes like the feminist movement, these new patterns of love have been more accepted and less negatively commented on (Oren & Press, 2019).

4.2. The Proof of Hypothesis 2

The global personal luxury goods market, as the core of luxury segments, keeps growing and reaches \$387 billion (Altgamma, 2024), proving the unparalleled resilience of this industry and setting a new milestone for it. For further research, it is found a trend that female spending power is gradually overtaking male high-end luxury spending.

Personal Luxury Goods Market (in \$ billions)

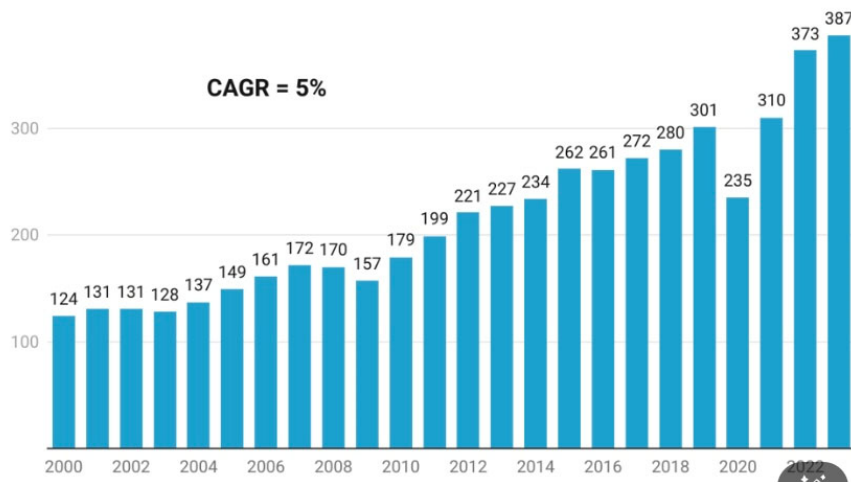


Figure 4. Personal Luxury Goods Market (Resources from Bain Company)

As women accomplish much progress in their professional and personal lives, they are more enthusiastic about purchasing luxury goods that symbolize their accomplishments. There are 62% of women buy luxury goods only for themselves, while just 46% of males do that. As for the value of goods, women also spend more than men, with 27% of women spending more than £50k per year, which is 10% higher than men (HAVAS, 2023).

Why are women immersed in buying luxury goods? Self-indulgence is the top motivation. Over half of the women, who are called "Joy Rejuvenators", put happiness gaining and emotional spending the first place on their luxury consumption journey. They are searching for comfort and inspiration, which come from the same values or beliefs the products spread and connect consumers with (Collins, 2023).

Currently, people pay more attention to leisure than before, which determines individual happiness (Varian, 2005), as shown by the comparison between Figure 5 and Figure 6. Despite people from different nations having different weight on the importance of leisure, the percentage with attitudes like "very important" and "rather important" significantly rises all over the world. Consuming, involving shopping in a mall or online, is a typical way of leisure and gaining happiness.

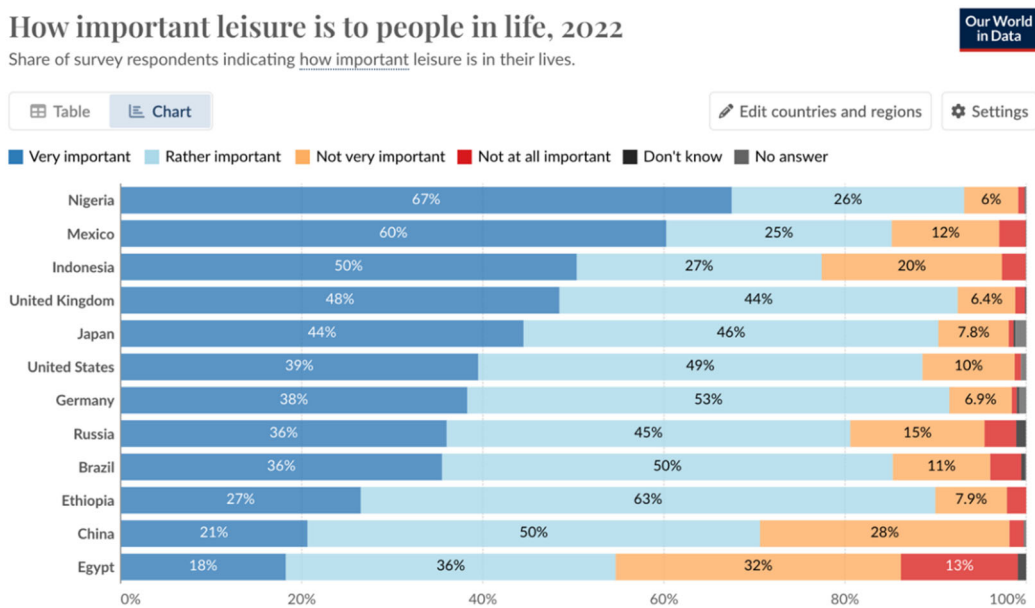


Figure 5. How important leisure is to people in life, 2022 (Resources from Our World Data)

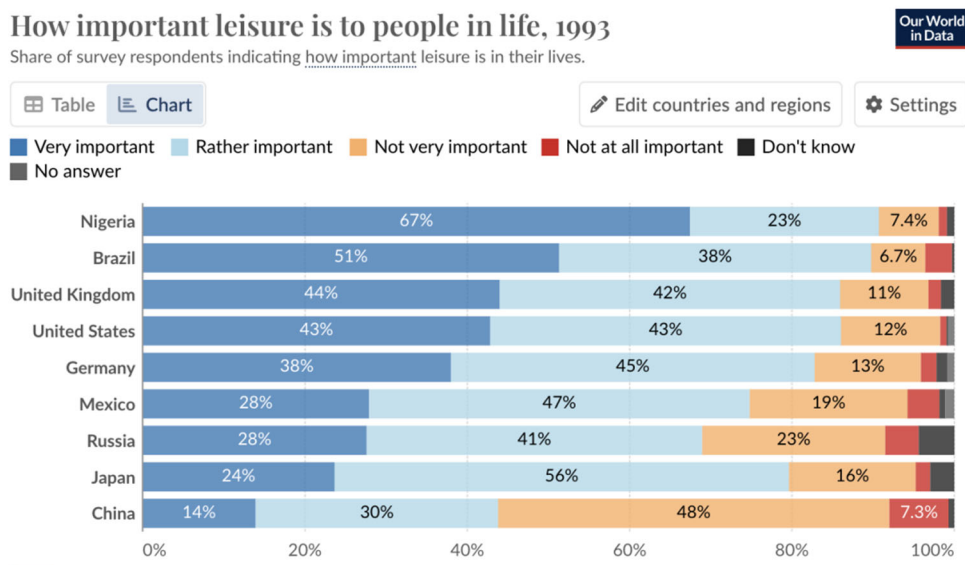


Figure 6. How important leisure is to people in life, 1993 (Resources from Our World Data)

So, we can see that the rise in women's consumption of luxury goods reflects their increasing emphasis on personal emotional happiness, which can also be proven in other aspects of daily life.

Except for the example of leisure, the changes in romantic relationships are also signs that illustrate individuals' emphasis on emotional happiness. Currently, people aged 18-39 years old experience the highest rates of depression and anxiety (American National Center for Health Statistics, 2020), and nearly half of them see their emotional health as top place (Deloitte, 2020). Linking it with relationships, according to Tinder (2022), 75% of young singles believe people are more attractive in dating when they are working on their mental well-being, and 80% of them even agree that taking care of themselves is their priority in a relationship. They are rejecting old-fashioned norms of relationships that advocate marriage as a task that should be finished in time. The motivations to start a relationship transfer from simply following social expectations or marriage to more diverse and inclusive modes: for immediate sexual gratification like "hookups" (Laskowski, 2020), for fun, escaping loneliness, feeling attractive, and increasing status in society (Whitton & Weitbrecht, 2020; Thorpe & Kuperberg, 2021). Other motivations are only about emotional experience, like approval from others, emotional support, curiosity, adventure, care, and companionship (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Tartakovsky, 2023). To avoid strict constraints, many of them choose more casual and short-run relationships (Paul Eastwick, 2018). As shown by the cases above, society is promoting individual happiness and liberty in relationships rather than conventional gender roles (Mengzhen, et, al., 2024). Also, urban adults, especially women, are more determined to leave an uncomfortable relationship (Ipsos, 2022) instead of putting up with it just like many of their parents choose.

The captious demands of urban women for their potential partners demonstrate their emphasis on happiness as shown by Figure 7 below, as a healthy relationship has strong correlations with life satisfaction (Leite et, al., 2023). About four in 10 single females say the major reason they keep single is the inability to meet someone reaching their standards, compared to only 23% of males (American Perspectives Survey, 2023). Urban women won't have to do with partners with characteristics that make them uncomfortable.

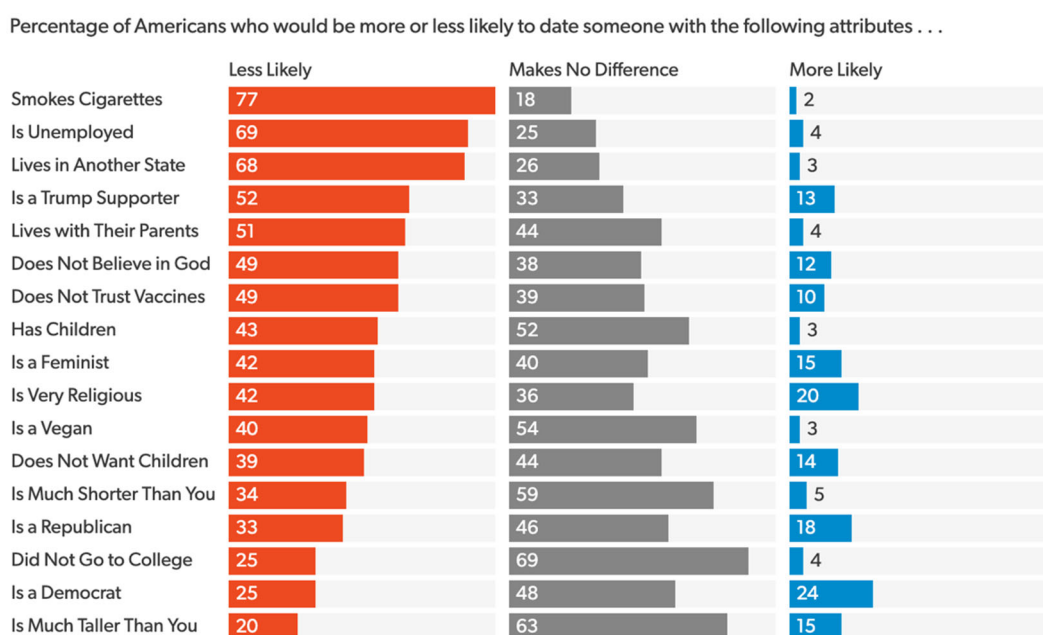


Figure 7. Attributes of Americans likely to date
(Resources from American Perspectives Survey, 2023)

What's more, people tend to know more about their partners before starting a relationship, instead of starting long-term relationships with strangers to follow a rigid social script. 44% of young American adults say they were friends with their partners before being romantically involved, while only 21% of elders say the same, even 52% of seniors did not know their partners before dating (American Survey Centre, 2023)!

Therefore, it is obvious that the shifts in relationships are partly caused by the increased attention to personal happiness and well-being, which is also a motivation for the increase in the sales volume of luxury fashion goods for urban women.

4.3. The Proof of Hypothesis 3

Consumerism can be seen in many ways surrounding everyone's daily life. First, annual large-scale shopping events are examples. In 2023, consumers spent \$12.4 billion on Cyber Monday and \$9.8 billion on Black Friday, continuing the trend of breaking spending records (Analytics, 2023). Besides, the credit card debt per user reached \$6360 in 2023, about 10% higher than last year, which marks a move in a negative direction (Transunion, 2023). Additionally, it has a great influence on the environment. Though North Americans only make up 8% of the global population, they account for 50% of garbage (Brummet, 2004). If there were no such demands for products, fewer goods would be produced, and less garbage would emerge. Also, the constant release of new products like smartphones and cars, conscious consumption like luxury consumption, and rapid exposure to ads on mobiles are all signs of today's consumer culture.

Inevitably, the spread of consumer culture makes a strong difference in the romantic relationships of urban people. First, from the view of spending behaviors during the relationship, men in a dating condition tend to spend more money, especially on conspicuous items, than in a control condition, while the romantic prime seems to have little impact on women's spending behaviors (Griskevicius et al., 2007), demonstrated by Figure 8 below.

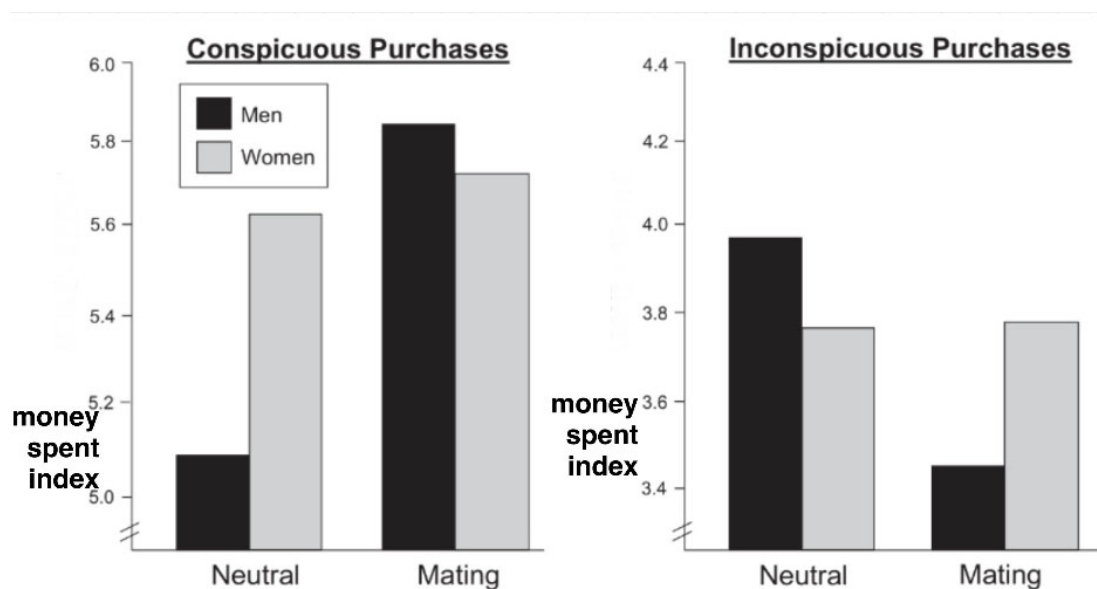


Figure 8. Purchases in Love

(Resources from Journal of personality and social psychology, 2007)

In women's view, they believe men with more financial and social resources are more competitive when finding a partner (Thompson & Sullivan, 2012), which might be the reason why men make an effort to show their spending power, particularly through conspicuous purchases.

Connecting the commercial mindset broadly with other intimate relationships, people have expressed entirely different views on it. Some argue that the commodification of intimacy is not humanizing (Zelizer, 2000), which means love relationships have basic distinctions from financial exchange relations. The realms, like romantic love, childcare, marriage, and sex, are relationships where people get involved out of love. As a result, it is inimical for them to connect with monetary compensation. Some feminists believe commercialization of romantic love would normalize male dominance (Donnerstein & Malamuth, 1984) and objectify women (Zimmerman, 2012), as women are still a vulnerable group in today's society. Even within the framework of Marxism (1883), all the activities about the commercialization of intimacy, including using dating apps and sugaring, are detrimental to human dignity and the alienation of the real self.

Alternatively, many kinds of literature suggest that intimacy within the market is not fundamentally harmful but even beneficial. Coontz (2013) believes that traditional marriage is based on economic corporations and exchange, showing that there's no specific boundary between market and intimacy. Some even believe commercialization can assign value and meaning to relationships (Bernstein, 2007). Historically, childcare, sex, caring for the old, "emotional labor" and chores in the house are seen as what women should do in intimacy for free. When this shift occurs in intimacy, it might be an important step in gender equity since it assigns real financial value to their labor (Weitzer, 2012).

5. Conclusion

Beginning with the widespread of consumerism in current society, this paper tries to find the relationships between urban women's consumption structures and shifts in their attitudes towards romantic relationships with empirical study and theoretical analysis. The development tendencies and motivations of these new phenomena are the main study topics and get two conclusions as follows: The spending power of urban women is negatively correlated to traditional types of relationships but positively related to the acceptance and diversities of new types of relationships; the increase in the sales volume of luxury fashion goods for urban women has some similar motivations to the shifts of relationships. During the progress, the consumption of luxury goods and some new-style patterns of relationships are key points because of their representativeness. Additionally, the paper conducts further study on a new concept that has existed recently, "commercialization of intimacy", and theoretically discusses on its benefits and drawbacks.

6. Limitations

In the empirical research part of a study on the "commercialization of intimacy", the lack of data with a large sample size is the biggest limitation. This is because this topic was proposed not long before and the academic world has not produced sufficient results yet. Besides, the sensitivity and personal privacy that this topic involves are also reasons, since many people are not willing to talk about their true experiences and perspectives. So, the research, especially on sugaring and emotional labor, mainly uses indirect information, summarizes overall characteristics from a small number of interviews, or just theoretically discusses.

References

- [1] Brown, H. S., & Vergragt, P. J. (2016). From consumerism to wellbeing: toward a cultural transition? *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 132, 308-317.
- [2] Chao, A., & Schor, J. B. (1998). Empirical tests of status consumption: Evidence from women's cosmetics. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 19(1), 107-131.

- [3] Claxton, S. E., & van Dulmen, M. H. (2013). Casual sexual relationships and experiences in emerging adulthood. *Emerging Adulthood*, 1(2), 138-150.
- [4] Constable, N. (2009). The commodification of intimacy: Marriage, sex, and reproductive labor. *Annual review of anthropology*, 38(1), 49-64.
- [5] Davis, F. (1994). *Fashion, culture, and identity*. University of Chicago Press.
- [6] Eastman, J. K., Iyer, R., Shepherd, C. D., Heugel, A., & Faulk, D. (2018). Do they shop to stand out or fit in? The luxury fashion purchase intentions of young adults. *Psychology & Marketing*, 35(3), 220-236.
- [7] Eastwick, P. W., Keneski, E., Morgan, T. A., McDonald, M. A., & Huang, S. A. (2018). What do short-term and long-term relationships look like? Building the relationship coordination and strategic timing (ReCAST) model. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 147(5), 747.
- [8] Fernandes, M.I., Sousa, C., Conde, A.R. et al. Exploring the Relationship between Capacity to Love and Well-being: A Comparative Study of Emerging Adults and Middle-aged Adults. *Sexuality & Culture* 28, 1424–1445 (2024).
- [9] Firat, A., Kutucuoglu, K. Y., Saltik, I. A., & Tuncel, O. (2013). Consumption, consumer culture, and consumer society. *Journal of Community Positive Practices*, (1), 182-203.
- [10] Giovannini, S., Xu, Y., & Thomas, J. (2015). Luxury fashion consumption and Generation Y consumers: Self, brand consciousness, and consumption
- [11] Griskevicius, V., Tybur, J. M., Sundie, J. M., Cialdini, R. B., Miller, G. F., & Kenrick, D. T. (2007). Blatant benevolence and conspicuous consumption: When romantic motives elicit strategic costly signals. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 93(1), 85.
- [12] Guo, Z. (2022, December). The Influence of FEMALE's Awakening Consciousness on Consumer Culture. In *2022 6th International Seminar on Education, Management and Social Sciences (ISEMSS 2022)* (pp. 2168-2173). Atlantis Press.'
- [13] Hudders, L. (2012). Why the devil wears Prada: Consumers' purchase motives for luxuries. *Journal of Brand Management*, 19, 609-622.
- [14] Hudders, L., Pandelaere, M., & Vyncke, P. (2013). Consumer meaning making: The meaning of luxury brands in a democratized luxury world. *International Journal of Market Research*, 55(3), 391-412.
- [15] James-Kangal, N., Weitbrecht, E. M., Francis, T. E., & Whitton, S. W. (2018). Hooking up and emerging adults' relationship attitudes and expectations. *Sexuality & Culture*, 22, 706-723.
- [16] Jamison, T. B., & Sanner, C. M. (2021). Relationship form and function: Exploring meaning-making in young adults' romantic histories. *Personal Relationships*, 28(4), 840-859.
- [17] Jiao, C., Lee, C. T., Feng, Q., & Fincham, F. D. (2024). Romantic relationships and attitudes in Asian emerging adults: Review and critique. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*.
- [18] Kuate-Defo, B. (2004). Young people's relationships with sugar daddies and sugar mummies: what do we know and what do we need to know? *African journal of reproductive health*, 13-37.
- [19] Lens, I., Driesmans, K., Pandelaere, M., & Janssens, K. (2012). Would male conspicuous consumption capture the female eye? Menstrual cycle effects on women's attention to status products. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(1), 346-349.
- [20] Martens, L., & Casey, E. (2016). *Gender and consumption: Domestic cultures and the commercialization of everyday life*. Routledge.
- [21] McRobbie, A. (2008). Young women and consumer culture: An intervention. *Cultural studies*, 22(5), 531-550.

- [22] Nayar, K. I. (2017). Sweetening the deal: Dating for compensation in the digital age. *Journal of gender studies*, 26(3), 335-346.
- [23] Nelissen, R. M., & Meijers, M. H. (2011). Social benefits of luxury brands as costly signals of wealth and status. *Evolution and human behavior*, 32(5), 343-355.
- [24] Ngo, Q. (2019). Consumerism and femininity: Women and consumer culture in contemporary Hollywood feature films (Master's thesis).
- [25] Pepi, R. Y. (2021). In *Between Private and Public Life: An Investigation of Women's Work as Sugar Babies and The Commodification of Intimacy*.
- [26] Rauer, A. J., Pettit, G. S., Lansford, J. E., Bates, J. E., & Dodge, K. A. (2013). Romantic relationship patterns in young adulthood and their developmental antecedents. *Developmental psychology*, 49(11), 2159-2171.
- [27] Rezeanu, C. I. (2016). Reflexive Transformation of Intimacy in Late Modernity Theories: Some Critiques and Conceptual Alternatives. *Postmodern Openings*, 7(1), 35-54.
- [28] Slater, D. (2015). Consumer culture. *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies*, 1-7.
- [29] Stewart, S., Stinnett, H., & Rosenfeld, L. B. (2000). Sex differences in desired characteristics of short-term and long-term relationship partners. *Journal of social and personal relationships*, 17(6), 843-853.
- [30] Stokburger-Sauer, N. E., & Teichmann, K. (2013). Is luxury just a female thing? The role of gender in luxury brand consumption. *Journal of Business Research*, 66(7), 889-896.
- [31] Tartakovsky, E. (2023). The psychology of romantic relationships: motivations and mate preferences. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1273607.
- [32] TINDER'S YEAR IN SWIPETMD REPORT: acting Games are Dead in 2022 Said Young Singles, 2022
- [33] Venkatesh, A., Joy, A., Sherry Jr, J. F., & Deschenes, J. (2010). The aesthetics of luxury fashion, body, and identity formation. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 20(4), 459-470.
- [34] Wang, M., & Wong, M. S. (2014). Happiness and leisure across countries: Evidence from international survey data. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 15, 85-118.
- [35] *Women's Wealth 2030: Parity, Power, Purpose*, UBS, 2023
- [36] Wu, M. S. S., Chaney, I., Chen, C. H. S., Nguyen, B., & Melewar, T. C. (2015). Luxury fashion brands: factors influencing young female consumers' luxury fashion purchasing in Taiwan. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 18(3), 298-319.
- [37] Zhang, B., & Kim, J. H. (2013). Luxury fashion consumption in China: Factors affecting attitude and purchase intent. *Journal of retailing and consumer services*, 20(1), 68-79.