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## Causes and effects of social media engagement in luxury fashion marketing: A comparative study over the COVID pandemic

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**Causes and effects of social media engagement in luxury fashion marketing:  
A comparative study over the COVID pandemic.**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines cross-country heterogeneities and over-time changes of the role of social media marketing (SMM) in the luxury fashion industry. A comprehensive literature review is conducted on customer value, purchase intention, and engagement motivation to understand the causes and effects of SMM. Based on the survey data in China and the UK, probit and oprobit regressions are employed to estimate the models of SMM. Results show that affectional and cognitive motives are the two primary drivers of SMM engagement in both countries. Chinese customers are more susceptible to SMM than British counterparts, suggesting significant potential benefits of developing SMM strategies in China. Over time, SMM has become an irreversible trend of luxury brand management after the COVID pandemic. Identified heterogeneities and changes call for differentiated international marketing strategies in different countries at different times.

**Keywords:** Social Media; Brand Interaction; Luxury Fashion Marketing.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has gained its overwhelming popularity among the millennials whose customer satisfaction and purchase intention are heavily impacted by the so-called “Marketing 4.0” (Kotler et al., 2016). This new concept of marketing combines four integral components: brand identity, brand image, brand integrity, and brand interaction (Dash et al., 2021). The first three are part of Marketing 3.0, which emphasises the multi-dimensional, values-driven feature of customers (Kotler et al., 2019). The last component, brand interaction, is a defining feature of the inclusive, horizontal, and social approach to marketing, which is particularly pertinent to millennial customers. Almost all industries have evolved from push-oriented marketing strategies (unidirectional messages sent to customers) to a collaborative-oriented customer engagement. There has been an increasing effect of social media marketing on consumer’s emotion (Straker & Wrigley, 2016), purchase intention (Wallace et al., 2020), and satisfaction (Campbell et al., 2014), especially since the COVID pandemic (Gangadharbatla, 2021; Klaus & Tynan, 2022).

The fashion industry is no exception in accepting this trend. Social media marketing (SMM) has been studied in relation to its impacts on advertising effectiveness (Lou et al., 2023), brand engagement (Kwon et al., 2023), and impulsive purchasing (Shamim et al., 2024). It is arguable that customers are heterogeneous in terms of social media exposure and usage (Shin & Lee, 2021), so it is important to distinguish different customer motivations to engage with the social media platforms of luxury brands (Bazi et al., 2020). This information is particularly important for digital marketing and particularly SMM because managers need to know the target customers before planning marketing campaigns. In fact, social media has

transformed consumers from passive recipients of product information to influencers and participants by shifting some marketing power over sellers to buyers (Itani et al., 2020). Negative tweets are found to have significant impact on the likelihood to recommend the product in question (Barhorst et al., 2020). Nevertheless, it is also a great chance for brands to create a new “social image” and to promote customer perception (Sharma et al., 2024). In the once-in-a-century COVID pandemic, online shopping and SMM are even more important for the fashion industry due to the forced closure and limits of mortar-and-bricks stores.

However, in the luxury fashion industry, the evidence is mixed for embracing the SMM strategy. Some find that social media platforms can enhance brand attitude and loyalty (Yoo, 2024) in cases like Estee Lauder, Burberry, Tiffany, and Louis Vuitton. Others find that social media platforms over-reduce the psychological distance between consumers and luxury brands, which are accused of being “too friendly” (Park et al., 2020). It is argued that luxury fashion brands should behave differently from fast fashion brands like H&M and Zara, which also actively interact with their followers on social media (Mrad et al., 2020). If luxury brands are too interactive, it violates the original idea of luxury—to signify status and power.

Inspired by this dilemma, this paper embarks on the nexus between social media and luxury brand marketing. There are two sides of the relationship. On the one hand, one would like to explore the **causes** for customers to engage with the social media of luxury brands. On the other hand, it is natural to further investigate the **effects** of social media on customers’ purchase intention of luxury brands. The UK, as a representative developed economy with clear-cut western culture, is well researched in the literature of fashion marketing (Ko et al., 2016). China, nevertheless, begins to gain an increasing attention in the literature due to its

unprecedented growth miracle in the past four decades (Li et al., 2012; Huang et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2021). Despite being a developing economy, China is currently the world's largest luxury goods market (35%) and accounting for two thirds of global growth in luxury spending in 2019 (McKinsey, 2019). Therefore, a comparative study of the "old world" and the emerging economy is expected to generate interesting findings (Guo & Zhou, 2021). We want to know if customers of luxury fashion brands behave differently in the two disparate economic, cultural, and social environments, especially after the pandemic.

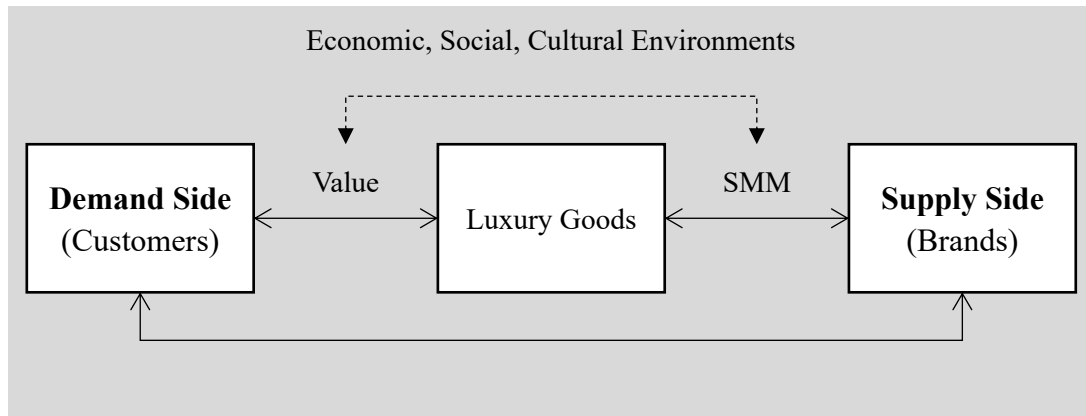
The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Following the introduction section, the next section is devoted to a comprehensive literature review on SMM and luxury brand. Section 3 discusses the methodology including ethic issues of data collection, the measurement issues, and the data description. Empirical findings are reported and analysed in Section 4. Conclusions and implications are drawn in Section 5.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section is devoted to critically reviewing the related literature related to this paper. It follows the conceptual framework of the luxury market consisting of the demand side (customers) and the supply side (brands) in a specific economic, social, and cultural context, as shown in Figure 1. In general, luxury brands produce luxury goods which are sold and promoted via various marketing strategies including SMM. Customers, on the other hand, perceive the value of luxury goods and form the purchase intention (Jiang et al., 2021; Davari et al., 2022). Customer motivations to engage with social media can be interpreted as causes of SMM, while the effects of SMM on the purchase intention take place via customer value (indicated by the dash arrows). The literature review focuses on the three key components of

the conceptual framework, luxury brands, social media, and the environment. It is the theoretical foundation for the questionnaire design and the empirical model in Section 4.

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework



Notes: Created by the authors.

## 2.1. Literature on Luxury Brands

According to Statista, the global luxury fashion market size was valued at \$330.07 billion in 2020. The luxury clothing market is expected to grow at a rate of 13% from 2021 to 2025. China is expected to become the leading country for luxury fashion by 2025. In marketing literature, luxury brands can be defined with different foci. For example, some use luxury brands to refer to those for prestige-seeking customers, while others treat “prestige” as a part of the brand value and “luxury” as self-indulgence (Dubois & Czellar, 2002). Consumers of luxury goods can derive subjective benefits beyond the functional utility, due to the distinctive quality (Garfein, 1989), authenticity (Goldstein & Carpenter, 2022), and the interpersonal effect (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). In particular, the interpersonal effect can be derived from the symbolic value of social identity of luxury brands (Vickers & Renand, 2003).

To summarise, the definition of luxury brands is gradually extended from functional to including experiential and psychological dimensions.

Essentially, luxury brands are a special form of branding that creates unique sociocultural and individual meanings to their adherents (Ko et al., 2019). There is usually a trickle-down hierarchy from luxury fashion trend to fast fashion trend (Zhang et al., 2021), so luxury brands need to stay in front of the fashion industry and luxury customers to provide privileged social status (Debenedetti et al., 2024). Therefore, an exclusive, privileged experience is the fundamental difference between luxury brands (e.g., Chanel, Louis Vuitton) and mass brands (e.g., Zara, H&M).

Luxury brands are co-created by both producers and consumers through interactions and dialogues (Tynan et al., 2010; Chapman & Dilmperi, 2022). This shifts the focus of marketing management from a passive approach to an approach of engagement with customers and partners (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) to co-construct unique experiences (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Social media is one of the most important tools to achieve value co-creation (Riedmeier & Kreuzer, 2022). After all, the ultimate purpose of marketing management is to promote the purchase intention, which is a combination of consumers' interest in and possibility of buying a product. An extensive literature on luxury goods is devoted to customer value because it is the subjective factor of purchase intention.

Consumption values of luxury brands generate purchase intention through the immersion process of emotion and affection. An influential model of this dynamic process is the stimulus-organism-response framework (Rahman et al., 2023). The stimulus component includes a long list of factors such as store location, convenience, shopping experience, website



quality, and brand reputation. These stimulus factors trigger organism components such as affection, involvement, and trust. Next, the organism factors lead to the response component including purchase intention and satisfaction, behavioural intention and loyalty, and recommendation. Organism components are the key link between stimuli and responses. Factors of organism components can be classified into two groups—flow and compatibility. On the one hand, the flow concept is an internal process in which pleasure, utility, and excitement are derived from luxury brand experience. On the other hand, compatibility is a positive feeling in the experience of luxury goods. This concept reflects the extent of consistency with existing belief, past experiences, and popular lifestyle (Ekinici et al., 2013).

To summarise, there is a well-established theoretical basis for how purchase intention is affected by customer values, especially via the channel of customer engagement. However, the way of interactions between consumers and luxury brands differs across generations and countries. Many studies have confirmed a significant difference among Gen-X, Gen-Y, and Gen-Z in their engagement with luxury brands (Lissitsa & Kol, 2016; Youn & Cho, 2022), but the literature on cross-country comparison is slim. Arguably, the generational heterogeneity can be partly attributed to the use of online platforms, which will be reviewed in the next subsection. The cross-country heterogeneity is a gap in the existing literature to be filled by the comparative study between the UK and China in this paper.

## **2.2. Literature on Social Media**

Social media are online networks of social interactions, collaborations, and sharing of information. In the short history of social media, there has been an evolution from information-sharing platforms (e.g., websites, blogs, and wikis) to interaction-engagement net-

works (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram). As one of the biggest social media platforms, Instagram has more than one billion active users sharing, hash tagging, and commenting on visual contents, and 70% of shopping enthusiasts turn to Instagram for product discovery. Social media have become an indispensable communication tool for almost everyone including governments and large firms in the last decade (Chou & Lin, 2023). Nevertheless, extensive literature has found significant disparities of social media usage across different cultures (Yousaf et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2020), especially in heavily regulated countries like China (Fitzgerald et al., 2022).

Luxury brands are not an exception to adapt their marketing strategies to embrace social media since 2009. Gucci created a website [GucciEyeweb.com](http://GucciEyeweb.com) as it launched a new sunglasses collection in that year. It is also active in updating its Facebook account and Twitter account (Samsung Design Net, 2009). Similarly, Burberry set up a similar website [artofthetrench.com](http://artofthetrench.com) in late 2009, initially as an information sharing platform. Similar strategies were fast copied by Dolce & Gabbana, Chanel, Louis Vuitton, and Yves Saint Laurent. Nevertheless, social media was not extensively used by luxury brands as their key marketing channels before the COVID pandemic (Yoo, 2024).

Empirical literature verifies a long list of benefits of SMM to luxury brands. These benefits include promotion of *sales* via electronic word-of-mouth and loyalty (Lipsman et al., 2012), improvement of brand-customer *relationship* (Laroche et al., 2013), and fostering of multilateral *information* sharing (Liu et al., 2021). Moreover, SMM can also contribute to brand equity (Bruhn et al., 2012), because the two dimensions of brand equity—brand

awareness and brand image—can be greatly enhanced by the joint value creation (Tynan et al., 2010).

Despite these benefits, some studies argue that SMM may also bring negative effects on luxury brands (Park et al., 2020). This is because of a conflict in the core values of social media and luxury brands as contrasted in Table 1.

Table 1 Contradiction between Luxury Brands and Social Media

<b>Luxury Brands</b>	<b>Social Media</b>
Exclusive	Inclusive
Controlled	Interactive
Prestigious	Accessible
Elite	Everyone

Notes: The table is a summary based on Park et al. (2020).

Whether or not the net effect of SMM on luxury brands is positive is a matter of optimal intensity of customer engagement, rather than a be-or-not-to-be question (Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009). Almost all luxury brands have their social media platforms, and SMM usually takes the following forms: entertainment (Manthiou et al., 2013), interaction (Zhu & Chen, 2015), trendiness (Naaman et al., 2011), customisation (Martin & Todorov, 2010), and word of mouth (Feng et al., 2023). These SMM activities are perceived by consumers to form distinctive values such as seeking empathy and reducing misunderstanding (Kim & Ko, 2012).

### 2.3. Literature on Marketing Environment

As shown in Figure 1, interactions between the demand side (consumers) and the supply side (brands) are influenced by the economic, social, and cultural environments. There has been extensive literature on cross-country heterogeneities in social media use (Liu et al.,

2020; Yousaf et al., 2022). However, most studies treat the environment as a static setting. Few has investigated the dynamics of the environment and the impacts on luxury brand SMM. The COVID pandemic is one of such events, which have significantly revolutionised marketing paradigms and consumer behaviour (Gangadharbatla, 2021; Gupta et al., 2023).

On the brand side, the pandemic accelerated the already ongoing shift towards digital channels in luxury brand marketing. With lockdowns and restrictions on physical retail, luxury brands had to rapidly adapt their marketing strategies to prioritise digital channels such as e-commerce, social media, and online advertising. This shift forced many luxury brands to invest more heavily in their online presence, including improving website experiences, enhancing virtual shopping options, and leveraging social media platforms to engage with consumers. On the consumer side, COVID has altered people's perceptions, preferences, and behaviours regarding luxury brands (Kumar, 2023). With travel restrictions and social distancing measures in place, there was a decrease in demand for travel-related luxury goods such as designer luggage and high-end fashion for special events. Instead, there was an increased focus on comfort, wellness, and sustainability, leading luxury brands to adapt their marketing messages and product offerings to meet these changing consumer preferences (Abaido & Chabani, 2024).

These drastic changes in the luxury brand market induce fast-evolving strategies of luxury brand marketing. First, with physical stores closed or operating under restrictions during lockdowns, luxury brands have shifted their focus towards digital channels, including social media, to maintain connections with consumers. Social media platforms became essential tools for luxury brands to engage with their audience, showcase products, and drive online

sales (Shah & Ali, 2023). The impact of COVID varies from country to country. We expect to see a stronger effect in China, because it was the first country entering the pandemic and has undergone a prolonged period of social isolation (Cedrola & Hu, 2022).

Second, influencer marketing gained even more prominence during the pandemic as people spent more time on social media platforms (Lou et al., 2023). Luxury brands collaborated with influencers to reach wider audiences and leverage their influence to promote products and services (Zhang et al., 2024). Influencers provided a way for luxury brands to maintain visibility and connect with consumers in a more authentic and relatable manner, especially during a time when traditional marketing avenues were limited.

Third, luxury brands adjusted their content strategies on social media to resonate with the changed consumer sentiment during the pandemic (Yao, 2023). There was a greater emphasis on content that focused on comfort, wellness, and sustainability, aligning with the shifting consumer preferences towards more meaningful and purpose-driven purchases (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2024). Brands also created content that emphasised at-home experiences, such as virtual fashion shows, home styling tips, and self-care routines. Existing studies have identified a long list of effects of COVID on luxury brand SMM, but a comparative study between developed and developing economies is still missing.

Based on the literature review on luxury brands, social media, and COVID influences, the research aim of this paper is to fill a gap in the empirical literature on SMM in luxury brands—the causes and effects of SMM of luxury brands. This aim is achieved by addressing four inter-related research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: What are the causes for SMM of luxury brands?
- RQ2: What are the effects of SMM on purchase intention of luxury brands?
- RQ3: Are there cross-country differences in luxury brand SMM between the UK and China?
- RQ4: Are there over-time changes in luxury brand SMM before and after the COVID pandemic?

### **3. METHODS**

To answer the RQs raised in the literature review, this section discusses the methods of. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, we decide to adopt a mono quantitative method as in Tsai & Men (2013) and Simon & Tossan (2018). The following subsections describe the design of the questionnaire, the issues of data collection, and the data.

#### **3.1. Questionnaire Design**

The questionnaire is divided into four sections. The first section includes the questions on individual attributes, such as gender, age, residence, religion, income, and occupation. These economic and demographic variables will be used as dependent variables in the regression analysis later. It is a common practice in empirical studies to control these individual characteristics (Zhang et al., 2021). The second section is designed to collect data on respondents' basic attitude towards luxury brands and social media. The third section is devoted to engagement motivation (the causes of SMM), while the fourth section embarks on the purchase intention (the effects of SMM). The fifth section focuses on the COVID changes.

<b>Customer Motivations</b>	<b>Q13</b>
Pragmatic motives	I want to know the latest product information.
Affectional motives	I love the brands.
Social motives	Everyone does that. My idols endorse the brands.
Cognitive motives	I would like to keep updated in my fashion knowledge.
Hedonic motives	Just for fun.

In particular, the key question of Section 3 is Q13, where we map the identified customer motivations of social media engagement as follows. The five dimensions of customer motivations (Q13) are based on the literature (Tsai & Men, 2013; Simon & Tossan, 2018). To properly measure each dimension, the statements are carefully worded to reflect the connotation of each construct. For example, “product information” → pragmatic, “love” → affectional, “knowledge” → cognitive, “fun” → hedonic. In particular, we separately measure two types of social motives, one due to ordinary people (“everyone does that”) and the other due to influencers (“my idols endorse the brands”).

In Section 4, questions are designed to reflect the three mechanisms through which SMM affects brand equity and customer equity.

<b>Effects of SMM</b>	<b>Section 4</b>
Information	Q15: Do you feel more confident in the luxury fashion brand if it has a presence on social media? Q16: Do you feel lack of confidence in the luxury fashion brand if it does not have a presence on social media?
Sales (Purchase Intention)	Q17: Do you think social media of luxury brands can increase your purchase intention during COVID?
Relationship	Q18: Do you think social media of luxury brands can improve the customer relationship during COVID?

### **3.2. Data Collection**

This paper involves collection and analysis of primary data. Therefore, ethical approval is sought from the research committee of a British higher education institute before the questionnaire is sent out to respondents via online social media such as Google form (for British respondents) and WeChat (for Chinese respondents). It is voluntary to participate in the questionnaire and the respondents are free to withdraw at any point during the data collection. A separate consent form is signed by the respondent before filling the questionnaire. To make sure the participants are well informed and aware of this, we re-state the purpose of the research project, the voluntary nature of the survey, and the contact of the investigator at the beginning of the questionnaire.

Due to the difference in popular social media of the UK and China, the data are collected using different tools. Therefore, it is a stratified sampling approach. Also, the author translated the questionnaire into Chinese to respondents in China.

### **3.3. The Data**

The questionnaire is sent to British respondents and Chinese respondents separately but simultaneously (February/2023). There are in total 447 valid returns, with 279 Chinese respondents (62.42%), 155 British respondents (34.68%), and 13 others (2.91%). Since this paper focuses on the comparison between China and the UK, the 13 observations of other nationalities are discarded.

Gender-wise, there are 99 females (63.87%) and 56 males (36.13%) in the British sample, and 213 females (71.89%) and 66 males (23.66%) in the Chinese sample. In both cases, female respondents dominate the sample probably because females are more interested in



luxury fashion. Most of the samples lies between 20s and 30s (i.e., Gen-Y and Gen-X), but we do have a wider age range in the China sample stretching up to 60s. The religion distributions of the UK and China are significantly different, reflecting the disparate cultures of the two countries. Most people in China have no religion (72%), while Christian (58.7%) is the most popular religion in the UK. Regarding the income distribution, we can see a sheer contrast between the two countries. China is a developing country, so the majority (55.9%) earn less than £15K. Respondents from the UK, however, have a much higher average income and the middle class (£40K-£100K) is much greater than China. Based on the descriptive statistics of the individual attributes (section 1 of the questionnaire), it is shown that the two subsamples have an appropriate and balanced coverage.

Now let us turn to the basic attitudes of the respondents towards luxury brands and social media (section 2 of the questionnaire). Surprisingly, both Chinese and British customers share a great similarity in the interest in luxury brands—about half of them agree that they want to know about luxury fashion industry (British are a bit higher), and no one in the sample strongly resent it. However, interest does not necessarily mean action. Most respondents own 1~3 luxury items for both countries. But for the UK, the second most popular choice is 4~6 items, different from the “none” choice in China. This suggests that there is a well-established middle class in the UK, but Chinese customers still have a very unbalanced distribution of income and, therefore, of luxury consumption. Regarding social media questions, China has a unique internet environment. Many popular social media outside China such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are not accessible without VPN, which are usually costly. The most popular social media in China is Wechat (80%) followed by Weibo and

Xiaohongshu. In contrast, the UK's most popular social media for the young generations are Instagram (58%). An interesting fact is that none of the British respondents use Chinese social media, but a few Chinese do use international social media.

## **4. RESULTS**

This section reports the findings based on the data collected using the methods discussed in Section 3 to answer the RQs raised in Section 2. Both descriptive statistics and regression analysis are employed. Empirical findings are organised in terms of RQ1 and RQ2, with cross-country comparisons (RQ3) discussed along the way. We devote a standalone subsection to discuss over-time changes (RQ4).

### **4.1. Engagement Motivation**

In our sample, 90.32% British respondents follow luxury brands on social media, while only 79.21% Chinese counterparts do so. It suggests that China still has a great potential in SMM of luxury brands.

In the survey, affectional motives ("I love the brand") are the most important reason for customers to engage with social media of luxury brands for both Chinese and British customers (Kozinets et al, 2010). The second place is taken by cognitive motives ("I would like to keep updated in my fashion knowledge"), which is in line with the findings in Kumar & Noble (2016). Pragmatic motives ("I want to know the latest product information") are the third important reason for customer engagement (Bazi et al., 2020), because there are alternative ways of getting the same information. Another interesting finding is that the Chinese customers are more likely to be affected by social motives compared to their British counterparts, especially the idol endorsement effect as found in Yu & Hu (2020).

The distribution of engagement motivations is surprisingly similar between China and the UK, despite differences in economic, cultural, and social features of the two countries. To identify the sources of heterogeneities, six dimensions (age group, gender, residence, religion, income class, and occupation) are compared in the online supplementary material.

- **Age.** For those aged over 30 years old, the distributions of engagement motivations of the two countries demonstrate a high degree of homogeneity. In other words, the generation similarity dampens out the cross-country heterogeneity.
- **Gender.** However, males in the two countries behave quite differently. British males are less likely to engage due to affectional motives compared to their Chinese counterpart. Therefore, the gender effect exacerbates the cross-country heterogeneity.
- **Residence.** Similarly, those from rural areas (towns and villages) are more likely to follow luxury brands on social media because of the need for cognitive motives (fashion knowledge) and pragmatic motives, but cross-country heterogeneity is mild for non-urban residents. Most heterogeneity must lie in those who live in cities, especially those in first-tier cities.
- **Religion.** It is well noted that China does not have a strong religious culture (72%) and the mainstream religion of the UK is Christian (58.7%). To see if religion has a significant effect on the cross-country difference, we tabulate the motivations for the non-mainstream religions of the two countries (UK: non-Christian; China: religious) and we find that religion (and the related culture) contributes a substantial share of heterogeneity in the motivations.

- **Income.** The lower income groups (defined as those with annual income less than £40K) of the two countries have very similar distribution of motivations. Thus, it is the middle class and the upper class of the two countries that make the difference.
- **Profession.** The Chinese fashion workers are more likely to engage due to the cognitive and affectional motives compared to British fashion professionals. It is also found that the Chinese professionals do not engage with a brand just because it is fun like the British professionals do.

The cross tabulations reported above are descriptive statistics, in which the observed differences do not control for other factors. To explain what causes the engagement motivations, we need to employ regression analysis. Given that the dependent variables are dummy variables (binary in values) defined as if a respondent has a particular motivation, the probit regression model is appropriate (Foreman-Peck & Zhou, 2013). We report the probit regression estimation results in Table 2.

For social motives, we have distinguished two specific types. The first social motivation is just to be part of an online fashion community, while the second social motivation is to advocate the idol endorsement. It is found that for community seekers, China effect, gender effect, age effect, and income effect are not significant. Those with no religion are less likely (-0.860\*\*) to engage with social media for being part of an online community. Urban residents are more likely to engage for online community purpose, with first-tier cities having a stronger willingness than second-tier cities and towns. Luxury fashion professionals have greater motivation to join the online community than other industries.

Table 2 Probit Regressions of Engagement Motivation

	Social		Affection	Pragmatic	Cognitive	Hedonic
	Everyone	Idol				
China effect	0.240	0.570**	0.379*	0.182	-0.227	-0.444
Gender effect	0.464	-0.228	-0.025	-0.105	-0.487***	0.287
Age effect	-0.037	-0.033**	0.002	-0.009	-0.013	0.000
Christian	-1.195*	0.790*	0.706**	-0.258	-0.364	3.784***
Islam	.	.	0.349	-0.595	0.376	.
Buddhism	-0.685	0.646	0.196	0.04	-0.228	.
No religion	-0.860**	0.312	0.129	-0.394*	-0.075	4.227***
First-tier cities	4.141***	-0.246	0.213	-0.285	-0.073	0.107
Second-tier cities	4.024***	-0.333	0.09	-0.402*	0.005	0.515
15K-40K	-0.360	0.059	0.308**	0.309*	-0.052	-0.124
40K-100K	-0.307	0.169	0.071	0.341	0.172	0.100
100K+	.	.	0.62	0.663	-0.081	.
Luxury fashion	1.298***	-0.034	-0.374*	-0.119	0.318	0.154
Other fashion	0.216	0.093	0.145	0.172	0.017	-0.26
Constant	-4.732***	-1.264*	-1.222***	-0.431	-0.02	-5.899***
N	405	405	434	434	434	373
AIC	102.468	181.518	565.913	391.777	476.848	157.799
BIC	154.518	233.569	627.008	452.873	537.944	204.858

Significance level: \* 10%, \*\* 5%, \*\*\* 1%.

Regarding the social motivation of idol endorsement, it is found that the Chinese customers are more likely (0.570\*\*) to be affected by idol endorsement to engage with a luxury brand, compared to the UK. The age effect is also significant that older customers are less likely to be affected by idols (-0.033\*\*).

In the affectional motives, what stand out are the religion effect of being Christian and the income effect of the 15K-40K working class. Other factors, such as the China effect, are not significant in explaining the variations of having affectional motives while engaging with luxury brands on social media.

It is interesting to find that none of the demographic, cultural, and economic factors is significant in explaining the differences in pragmatic motives. It is not difficult to see the reason—people are more similar in decisions and actions than thoughts. If customers follow the social media platforms just for product information, then Chinese and British customers are about the same.

Turning to the causes of cognitive motives, the only significant factor is the gender effect. Compared to females, males are less likely to engage with social media of luxury brands for knowledge. This is the same for both the UK and China, the young and the old, Christians or Buddhists, the rich and the poor, and all occupations.

The last identified cause of customer engagement is hedonic. It is found that Christians and those with no religions are more likely to follow social media of luxury brands just for fun. This is the same for both sexes and all generations, and there is no significant difference between China and the UK.

#### **4.2. Brand Equity, Purchase Intention, and Customer Relationship**

As reviewed in Section 2, SMM can affect brand equity of luxury brands (Bruhn et al., 2012). It is noted that there might be asymmetry in the effect, i.e., the positive effect of presence of SMM may have a different effect in magnitude from the negative effect of absence of SMM. This idea comes from the framing effects of psychology. Therefore, we ask two related questions from different angles:

- Q15: Do you feel more confident in the luxury brand if it has a presence on social media?

- Q16: Do you feel lack of confidence in the luxury brand if it does not have a presence on social media?

The hypothesis of asymmetry means that if a luxury brand has a presence, then customers have an improved brand image. Nevertheless, if it does not have a presence, then customers are more towards to neutral about it. In other words, absent from social media does not penalise luxury brands as much as it rewards them for presence. It suggests that the special characteristics of luxury brands (exclusiveness, prestige) can cancel out some of the benefits of actively managing a social media platform (inclusiveness, accessible).

Table 3 T test of asymmetric effects of SMM on brand equity

	No. of Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.
(1) Positive Effect	434	3.620	0.781
(2) Negative Effect	434	2.993	0.918
Difference: (1)–(2)	434	0.627	1.171
H0: (1)–(2) = 0	HA: (1)–(2) ≠ 0	t statistic = 11.152	P value = 0.000

To formally test the asymmetry, we employ the T test of the null hypothesis (H0: Q15 = Q16). As shown in Table 3, the p-value of the null hypothesis being true is 0.000 (with a t statistic of 11.15). Therefore, the observation that the positive effect of having SMM is significantly stronger than the negative effect of not having SMM is statistically supported.

Now turn to the key questions of this paper—will SMM increase the purchase intention? We answer this question together with another related question—will SMM improve the customer relationship?

We can see two commonalities. On the one hand, the purchase intention and customer relationship are promoted with a similar degree during the COVID pandemic. The distribution of opinions of the two questions are almost the same. On the other hand, the UK and

China share very similar pattern of opinions. The only outstanding one is that some British customers do not agree that SMM can ever increase their purchase intention of luxury goods (“strongly disagree”), but no Chinese customers have similar opinion. In other words, the lockdowns during the pandemic seem to reinforce the role of SMM for both countries.

Like the analysis in 4.1, cross tabulations are descriptive statistics without much to be told in the causality of purchase intention and customer relationship, though both are deemed to be positively affected by SMM. Regression analysis is needed for identifying the causal effects of different factors such as country, gender, age, religion, residence, income, and profession (Kim et al., 2019). Different from the probit models reported in Table 2, a new regression model, ordered probit (oprobit), is needed for modelling ordered categorical variables like Q17 and Q18, whose values are defined in a scale of 1 to 5.

To investigate the effects on purchase intention by country, the oprobit regression model is estimated for the overall sample with a China dummy as well as for the two subsamples of China and the UK, respectively. It is to check if the slope effects are homogenous between the two countries, in addition to a level effect captured by the intercept dummy of China.

The key independent variable is engagement in SMM, which is expected to positively contribute to purchase intention according to our literature review. As shown in Table 4, this hypothesis is supported by the positive and significant coefficient (1.162\*\*\*) of “SMM engagement”. Specifically, the positive effect of engaging in SMM on purchase intention is much higher in the UK (8.214\*\*\*) than in China (0.712\*\*\*). This cross-country heterogeneity suggests that there is still a huge potential to explore the benefits of SMM in China.



Table 4 Oprobit Regressions of Purchase Intention

	Overall	UK	China
SMM engagement	1.162***	8.214***	0.712***
China effect	1.059***		
Gender effect	-0.105	0.128	-0.224
Age effect	-0.012	-0.052***	-0.011
Christian	0.385*	0.339	0.088
Islam	0.562**	0.248	1.111
Buddhism	0.418*	.	0.547*
No religion	0.026	-0.062	0.162
First-tier cities	0.133	-0.082	0.544*
Second-tier cities	-0.217	-0.231	-0.167
15K-40K	0.279**	-0.069	0.456***
40K-100K	0.520***	0.146	1.019***
100K+	0.654**	0.942***	0.415
Luxury fashion	0.156	0.023	0.322
Other fashion	-0.198	-0.243	-0.078
N	434	155	279
AIC	969.543	337.924	570.647
BIC	1046.931	389.663	632.377

Significance level: \* 10%, \*\* 5%, \*\*\* 1%.

The discrepancy is partly due to a higher purchase intention of Chinese customers (1.059\*\*\*), so SMM of luxury fashion brands can be less developed due to the high purchase intention in the first place. Looking at the regressions of the two subsamples, the working class (15K-40K) and the middle class (40K-100K) in China are much more likely to be affected in their purchase intention. In contrast, the purchase intentions of the rich in the UK (100K+) are more likely to be affected by social media. This heterogeneity informs marketing professionals to target at different groups in different countries.

Table 5 Oprobit Regressions of Customer Relationship

	Overall	UK	China
SMM engagement	0.452***	-0.323	0.692***
China effect	0.173		
Gender effect	0.241*	0.087	0.345**
Age effect	-0.003	-0.011	0
Christian	0.049	0.172	0.007
Islam	-0.049	0.21	-0.269
Buddhism	0.033	.	-0.109
No religion	0.009	0.058	-0.063
First-tier cities	-0.075	-0.263	0.072
Second-tier cities	-0.136	-0.309	-0.08
15K-40K	0.117	-0.187	0.131
40K-100K	0.504**	0.176	0.729*
100K+	0.308	0.518	0.095
Luxury fashion	0.127	-0.047	0.207
Other fashion	0.143	0.277	0.093
N	434	155	279
AIC	945.235	353.606	609.488
BIC	1022.623	405.344	674.85

Significance level: \* 10%, \*\* 5%, \*\*\* 1%.

In contrast, the SMM engagement effect on customer relationship is only significant in China, not in the UK. As the first country suffering from the pandemic, China has experienced a prolonged social isolation and mobility restriction. Therefore, the impact of SMM on customer relationship in China is expected to be bigger. In addition, the existing customer relationship in the UK has been well established even before the pandemic. Like any technology, the marginal benefit of the same input (SMM in this case) is declining. China, however, still have a huge potential in exploring the SMM benefits.

### 4.3. Impacts of COVID

Ideally, the impacts of COVID on SMM of luxury brands should be investigated through a longitudinal survey, allowing for the use of panel data to identify causal effects. However, it is not possible to travel back in time and ask respondents about their experiences before the pandemic. Instead, we asked the respondents to report the changes and use statistical tests to determine if there are significant differences across countries and over time. We are aware of possible biases of the self-reported responses. But given that the COVID pandemic was only a couple of years before the data collection, we believe that the reliability of responses is acceptable. The t test results of the three questions related to the use of luxury brand social media are summarised in Column (1) of Table 6 shows that, during the COVID pandemic, respondents in both countries have increased the use of luxury brand social media ( $>3$ ), and the increase is significantly higher for British respondents ( $\frac{3.929}{5} = 78.58\%$ ) than their Chinese counterparts ( $\frac{3.735}{5} = 74.4\%$ ). This common trend in the use of SMM during the pandemic is attributed to the lockdowns and limited physical marketing venues. A relatively higher SMM boost reflects the market maturity and marketing environment in the UK compared to China. This result is consistent with the previous evidence that China has a great potential in the development of luxury brand SMM.

Conversely, column (2) of Table 6 suggests that during the COVID pandemic Chinese customers have relied more on SMM to purchase luxury brands than British customers. Different from column (1) which focuses on the use of SMM, column (2) emphasises the impact of SMM on purchase intention. Despite a smaller increase in attention to SMM, Chinese cus-

tomers have a higher conversion ratio (action). A higher effectiveness of marketing strategy implies an underinvestment in SMM of luxury brands in China.

Table 6 T tests of cross-country differences over COVID

Subsample		(1)	(2)	(3)	No. of Obs.
UK	Mean	3.929	4.116	4.368	155
	(St. Dev.)	(0.080)	(0.062)	(0.072)	
China	Mean	3.735	4.416	3.925	279
	(St. Dev.)	(0.057)	(0.042)	(0.050)	
H0: UK = China	t statistic	1.999**	-4.084***	5.192***	
	P value	0.0463	0.0001	0.000	

Notes: Significance level: \* 10%, \*\* 5%, \*\*\* 1%. strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, neutral = 3, agree = 4, strongly agree = 5. Column (1): During the COVID, have you significantly increased the use of luxury brand social media? Column (2): During the COVID, have you relied more on social media contents in purchasing luxury fashion products? Column (3): After the COVID, will you keep using social media as an important information source of luxury fashion products?

Finally, column (3) asks the respondents if they are going to keep using social media platforms as an important information source of luxury fashion products. It is shown that British customers are more likely to continue the consumption habit ( $\frac{4.368}{5} = 87.36\%$ ) than Chinese ones ( $\frac{3.925}{5} = 78.5\%$ ), but both countries seem to have an irreversible increasing trend of SMM.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper studies the effects of social media marketing on customer value and purchase intention of luxury brands. First, we find that the most common reasons for engaging with social media of luxury brands are affectional motives, cognitive motives, and pragmatic motives. The idol endorsement effect is greater for Chinese customers, while affectional motives are more prominent for British customers. Second, there is an asymmetric effect of

SMM on brand equity. The penalty effect of absent from SMM is less than the reward effect of presence in SMM, so SMM can increase purchase intention and improve customer relationship, especially during the COVID pandemic due to the lack of physical interactions. Third, the distributions of engagement motivations are very similar between China and the UK customers. The differences are greater for males, the young, the rural residents, the middle- and upper-class, and the fashion professionals. The effects on purchase intention are similar in general, but China is more likely to be affected by social media.

Based on the findings above, we draw some implications for luxury brand marketers. First, SMM is essential for both customers and brands because it provides values for both sides, especially during the COVID pandemic when physical interactions are difficult. It is a matter of how-to rather than a be-or-not-to-be question, and this trend is irreversible after the pandemic. Second, purchase intention can be increased by SMM, but the effect differs across several dimensions. The males and the older customers, for example, are less susceptible to SMM. Therefore, the SMM campaigns should target at the females and the young, who are more likely to interact with and be influenced by SMM. Third, China, as an emerging economy with a huge population, behaves quite similarly to a developed economy (the UK) in many aspects such as engagement motivation. Yet, due to cultural and economic differences, Chinese customers, especially its working class and middle class, are more likely to be affected by SMM. This points out a practical direction of marketing management for luxury brands which have the ambition to enter the Chinese market. According to recent literature on SMM in China, two most popular social media platforms for the fashion industry are Xiaohongshu and Weibo (Fitzgerald et al., 2022).

A limitation of this study is that it does not address the structural transmission of the effect of SMM. The empirical findings of this paper only verify the existence of direct effects. A structural equation model can be utilised in future studies to build a more systematic understanding of how these effects are interlinked.

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