

UNDERSTANDING CHINESE AFFLUENT CONSUMERS'
WEALTH FLAUNTING BEHAVIOR ON WEIBO
FROM A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

By

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To my beloved parents

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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Due to rapid economic growth that has fueled people's desire for luxury branded goods, luxury consumption in China has seen double digit increase in recent years. Some consumers of luxury goods and services have employed new media to show off such consumption. The purpose of this study is to analyze the growing phenomenon of wealth flaunting on Weibo, China's version of Twitter, and the role of traditional cultural values in shaping this type of consumer behavior.

This study uses qualitative content analysis methodology. Quantitative technique is also employed to contextualize the flaunting individuals' homepages and their posts. The sampling procedure collected a total of 280 cases of flaunting wealth posts, as well as 76 related homepages on Weibo. Each post and homepage was coded and some results were yielded.

From the individuals' Weibo homepages and their flaunting wealth posts, we learned that: 1) the individuals who flaunt wealth on Weibo are geographically scattered, both in and outside China. 2) the most flaunted brand categories are handbags and shoes whereas; 3) watches and automobiles are the least flaunted categories. Three

themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of the posts: materialism, equation of luxury with taste and luxury routinizing. This study also suggests that the wealth flaunting behavior of Chinese affluent customers are greatly influenced by “face” and collectivism, the two most fundamental tenets of traditional values in China.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In mid-October of 2005, the Top Marques Shanghai show, originated from Top Marques Monaco, was staged at the Shanghai International Convention Center. The show attracted some of the world's most exotic luxury-goods producers. During the four-day exhibition, affluent consumers in China splurged \$63 million on luxury items, gobbling up watch and jewelry as well as private jet and pricy real estate property (Schwarz & Wong, 2006). The show's success signifies the explosive growth of luxury consumption in China in recent years. Consequently, China has now become the second-largest market for luxury goods in the world. Furthermore, with an estimated annual growth rate of 23%, China will become the largest domestic market for luxury goods over the next decade, predicts by independent stockbroker CLSA Asia Pacific Markets (2011). Compared to their counterparts in developed countries, Chinese affluent consumers have displayed some unique characteristics, one of which is their greater desire to demonstrate their wealth and success through the consumption of luxury goods.

Chinese affluent consumers' view of luxury goods as status symbol is consistent with what Thorstein Veblen (1899/1994), a famous American economist and sociologist, observed about the new affluent consumers in the post-industrialization European countries in the nineteenth century:

In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence. And not only does the evidence of wealth serve to impress one's importance on others and to keep their sense of his importance alive and alert, but it is of scarcely less use in building up and preserving one's self-complacency. (p.24)

With the advancement of information technology, some wealthy consumers in China today have more effective ways to project and sustain their images of prestige based on wealth. Rather than showing their luxury possessions in the real world, they display such possessions on the Internet to the greater public. This kind of flaunting behavior can often be found on web forums, blogs and other new media platforms.

A recent incident of this nature has attracted much public discussion in China. A girl named Guo Meimei flaunted her designer bags and luxury sports cars on her microblog. Netizens questioned the source of her financial support and were offended by her bragging posts. The incident highlights the importance of Sina Weibo, China's version of Twitter, on the growing phenomenon of wealth flaunting among many luxury-goods consumers in China.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of traditional Chinese cultural values on Chinese consumers' wealth flaunting behaviors on the Internet, as well as examining how Sina Weibo, the media platform assists these consumers to elevate their social status. Through content analysis of the homepages of the wealth flaunting individuals and their posts, this research seeks to provide empirical information for luxury marketers and communication researchers.

Significance of the Study

This study fills three gaps in the literature of conspicuous consumption. First, although conspicuous consumption has been studied by scholars from a variety of academic disciplines, conspicuous consumers' behavior in Cyberspace is rarely examined. Second, studies on luxury consumption are mostly conducted in the context of developed countries with mature market economies. The current research contributes

to the field by focusing on the developing world. Third, previous studies on conspicuous consumers in China mainly focused on demographic, psychographic and socio-economic variables (e.g., Atsmon & Dixit, 2009; Chadha & Husband, 2007; Heinemann, 2008; Henriksen, 2009; Xiaolu & Pras, 2011). Very few published work examines Chinese luxury-goods consumers' behavior in Cyberspace, even less on flaunting wealth behaviors. This study is the first attempt to investigate the flaunting wealth phenomenon in China from a cultural perspective. It is important that we address the issue from a cultural perspective because, to the author's knowledge, such large scale wealth flaunting on the Internet is a unique phenomenon that can only be understood in the particular cultural context of China.

Research Overview

This thesis is organized as follows: Chapter 1 discusses the research in general and points out the significance of studying the wealth flaunting behavior of Chinese affluent consumers. Chapter 2 provides a literature review that surveys the most significant publication on conspicuous consumption in general and its manifestation in China in particular. This chapter pays special attention to the specific economic and historical background of China, offers detailed cases of wealth flaunting behaviors on the Internet, discusses the role of Weibo in China, and proposes the theoretical backgrounds and research questions regarding this research.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology used in this research. Starting with a clarification of what constitutes flaunting wealth posts, this chapter moves on to content analysis, followed by a discussion of the image-text relationship and ends with an explanation of data collection and analysis procedures.

Chapter 4 reports the findings of this research, namely, the contextualizing quantitative results and the themes emerging from the qualitative content analysis.

Chapter 5 further elaborates on the research findings, its limitations and implications for future researches.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Conspicuous Consumption

Why are people willing to pay premium prices for luxury-brand products, instead of functionally equivalent goods at a much lower price? The phenomenon of spending extravagantly on publicly visible goods and services is referred to as “conspicuous consumption” by Thorstein Veblen in his *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, an economic study that discusses the emergence of a new social class in the late nineteenth century. Veblen observed that people from this new wealthy class were inclined to spend money on conspicuous goods and services to achieve higher social status.

Since personal wealth is not observable, some of the newly rich are eager to demonstrate their wealth to others as a way of elevating their social status. By spending extravagantly, the new tycoons hope to gain immediate social recognition and compete with well established “nobilities” who have consolidated their status for generations (Shipman, 2004). Chaudhuri and Mahumdar (2006) have noted that being able to “be seen or identified by others” as rich is a very important component of conspicuous consumption.

People purchase conspicuous goods for very different reasons. They can be roughly divided into three categories, each of which satisfies different social needs (Gierl & Huettl, 2010). The first category includes products that are used primarily as status symbols. This type of product is usually known for its extremely high price and easily recognizable symbols. The second category includes products that are used to distinguish oneself within a peer group. The products in this category are usually hard to come by due to scarce supply. As such, they tend to project both the extraordinary

ability and unusual taste of the owner. The third category refers to products displaying conformity to certain social norms. The group members share strong emotional links and they display a high level of conformity by their similar consumption pattern (Gierl & Huettl, 2010). These classifications provide us with some insights on the underlying reasons for purchasing conspicuous consumption goods.

Conspicuous consumption goods are often referred to as luxury products in the literature because luxury products not only fulfill the basic needs of regular customers, but also meet the needs of conspicuous consumers. The concept of luxury is entirely subjective. What is considered a luxury item for one individual may be taken for granted by another. It depends on the person's relative social status and income level. Some researchers define luxury as prestige brands that incorporate both the social values such as conspicuousness and personal hedonistic values (Wiedmann, Hennigs & Siebels, 2007). Other researchers see luxury items as "fashionable and high quality consumer goods made by reputed luxury brands" (Chandha & Husband, 2006, p.106). With respect to this research, Chinese affluent consumers generally perceive luxury goods in the same way as their counterparts in other countries. They prefer top-tier brands that have the best quality. However, due to government policies, certain types of luxury goods, such as automobiles and cosmetics are selling at much higher prices in China than other countries. Therefore, what is considered luxury under these product categories by the Chinese affluent customers may not be perceived in the same way by the Western customers. The slight difference in luxury perception also has some influence on the flaunting behavior of the affluent individuals.

Sun (2010) identifies six dimensions of luxury goods, of which, “very high price,” “scarcity and uniqueness” and “superfluousness” are directly related to conspicuous consumption. However, it should be noted here that conspicuous consumption is not limited to buying luxury merchandise only. Affluent customers today are also spending money on extensive leisure activities that signify a luxury lifestyle.

Since the publication of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, researchers have produced a rich body of scholarly literatures on different aspects of conspicuous consumption. For example, Gierl and Huettl (2010) have explored different scarcity signals. According to them, the scarcity of certain luxury goods is either due to supply (e.g., “limited edition”) or due to demand (e.g., “only a few units remain”). People who seek social distinction through conspicuous consumption favor products that are scarce due to limited supply whereas people who prioritize group solidarity may prefer products that are scarce due to demand.

Nunes, Drèze, and Han (2011) examine luxury brands' sale during financial crisis. They have found that the two luxury handbag superpowers, Louis Vuitton and Gucci, changed their product lines during the global recession in 2009 to become significantly more conspicuous. Their strategy evidently succeeded in attracting wealthy Chinese consumers because the sale of luxury goods increased by 16% in China while declining everywhere else (Atsmon, Dixit, Leibowitz, & Wu, 2011).

Some researchers have examined the motivations of luxury-goods consumers from a psychological standpoint. Costly Signaling Theory argues that since certain desirable personal assets, such as wealth or access to resources in general, are not directly observable, individuals may engage in apparently wasteful behaviors to send

status signals which they hope to make them attractive (Nelissen & Meijers, 2010). Rather than discussing conspicuous consumption in the context of human society, this theory argues from an evolutionary perspective and illustrates that human preference for luxury consumption stems from the desire to signal traits that might increase status, a desire that is shared by all social primates.

To test this assumption, Nelissen and Meijers (2010) examined observers' reactions towards people who wore brand-name clothing. Their study confirms that people who wear expensive designer clothing are treated more favorably than those who do not. Do people who show off luxury products on the Internet receive positive feedbacks from the audiences? It is one of the questions to be explored by this study.

The consensus of the current literature is that “being able to be seen or identified by others” is the major objective of conspicuous consumption (Chaudhuri & Mahumdar, 2006). One’s individuality is communicated through consumption rather than interpersonal communication because the purchased products are viewed as expressions of consumer self-concept and connection to the society (Nelissen & Meijers, 2010; Chaudhuri & Mahumdar, 2006). The most important message communicated through conspicuous consumption is the high social status of the consumer (Jin, Li & Wu, 2011). Cross-cultural research among American, Chinese and Mexican has found that the levels of status consumption among the three groups were similar. However, the study also demonstrates that the level of attachment to material goods differed among the three groups. China had the highest materialism score followed by Mexico (Eastman, Fredenberger, Campbell & Calvert, 1997). This study confirms that materialism and conspicuous consumption share some common

characteristics but are different in nature. For instance, a conspicuous consumption consumer and a materialistic consumer may choose the same luxury product, but they could be buying for very different reasons. A status-conscious consumer is concerned with the status quality of a product and a materialistic consumer values the possession of the product itself (Eastman et al., 1997).

In the past, most studies on luxury consumption were done in developed countries. Little attention was paid to the developing world. With consumers' growing appetite for luxury goods in places like China, more researchers have turned their attention to luxury-goods consumers in emerging economies. Since China differs from the Western societies in social structure, economic resource and cultural values, Chinese consumers provide an ideal testing ground for recent theories on luxury consumption (Atsmon & Dixit, 2009). In the next section I will discuss luxury consumption in China.

Luxury Consumption in China

Asia is considered the most important market for luxury brands as it accounts for more sales than any other region in the world (Schwarz & Wong, 2006). Japan alone, accounts for over 40% of worldwide sales of most major luxury brands (Chadha & Husband, 2006). Asians' obsession with luxury products has attracted researchers' attention. In their book *The Cult of the Luxury Brand*, Chadha and Husband (2006) systematically analyzed the causes of this phenomenon. According to them, Asia was once a hierarchical society in which social status was defined by birth, family position or profession. Now that the social and economic changes have erased the traditional social distinctions, wealth becomes one of the most important criteria in defining one's social status in today's Asia.

The author finds their explanation especially valid in China, where the growth in sales of luxury goods has surpassed other major markets in the world in recent years. In 2009, China replaced the United States to become the second-largest market for luxury goods in the world (Xiaolu & Pras, 2011). One report predicts that China will overtake Japan as the world's largest luxury market, accounting for over 20 percent of global market share by 2015 (Atsmon et al., 2011). These studies and statistics make it clear that the luxury industry can no longer ignore China.

Many luxury brands have established their foothold in China in the past several years. Hermes, one of the world's largest luxury-goods companies first made its appearance in China in 2002. Since then, the group continued to strengthen its position by opening additional offices in various locations. As of 2011, Hermes has opened 20 stores in China, a threefold increase since 2005 when it had only five stores. Likewise, Louis Vuitton has opened 26 new stores since 2005 (Atsmon et al., 2011). Another example is Swarovski, the famous manufacturer of fine crystal goods, which has opened more than 110 retail outlets in 35 cities in China (Debnam & Svinos, 2008). These brands are responding to the increasing demand of Chinese customers. A report in 2006 indicated that about 13% of China's population (170 million people) was buying top-tier brands (Schwarz & Wong, 2006). The number today is likely to be even higher. The fact that the Chinese consumers are showing off their status with brand-name products unknown to them merely 10 years ago (Sun, 2010) suggests that China's affluent class is mostly nouveau riche whose purchasing power is likely to last for a while. Based on the interpretation of Xiaolu and Pras, the affluent class in this research refers to individuals with an annual household disposable income of at least fifteen

times the urban average household income per capita (¥ 17,175 or \$ 2702). This is consistent with the classification in other research. For instance, in McKinsey's 2009 report, affluent Chinese households earn more than \$36,500 a year, which gives them similar spending power of a US household making roughly \$100,000 a year.

China's wealthy class has been growing exponentially in recent years. Nearly half of those who are wealthy today were not so four years ago and those who are not wealthy today may become rich in five to six years (Atsmon & Dixit, 2009). The Chinese words for the new rich, "bao fa hu" (nouveau riche) have a negative denotation, often used to describe those who become rich in a very short period of time and are eager to showing off their wealth. The Chinese affluent consumers today exhibit the spending pattern discussed by Veblen in his classic study of the leisure class. Although his study was published in the nineteenth century, it still offers insights into today's materialistic culture. It is especially interesting to note the many parallels, as far as consumer culture is concerned, between China today and nineteenth century western society.

Some scholars (Chadha & Husband, 2006) have developed a five-stage model to map out the expansion pattern of luxury consumption (Shown in Figure 2-1).

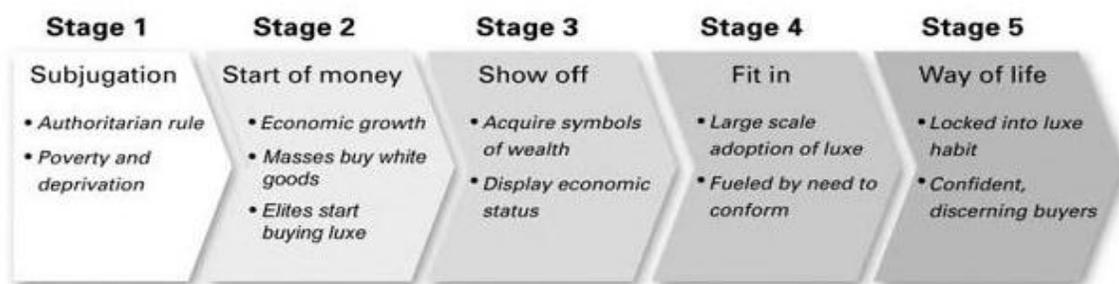


Figure 2-1. The spread of luxury model (Chadha & Husband, 2006)

According to this model, China is currently at the third stage, characterized by a preoccupation with showing off. On this stage, affluent customers are trying to acquire symbols of wealth and displaying them in the most conspicuous manner. According to Chadha and Husband (2006), due to unbalanced economic developments, countries in Asia are at different stages of the luxury culture. For instance, India is currently at the second stage (start of money), while Japan has already marched into the last stage (way of life).

During the Mao years when puritanical ethics held sway in China, the ostentatious display of wealth was neither possible nor allowed (Durvasula & Lysonski, 2010). However, since Western popular culture was introduced into China in the early 1980s, Chinese customers have become familiar with various Western brand names and embraced Western consumerism (Sugalsk, 2007). With China's social and economic transformation picking up momentum, new values and new beliefs are increasingly replacing the traditional virtues of modesty and frugality.

Previous literature review shows that when choosing a product, some consumers focus on the utility value whereas others pay attention to the status value. Rucker and Galinsky (2009) examined how psychological states of power affect consumption habits and came to the conclusion that feeling powerless, relative to feeling powerful would increase consumers' desire to acquire conspicuous goods. Their observation helps us make sense of conspicuous consumption in China. As Chinese affluent customers are mostly new tycoons who become rich only recently, they do not have time to gain social recognition through regular channels. Therefore, some of them rely on conspicuous consumption to achieve social status more quickly. They firmly believe that social status

can be achieved through conspicuous consumption (Chadha & Husband, 2006; Henriksen, 2009).

These consumers are consuming for the symbolic values of luxury products rather than their utility value. Since consumption is often used as a medium to communicate individual traits (Nelissen & Meijers, 2010), the trait that Chinese luxury consumers wish to exhibit the most is their superior status. Moreover, Durvasula and Lysonski's (2010) examination of Chinese attitudes toward money indicates that although attitudes towards money in China are not monolithic, most Chinese believe that money allows one to attain status, assets, power and even control over others. This inevitably leads to the rise of materialism and vanity, especially among young Chinese.

As the literature review thus far shows, China is indeed a market full of potential for luxury products. Chinese nouveau riche are shopping for the symbolic values of luxury goods in ways quite consistent with Veblen (1899/1994)'s study of the leisure class in the late nineteenth's century Europe and America. However, China's unique societal and economic environment has also produced some distinctive characteristics in the country's consumption of luxury goods. These differences constitute variations to Veblen's central thesis and will be discussed in the next section.

Chinese Luxury-goods Consumers

Surveys conducted on Chinese luxury-goods consumers show that the two most important factors in their purchasing decisions are the symbolic values and the "bling factors" of the goods. In other words, they are the typical conspicuous consumers who are willing to pay high price for goods that can best represent their superior status. However, according to a recent report (Debnam & Svinos, 2008), this trend is evolving. While the "bling factor" remains a key to the growth of luxury consumption, some

Chinese consumers are paying more attention to the brand values and heritage of the luxury brand they are purchasing. The report indicates the differentiation among Chinese luxury-goods consumers. While most of them are still at the “show off” stage (Chadha & Husband, 2006), some are already marching into the fourth stage: the “fit in” stage.

The Chinese luxury-goods consumers are not only millionaires for whom money is not an issue, but also average white-collar employees who have to save for months in order to buy one luxury item (Schwarz & Wong, 2006). McKinsey's report (2011) identifies four types of luxury consumers in China based on the percentage of household income they spent on luxury goods: core luxury buyers, luxury role models, fashion fanatics and middle class aspirants (p.13). While middle class aspirants make up only a small segment of the luxury consumer population, their number is growing at a fast pace (Atsmon et al., 2011). Sugalsk (2007) found that middle class in China were no longer thrifty, and saving every penny of their earnings. Instead, they are big spenders on luxury items and prone to flaunt their wealth.

Differentiating Chinese affluent consumers may help us to better detect the different motivations in luxury-goods consumption. Previous research has demonstrated that Chinese consumers seek satisfaction in different ways. For instance, some may buy the luxury product for exclusivity whereas others for status and recognition from their peer group. Only a small portion of the respondents surveyed by researchers indicated that they would no longer use luxury brands as a badge (Debnam & Svinos, 2008). Instead of choosing products that are imprinted with loud logos, these customers

prefer less conspicuous ones. They want to differentiate themselves from the tasteless nouveau riche and use the luxury products to demonstrate their excellent tastes.

Despite these differences among Chinese consumers, some of their common traits can be characterized from previous researchers' observations and experiences as listed below.

Young Demographics

Compared to their counterparts in other countries, Chinese luxury-goods consumers are a lot younger, mostly aged between 20 and 40 years old (Xiaolu & Pras, 2011). The older generations that experienced the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s did not have much chance to accumulate wealth and acquiring Western luxury brands. Besides, they were deeply influenced by Confucian values that call for frugality and keeping a low profile. As a result, they are less likely to engage in luxury consumption. In contrast, the younger generations grew up in the post-Mao era, with constant exposure to Western values. The “open door policy” implemented by the government since 1978 has allowed some people to become rich. The economic development coincided with the reentry of luxury brands in China (Sun, 2010). Subsequently, the nouveau riche and their younger heirs have become the core customers of all kinds of luxury products.

Big Brand-names, Recognizable Logos and High Prices

As discussed earlier, Chinese consumers are very brand conscious and prefer products easily identifiable by others. A report by Bain (2010) demonstrates that the five biggest brands in China under each luxury category accounted for 50% sales in that category. The underlying reason for this is that Chinese consumers generally lack knowledge of luxury products. They are only familiar with a few top brands.

Among the few brands of their choice, Chinese customers have preferences for the product lines as well. Chadha and Husband (2006) observed that affluent Asian customers were obsessed with handbags imprinted with recognizable symbols in a continuous pattern all over the bag such as the LV monogram and Gucci's Gs. Another example would be the rising popularity of Coach among Asian customers after Coach shifted its product lines to the logo-pattern look (Chadha & Husband, 2006). Apparently, Chinese consumers positively responded to the increased brand name visibility of the products.

The high price of luxury products does not seem to discourage rich Chinese consumers at all. On the contrary, higher price tag seems to have an added appeal as the example of Hermes' popularity demonstrates. The very notoriety of Hermes handbags as one of the most expensive luxury goods makes the brand name the best advertisement for its purchaser's social status.

Luxury Products and Taste

China's middle class consumers strongly associate luxury products with success and good taste (Debnam & Svinos, 2008; Schwarz and Wong, 2006). This contradicts with the traditional view on luxury goods that they were "superficial" or "extravagant."

How does a handbag with loud logos become a trendy fashion in China? Why do people associate good taste with luxury products? The answer can be traced back to the blank slate of Chinese fashion industry under Communist Party rule. Fashion and style encourages individualism, which is against the Communist doctrine. For several decades people wore clothes that had no personality. Grey, black, white and army green were the most popular colors in people's wardrobe (Zhao, 1997). When the gate to the Western world suddenly opened, consumers who did not have a chance to

develop their taste on style were overwhelmed by the Western fashion. Since they did not have standards for what is tasteful and what is not (Chadha & Husband, 2006), they relied heavily on luxury products to demonstrate their good taste.

Luxury Shopping to Improve Family's Face

“There is no point of getting rich without showing it; no point in wearing beautiful clothes when walking in the night and invisible to others.” This is an old Chinese saying, but it provides clues to the social psychology in conspicuous consumption.

Chinese consumers generally associate luxury goods with success and good taste. Given the important role of family in China, an individual's own success has implications to the whole family's standing in the local community as well (Heinemann, 2008). That is to say, luxury-goods consumers in China do not just shop for their own glory, but also to elevate the social respectability of his or her family (Chadha & Husband, 2006). In fact, many designer handbags are purchased by parents for their children because they want their kids to stand out from and look good in front of a crowd.

Overseas Shopping

Another important characteristic of the Chinese affluent consumers is their overseas-shopping behavior. Between 2008 and 2009, China luxury spending saw a 10% growth, of which, 8% was overseas spending (Bain & Company, 2010). It was estimated that while Chinese tourists spend over \$ 1 billion when shopping abroad, that number would grow much bigger in the years to come given the explosion of outbound tourism (Chadha & Husband, 2006). Chinese luxury consumers find the relatively lower prices and better selection of merchandise in the markets outside China appealing.

Why are Chinese consumers displaying such distinctive characteristics compared to their counterparts? The answer may lie in the specific historical and economic background of China.

China's Economic History

Modern China has always been a controversial country. With GDP growth rate at 8% to 10%, China is now the second largest economy in the world. However, statistics show that over half of China's population is still living in rural areas where they only share less than 12% of the country's wealth (Moore, 2010). While the Communist ideal is predicated on egalitarian principles, China today is experiencing an ever-growing wealth gap between the rich and the poor (Sugalsk, 2007). With the rich getting richer and the poor poorer, some inexperienced young Chinese cannot wait to flaunt their wealth online regardless of the consequences. The phenomenon is embedded in China's unique societal and economic backgrounds as the former communist country became capitalistic in nature and the previous third-world economy turned into the world's second largest economy.

To understand the behavior of wealthy Chinese nowadays, one has to look into history for clues. When Mao Zedong seized power in 1949, the social status of the working class was artificially elevated by the Communist government. As the Communist doctrine was bent on wiping out all social inequalities, the traditional social markers such as education, birth, and wealth were no longer valid. In 1966, Mao started the Cultural Revolution which pushed egalitarianism to its extremes. Countless number of priceless cultural relics was destroyed as they were deemed remnants of old tradition. People of status such as professors, doctors, landlords or anyone with prestige were

denounced in public because they embodied inequalities in the society. This radical chapter in Chinese history seriously undermined traditional values and practices.

After the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping's regime encouraged private entrepreneurship with his famous slogan "to get rich is glorious" (Griffiths, Michael, Chapman, & Christiansen, 2010). Since 1978, the Chinese government implemented a series of economic reforms to reorient the country's economy after years of negligence. Private entrepreneurs emerged and were encouraged to engage in market-oriented activities (Wei & Pan, 1999). As a result, a new social class of rich people appeared (Chow, Fung, & Ngo, 2001; Xiaolu & Pras, 2011). The economic reforms ushered in many changes in China. Ironically, after the 1989 Democracy Movement in Tiananmen Square (Sugalsk, 2007), the pace of privatization and market oriented economic reform quickened. The Democracy Movement gave the government a sense of urgency to channel public energy away from politics, but into economic activities. Shortly after the Tiananmen crackdown, entrepreneurial activities and consumption were encouraged by the government. Against this backdrop, consumer market and consumer culture were born in China (Wei & Pan, 1999; Xiaolu & Pras, 2011).

It is not a coincidence that China's new rich exhibit classic spending patterns associated with conspicuous consumers. The "social leveling" during the Cultural Revolution paradoxically produced a craving for status symbols in the post-Mao years. Meanwhile, the economic reforms since 1978 have made it possible for people to accumulate wealth. What is more, the Tiananmen protest in 1989 facilitated the formation of consumer culture. When status-conscious customers look for ways to display their newly acquired wealth to others, they simultaneously reap the benefits of

social recognition and respect which partially explains the boom in luxury market in China.

In some ways, today's China resembles the early nineteenth century European society that Veblen (1899/1994) studied significantly. Both societies are characterized by the high economic growth rate, emerging middle-class and a big appetite for luxury products (Heinemann, 2008). However, luxury consumption in today's Western society has become more discrete and wealthy Western consumers tend to shift their attention from symbolic values to utility value of the products (Degen, 2009). In China, however, affluent customers were denied access to luxury goods for many years (Wong & Zaichkowsky, 1999). Hence, now they are finally free to choose among branded luxury products, they inevitably gravitate towards the status function of the luxury goods. They are convinced that by purchasing luxury products, they gain social recognition and respect from others (Xiaolu & Pras, 2011).

Another important force that influences Chinese customers' behavior is the globalization process which is directly responsible for the rise of middle class in China. For example, many Western companies outsourced their service in developing countries such as China and India. In doing so, they created many job opportunities and provided more disposable incomes to people in the developing world who then become consumers in the market (Sugalsk, 2007). As illustrated in previous section, although luxury-goods consumers make up only a small population in the rising middle class, their number is increasing.

As I have stated earlier, most Chinese consumers purchase luxury products as a badge of social status (Debnam & Svinos, 2008). Much like the medals worn by a proud

general, luxury goods to Chinese consumers are trophies of their victories won on the battlefields of modern economic life. As China's obsession with luxury goods evolved, wealthy Chinese consumers are not only purchasing more goods, but also seeking new ways to experience luxury lifestyles, as evidenced by their visits to spas, massage parlor and other wellness centers (Atsmon et al., 2011). Since these activities take place mostly in private setting and not as publicly visible to others as the possession of goods, some conspicuous consumers have started looking for alternative ways to broadcast their lifestyle to others. There are also a number of consumers who are not content with conferring status merely through conspicuous goods, as these goods are only visible to those who have access to their environments. The Internet is thus becoming a convenient tool for these conspicuous consumers who want to share their newly acquired status to the mass audience. In the next section, I will focus on media's role in the shaping of flaunting wealth behavior on the Internet.

The Flaunting Wealth Behavior on the Internet

In late June of 2011, a girl named Guo Meimei attracted the attention of millions of Chinese netizens. The incident started on Weibo (mini-blog) when Guo showed off her luxury lifestyles to her followers. Rarely retweeting others, Guo tweeted hundreds of original Weibos, most of which are pictures of herself with all kinds of luxury items. Designer handbags, sports cars and jewelry were the three most tweeted categories on her Weibo. What triggered the controversy was that she claimed to be the “commercial general manager” of the Chinese Red Cross, a title verified by Sina, the Internet Company hosting Weibo. People started questioning the source of her financial support that enabled her to lead such a luxury lifestyle and the credibility of her claim as the “commercial general manager” of an officially recognized philanthropic organization. For

a 22-year-old girl, both her level of consumption and responsibility seemed unusual for her age.

The controversy aside, Guo is not the only consumer, nor even the first, guilty of flaunting wealth on the Internet in China. Before her, there had already been a number of similar incidents covered by mass media.

In 2005, a blogger nicknamed “Signorino Long” launched a blog full of wealth-flaunting content. Each post was a detailed recording of his daily life. He not only posted pictures of his newly purchased luxury products, but also publicized the brand name and price of his purchase. Signorino Long also revealed details of his personal life on his blog. In one of his posts, he claimed that he was the bread winner of his family which was supported by his ¥300,000 monthly salary (Approximately \$47,000). On his post dated June 25, 2006, Signorino Long described how he took his girlfriend out for a drive in a Porsche convertible in Hong Kong, but turned off A/C to save fuel. He confessed that his conspicuous consumption was mostly for others to see. It was not until Signorino Long posted a picture of him using a stack of burning bills to light his cigarette that the public became furious. The netizens widely condemned his behaviors on the Internet and a new phrase, “flaunting wealth” or “xuan fu” in Chinese began to gain currency in China.

Blogs are not the only channels to flaunt wealth. Internet videos provide another venue. In 2006, someone uploaded a digital video clip onto the “Youth Entertainment” website. In her “Monolog of outrageous office lady: How I drove Honda to smash your junk car” video, a woman who claimed to be a noble, classy high-end office lady, expressed her anger when a mini car bypassed her luxurious elegant Honda Accord

Sedan. The context here is that driving private cars was not so common in China merely six years ago and Honda Accord was one of the best cars on the market. She described how she stopped the car and smashed it. When she was criticized by the netizens, she uploaded more footage of her making controversial statements, such as “people who earned less than 3000 RMB (\$469) a month are inferior.” As can be expected, her remarks sparked a firestorm on the Internet.

The individuals who show off their wealth on the Internet frequently argue that they are merely sharing part of their life with the audience. For them, luxury goods have an actual utility function. As Epstein has observed, “The tricky part of judging snobbery, in oneself or others, is in determining the intrinsic value of a thing, or act, or person and the value that society assigns that thing, or act, or person” (p.10). However, it can be argued that whether a luxury product is considered conspicuous or not should be determined by whether it serves directly to enhance human life on the whole (Veblen, 1899/1994). In this sense, when a luxury product has less utility function but is used as a prop to show off wealth, it is a conspicuous good.

How does the Internet become a platform for people to flaunt their wealth? There is no easy answer to the question, but the research literature provides us with some insights.

According to CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Center) report (2010), up to June 2010, the number of Chinese Internet users had reached 420 million and the penetration rate had climbed up to 31.8%, compared with 22.5 million and less than 3% respectively in 2001. These results demonstrate the astonishing growth rate and the potential power of Chinese Web users.

What is more, several reports have confirmed that Chinese affluent consumers are active Internet users. Internet usage among all age groups is above 90% (Atsmon & Dixit, 2009; Degen, 2009). As illustrated by Bain's (2010) report, while in-store experience is still the most important factor driving a consumer's purchasing decision, web-based luxury goods companies and online community (social networking) platforms are also influencing customers' choices. It is particularly true among consumers between the age of 25 to 44 who spend much more time collecting product information and exchanging views on purchased products within their online community (Atsmon et al., 2011).

The anonymity of the Internet is perhaps the biggest lure to these conspicuous consumers. Online platforms such as blogs and discussion forums allow citizens to voice their opinions and exchange ideas. Since there is no visual and audible cues to define identity, people on the Internet are unknown to each other. As the popular adage goes, "On the Internet, nobody knows you are a dog." People develop pseudonyms in cyberspace to hide their true identities and further protect their privacy. Since flaunting is not considered an admirable behavior and excessive self-disclosure is inappropriate in China, anonymity on the Internet allows the consumers of luxury goods to attract the attention they desired while maintaining their privacy. Zhao and He (2009) have studied the "web bragging" phenomenon and suggest that since the ultimate goal of mass communication is to influence public opinion in real life, the Internet is used by these sharers differently because they do not want to cause any changes in their real lives. In other words, they intend to keep their virtual identity in the Cyberspace.

The individuals who flaunt their wealth online are also Internet sharers. Instead of showing every aspect of their livelihood, the conspicuous consumers only choose the most glorious aspect of their life to be put on public display, such as the possession of luxury goods or having an expensive lunch at a fancy restaurant. What they have in common with traditional Internet sharers is that they want to draw attention through sharing their personal lives. The decentralized nature of the Internet allows each individual to become the communicator and the two-way communication mechanism on the Internet allows users to receive instant feedback. This, as identified by Zhao and He (2009), is one of the most important motivations for Internet sharers. They need strangers' feedbacks to feel good about themselves.

Chinese consumers are active Internet users and some online platforms have become major channels for them to generate product information. The anonymous and decentralized natures of the Internet allow some of them to share their extravagant lifestyle with strangers without worrying about the consequences. Moreover, they enjoy being the object of attention. Before the era of microblogs, the individuals who wished to flaunt wealth employed all kinds of channels on the Internet such as blogs, forums and video sites. However, the flaunting behavior exhibited in these channels showed no consistent pattern. The Guo Meimei incident highlights Weibo's potential as a new venue for public display of wealth. As revealed by one article entitled "Finding out more about the rich ladies who are showing off on Weibo" posted on Tinaya, there is a group of rich young women in China who are employing Weibo as a channel to show off their luxurious life style. With "Xuan fu" becoming a Weibo phenomenon, we need to have better understanding of this medium.

The Influence of Weibo

Sina Corp, which operates China's third-most-visited website, launched Weibo in August 2009 (Wen, 2011). Since then, this new media forum has experienced exceptional growth and its influences in China are far-reaching.

New media has become a major source of news in China. According to a report recently released by Social Sciences Academic Press and Shanghai Jiaotong University, 65% of the hot events in China in 2010 were first reported by new media (Sun, 2011). To understand why a 22-year-old girl could attract so much national attention by flaunting wealth, we only need to take a closer look at Weibo's impact on Chinese society.

Sina was the first Internet provider to provide the service in China. Although its competitors introduced similar services afterwards, Sina Weibo already established its market share and became irreplaceable. To date, Sina Weibo subscribers account for 87% of all microblogging users in China (Wen, 2011). In less than two years, Weibo has attracted more than 200 million registered users, a number that took Twitter four years to achieve (Barboza & Yan, 2011). Given China's large population base and the fact that Twitter, Facebook and other popular Western sites are blocked by the Chinese government, Weibo's dominance in the market is expected. However, no one could have foreseen the profound changes Weibo would bring to the Internet world.

When Weibo was first introduced in 2009, the company created accounts for movie stars, real estate tycoons, athletes and writers who were already using Sina's blog service. It soon attracted millions of young people (Barboza & Yan, 2011). With the user base growing exponentially, plenty of journalists, scholars and entrepreneurs in various

fields all joined this trend. Their involvements quickly turned Weibo into an efficient and powerful tool to influence public opinion.

In March 2011, the city government of Nanjing aborted its plan to cut down some 600-year-old phoenix trees for a planned subway project because city officials were alarmed by the opposition from Weibo users (Ran, 2011). In another incident, a government official was removed from his post by his superior because his extra-marital affair was exposed on Weibo. In the case of Guo Meimei flaunting her new Maserati discussed earlier, one of the immediate consequences was that the Chinese Red Cross came under public scrutiny because of Guo's supposed affiliation with the charity organization.

Most recently, the public outrage at the train crash which took place on June 23 this year has a direct connection with the massive power of Weibo. The news of the accident was broadcasted on Weibo as soon as passengers on the train sent messages through the Weibo platform from their cell phones. The original Weibo bulletin about this accident was then forwarded to tens of thousands of people (Sainsbury & Zhang, 2011). Weibo, as a social media platform, played a critical role in broadcasting the accident. First, the eye witness messages from passengers on the train became the most reliable information source for traditional media. Journalists relied heavily on Weibo for their stories. Secondly, people relied on Weibo to locate their missing family members or calling for help. As the example of Yiyi's case shows, public sympathy and support for the two-year-old girl who lost both her parents during the accident were mobilized through Weibo. Millions of people were touched by her tragedy and plead for best doctors to treat her on Weibo. Moreover, bloggers also expressed their displeasure with

the authorities for the poor performance in rescue effort. The spokesperson of The Ministry of Railways of China was dismissed largely because bloggers were angry at his insensitive remarks after the accident.

Before the emergence of microblogging, Chinese people never had a media tool so powerful. It not only alters government policies but also exposes corruptions. From a comparative perspective, Weibo's impact on Chinese society seems much bigger than Twitter's on American society. According to a report by Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, over 73% of microbloggers in China use Weibo as the primary information source compared to only 7% of Americans getting their news from social networking tools (Guo, 2011; The Pew Research Center, 2010). The Chinese government's strict control over other mainstream channels on the Internet and relatively little interference with Weibo is one of the reasons why Weibo has become the main outlet for controversial topics.

China's Internet environment remains one of the most controlled in the world, according to a report presented by Freedom House (2009). Chinese authorities maintain tight controls over the Internet by using a variety of methods which come down to four forms: technical filtering, prepublication censorship, post publication censorship and proactive manipulation.

Restricting access to foreign websites is the most common form of technical filtering. For instance, YouTube has been blocked because some of the contents on the site are considered inappropriate and offensive by the Chinese governments. Similarly, Facebook, Twitter, WordPress are all blocked because they broadcast "undesirable" information. Interestingly enough, all of these websites have substitutes in China's web-

sphere, albeit under strict surveillance for sure. Technical filtering can also be achieved through software. The Golden Shield Project's censoring system, known as the Great Firewall, was installed by the government to block sensitive information (Woo, 2009). However, many Internet users have resorted to software to bypass Internet censorship since 1998.

Meanwhile, pre-publication and post-publication censorship are also in place to ensure taboo topics would not appear on the Internet. The Ministry of Propaganda of the Communist government is in firm control of the mass media and gives specific directions on what should and should not be published. All the messages posted on blogs, bulletin board system (BBS), and comments are under close surveillance. If pre-publication censorship is designed to prevent unauthorized contents from ever being published, post-censorship aims to minimize the damage by what has already been posted.

Filtering sensitive words and deleting posts and comments are no longer effective because of the speed of information flow on the Internet. Realizing this, the Chinese authorities have recruited people to write positive remarks about the government and report offensive posts (Freedom House, 2009). These people hired by the government have been nicknamed “50 Cent Party” members because it is rumored that they are paid 50 cents per posting of supportive comments. Because of the anonymity nature of the Internet, there is no way to know for sure which posting is authored by “50 Cent Party” members.

As an influential media forum, Weibo is under close surveillance by the authorities as well. The technical filtering applied on Weibo operates to block “sensitive words.” For

example, after Arab Spring erupted in the Middle East, the word “Egypt” suddenly became a sensitive word and would trigger off the filtering mechanism. Any Internet search that used the word Egypt would result in an automatically generated message that says: “According to relevant laws, regulations and policies, the search results cannot be shown.” Postings that have survived the filtering continue to be subject to post-publication censorship. Sina hires at least 100 staffers to monitor the content of Internet posting 24 hours a day. Undesirable contents can be removed any time. Should anyone consistently publish controversial posts, her/his account risks being suspended (Epstein & Yang, 2011).

Much has been said about the dark side of Weibo. However, despite censorship, Weibo is “by far the best platform for free speech in China” (Wen, 2011). One of the primary reasons that Weibo can provide a relative free public space is that the sheer volume of its users makes it impossible for the censors to keep track of every post, not in a timely fashion anyway. Anyone can be a potential information source that may reveal corruption case or make comments on sensitive subjects not to government’s liking. And once something is posted, it can be quickly forwarded to thousands of people before censors have chance to delete it.

Another reason that Weibo has become so influential is that mainstream media are extremely limited in terms of what they can and cannot show, publish or broadcast because government has a monopoly over the more traditional and more established media outlets – television stations, radio networks, publishing houses and film studios. Paradoxically, the tighter official control over the conventional media has turned the public to citizen journalism in microblogs for information. For instance, a recent

shipwreck accident in Shaoyang, Hunan province cost the lives of many people. The official news report mentions only 12 deaths, whereas eye witness reports posted on Weibo would suggest a death toll of 50.

In addition, Chinese netizens have developed various strategies to circumvent official censorship on Weibo. Equivoque (deliberately ambiguous expressions) or abbreviation is the most used strategy to substitute sensitive words. For the deleted posts, netizens forward screen shots of the posts and post them as picture files. All these strategies have helped microblogs to become a powerful tool in influencing public opinion in China.

The discussion of authorities' strict control over media and Weibo's significance in China will help us understand why the flaunting of luxury goods by a 22-year-old girl caused people's deep distrust of state charities. Donations to charities in China between June and August in 2011 dropped by 86.6% to \$131.4 million, compared to the \$979.7 million donated between March and May of the same year (Staff reporter, 2011). Although it turns out that Guo's wealth has nothing to do with the Red Cross Society of China, the incident exposes people's concerns about luxury goods. In a developing and transitioning economy where corruption is common practice (Webster, 2002). Chinese people are sensitive about anyone with large amount of unstated source of wealth. Since traditional media channel are firmly controlled by the ruling Communist Party, Weibo becomes an irreplaceable platform to expose possible corruptions. Under such circumstance, luxury goods displayed on Weibo not only represent wealth, status and good taste in China, but could also suggest corruptions and other unstated sources of wealth.

Theoretical Backgrounds and Research Questions

As demonstrated in the literature review, Chinese luxury consumers' spending on luxury products has grown exponentially in recent years and such spending is usually focused on status functions rather than utility functions of the expensive goods and services. Researchers have noted the influence of both Western and traditional Chinese values on Chinese consumers' behavior (Degen, 2009; Henriksen, 2009; Wang, Doss, Guo & Li, 2008; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). This research focuses on the sector of wealthy Chinese customers who ostentatiously display their wealth online. In contrast to traditional wealthy consumers, the individuals in my study not only purchase luxury products, but go out of their way to show off their possessions of expensive merchandise to mass audience on the Internet. As far as we know, it is a unique phenomenon that can only be understood in the particular cultural context of contemporary China. Hence, this research has two focuses. First, it seeks to interpret conspicuous consumption in contemporary China from cultural perspectives; and second, it examines the role played by media platform in the emergence of the flaunting of wealth. As far as the theoretical framework is concerned, the current study is largely informed by taste performance theory.

Traditional Cultural Values

Chinese society has been undergoing dramatic changes in the past fifty years. The emergence of luxury market there is both tied to and a product of a complicated history. Several prominent studies have attempted to analyze affluent Chinese consumers' conspicuous spending behavior from a cultural perspective. Typically in these studies, culture is defined as "collective programming of the mind; it manifests itself not only in values, but in more superficial ways: in symbols, heroes, and rituals"

(Hofstede, 2003, p.1). Given the complexity of any cultural phenomena, Hofstede has developed his famous “five dimensions” framework to evaluate cultures in an intercultural context. Many concepts associated with traditional Chinese cultural values and Western cultural values are found in his framework and it is been extensively applied to intercultural studies in recent years. After reading the academic literature on conspicuous consumption and Internet sharing phenomenon in China, the author has identified two aspects of Chinese traditional values that are most likely related to the flaunting wealth behavior online. These values come from several ideologies that have influenced the Chinese society for thousands of years.

Collectivism

Countries in East Asia share a collectivist cultural tradition in which people place collective interests above individual interests (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). In collectivist cultures, the interest of the group is the first priority; Individual interest is minimized or considered not important. People are tightly integrated (Jandt, 2007). On the surface, the consumption of luxury merchandise by China’s affluent class seems to contradict with the doctrines of collectivist values, which oppose individuals openly pursuing personal interests at the group’s expense (Xiaolu & Pras, 2011). However, Henriksen (2009) suggests that under certain circumstance, some conspicuous purchases have the function of differentiating one group from another and in doing so, affirming solidarity within group. He uses the term “conformist individuality” to describe these consumers. With regards to the current research, we ask the following question:

Q1: Is Collectivism related to the wealth flaunting behavior on Weibo? If so, what aspects of Collectivism can be observed?

Face

A number of studies have stressed the importance of “face” when explaining Chinese luxury consumers' behaviors (Bao, Zhou & Su, 2003; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998; Henriksen, 2009). According to Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998), the concept of face refers to “a claimed sense of favorable social self-worth that a person wants others to have of her or him” (p.187). In China, maintaining face is not only for the individual himself or herself, but for the community in which the individual is a part of. The “social-self” always comes before the “personal-self” in a collectivist culture such as China. In other words, one is encouraged to perform the appropriate “social-self” in most circumstances no matter what his or her “inner self” is (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Bao, Zhou and Su (2003) have examined how face consciousness affect consumer decision-making process and conclude that consumers with strong face consciousness tend to pursue conspicuous goods to enhance face or to avoid losing face. They are more likely to stick to established brands than the novel ones to avoid losing face. Based on their findings, we can extrapolate that most conspicuous-goods consumers have a high level of face consciousness because they not only purchase luxury goods but also brag about their purchases to the public.

Q2: Does the face concept help explain flaunting wealth behavior on Weibo? If so, how does it work?

Taste Performance Theory

Grodin and Lindlof (1996) have found that personal identity in postindustrial societies is increasingly expressed through consumption patterns. In the past, people's identities were conveyed by a few indicators such as wealth, religion and social class. In Veblen's account, conspicuous consumption is often employed by affluent people to

demonstrate the superior status. Nowadays, with the development of information technology, the individuals are able to define and express themselves in a number of ways based on the things they share on the Internet. This perspective extends Veblen's theory to the modern time and illustrates that in the Internet age, defining identity through consumption patterns is no longer limited to the affluent consumers (Parks, 2011).

Although the theory is still at initial stage, a few researchers have employed it to examine various online platforms. For instance, Liu (2008) investigated a sample of user profiles on MySpace and concludes that the users mainly craft these profiles to emphasize their prestige and differentiate themselves from others. Liu, Maes and Davenport (2006) have explored the deeper patterns of culture and taste reflected in the social network profiles and suggested that the latent semantic fabrics of taste allowed the users to have more flexible representations of themselves in Cyberspace. Other researchers have examined more online arenas. McGuire and Slater (2005) evaluated various online tools adopted by users to share their taste in music. The potential cultural benefits from using these tools are implied. Miller and Edwards (2007) studied the photo sharing culture on Flickr and have identified two types of users. The first type of user prefers to share images of traditional theme with their friends or family members while the second type uses the site to document their lives and interact with strangers.

Park (2011) describes three boundary conditions which determine whether a user's behavior can be explained by taste performance theory. First, the user must update his or her online persona at some level of regularity. Second, the user's persona must include indicators of personal tastes and preferences. Third, the individual must

engage in some activities to “perform” their online identity for the audience. With respect to the current research, the Weibo homepage is the persona which carries the virtual identity of the individual. Moreover, the users in our sample share their taste in luxury goods or services with their Weibo followers. Their identities are communicated more effectively compared with users sharing other tastes, given that conspicuous goods are already status signals and the media platform is employed to amplify the effect. The first and second conditions are met because the author has removed inactive accounts and accounts that made no constant mention of luxury products or services when preparing data for analysis. The third condition is also met because the user not only displays her virtual identity through the layout of her homepage and the content of her posts, she also “performs” her persona in interacting with the audience in the threaded comments under her posts. Therefore, the taste performance theory could be applied to the current research to understand how the conspicuous consumers use Weibo to display their identities.

Q3: How do the Internet flaunters employ the microblog platform to state their taste in conspicuous goods?

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHOD

Defining the Flaunting Wealth Posts

Through the review of literature and multi-keyword search on the Internet, it could be seen that “Flaunting wealth” has become quite a popular word in Chinese society in recent years. Despite the massive flow of information related to the phenomenon of “Xuanfu” in China, there is very little discussion on this topic in the West. While flaunting wealth is a common occurrence around the world, flaunting wealth through social media is a rather unique cultural phenomenon, which is directly tied to the societal and economic situation in China. As such, it should be closely examined from a cultural perspective in order to gain a better understanding of the cultural differences between China and Western society.

Before we can further discuss the phenomenon of wealth flaunting on Internet, we need to define what constitutes wealth flaunting behavior first. According to Oxford Dictionary, the word “flaunt” means “to walk or move about so as to display one's finery; to display oneself in unbecomingly splendid or gaudy attire; to obtrude oneself boastfully, impudently, or defiantly on the public view.”

This definition is visually illustrated by a snapshot of Guo Meimei, the controversial rich girl we discussed earlier who posted the picture on the microblogs (shown in Figure 3-1). The text message attached to the photo reads “Oh...my little Maserati was 'injured'. Sent to a repair shop today and won't be back until after May 1st. I pray to God not to let me miss the luxury sports car parade.” The arrangement of the three images in this picture frame is rather interesting. There is a close-up shot of the Maserati logo in the picture on the top left corner; the picture on the right is a shot of Guo herself with her

Hermes bag displayed prominently; the picture on the bottom left is meant to confirm her ownership of the luxury car.



Figure 3-1. Snapshot of Guo Meimei's flaunting wealth post

To some extent, the Internet has provided a new kind of public space. If rich people wanted to flaunt their wealth in the past, they had to be physically present in public space such as streets, theaters, parks, shopping malls, airport, and etc. Nowadays, they do not have to go anywhere because of the new public space provided by the Internet. The Internet has indeed changed the nature of flaunting. All the meaning is embedded in the pictures posted online. Back to our example, the close-up logo shot indicated Meimei's intention: to let everyone recognize the brand of her car if the group shot was not distinctive enough. The text part went a step further by mentioning the brand name and the fact that the car qualifies to attend the luxury sports car carnival.

The line between flaunting and sharing one's life is vague. As pointed out by Epstein (2003), “the real snobbery question was whether one is taking pleasure in a thing or activity for itself or because the pleasure is that other people, most people, in fact, are for one reason or another excluded from it (p.24).” So the real question becomes: whether one is taking pleasure in sharing his or her life with others or whether the pleasure is derived from flaunting stuff beyond the reach of everyone else. The latter is materialistic in nature. As Guo’s case shows that she is a classic example of showing off the luxury goods for the purpose of flaunting. Hers and other similar postings on Weibo suggest that:

1) The brand name of the luxury product or the luxury service is usually the focal point of the uploaded picture on Weibo. If the brand name is not available, the expensiveness of the product or service will be stressed.

2) The actual ownership of luxury product or experience of luxury service is one the emphasis of the many wealth flaunting posts.

Content Analysis

Content analysis is used primarily as a quantitative research method which translates text data into explicit categories consistent with the statistics (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Compared to the more prevalent quantitative content analysis, qualitative content analysis begins with an inductive analysis of texts and searches for patterns (Patton, 2002). In other words, it goes a step further than quantitative content analysis and digs deeper into the texts for meanings.

This study sought for themes from the flaunting wealth posts. Moreover, it is conducted to understand an emerging phenomenon that had not yet been examined by other research. The exploratory and explanatory purposes of the current study called for

a qualitative approach that develops the coding schemes inductively from the texts. Quantitative technique is also employed in contextualizing the Weibo homepages and posts in order to provide a more holistic view of the flaunting wealth individuals.

Frameworks for Image-text relationship

Sina Weibo has some features that Twitter does not currently provide. As a result, the posts to be analyzed for this research are different from the typical Twitter postings. Most posts included text and image as well as some other media forms, like audio and video.

Marsh and White (2003) investigated the relationships between text and images in various media forms. They identified 49 image-text relationships and categorized them into three groups according to the closeness of their conceptual relationship. Since our goal in this research is to explore the motivations of those who flaunt their wealth on Weibo and the strategies they have developed to serve that purpose, it is essential to figure out the connections between text and image in their flaunting posts. Hence, Marsh and White's (2003) codes for analyzing text-image relationship was applied to the current research to gain a better understanding of the flaunting wealth phenomenon. Ten text-image relationships were identified for the current research. Their names and descriptions can be found in the Appendix section of the current study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Few qualitative content analyses have been conducted on microblogs as it is an emerging social media platform. Vieweg, Hughes, Starbird and Palen (2010) studied crisis communication on Twitter. They analyzed microblog posts generated during two concurrent emergency events in North America. The tweets were obtained via keyword search and were analyzed through content analysis. Likewise, Qu, Huang, Zhang and

Zhang (2011) examined the microblog posts on Sina Weibo during Yushu Earthquake. They applied the qualitative method used by Vieweg et al (2008) to analyze the posts. What is more, researchers in health communication also utilized qualitative content analysis to study concussion-related tweets on microblog (Sullivan et al., 2011).

All the above examples employed keyword searches to collect tweets for analysis. However, for the current research, this method is inadequate because the flaunting wealth behavior involves a wide range of topics and cannot be generalized with a few keywords effectively. Luckily, a post on Tianya, entitled “Finding out more about the rich ladies who are showing off on Weibo” reveals that there is a group of rich young ladies who are more than willingly to brag about their luxury lifestyles to their fans on Weibo.

Tianya was launched in 1999 and was ranked 21 of China’s most visited web sites. It attracts more than 1.5 million page views per day and covers a wide range of topics and issues (Qu, Wu & Wang, 2009). The post exposing the Weibo accounts of the wealthy young ladies has attracted over two million hits and has generated over six thousand responses. According to netizens’ own counting, there are over 110 accounts engaged in wealth flaunting on Weibos. This post provided a rich database for analysis. Unlike research based on keyword search for data collection, the current research uses a crowdsourcing method.

The term crowdsourcing was first brought up by Howe (2005) in an article he wrote for *Wired Magazine*. Prior to 2005, the method was already successfully applied to various fields such as business and economics. In his book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, Surowiecki (2005) describes four conditions that shape these crowds: diversity of opinion, independence, decentralization and aggregation. In the case of the current

research, the basic information about people flaunting their wealth on Internet was gathered from a post in one of the most popular forums in China. First of all, the decentralized nature of the Internet ensures that the responses to the post came from all over China and were not limited to a particular region. Besides, the high click-through and response rate guaranteed the variety of the reported accounts. Thirdly, unlike face-to-face communication, the netizens were less likely to be influenced by others' responses. Finally, the post provided a platform for netizens to report Sina Weibo accounts containing flaunting wealth content. To sum up, the post on Tianya was actually a well-established crowdsourcing project reflecting the wisdom of the crowds. The reliability of using this method was proved by many examples.

Based on the post on Tianya, the author has collected a total of 104 user accounts on Sina Weibo. Reviewing each account post by post, the author removed 28 accounts because the users of these accounts either do not engage in obvious wealth flaunting behavior or have removed most of their posts on Weibo. As a result, a total of 76 accounts are left for examination. The next step is to obtain posts related to wealth flaunting. Since the account users update their posts at varying paces, some have only a few pages of posts while some have over 50 pages in their accounts (each page contains 47 posts). To rule out the bias and accurately reflect the characteristics of each individual, a stratified sampling strategy is employed. For each Weibo account, every page would be marked with a backward sequence number. It means the page that contains the latest posts would be labeled as page No. 1. If one account has 15 pages of posts, the one page that contains the individual's oldest posts would be labeled as page No. 15.

Secondly, the 76 accounts would be categorized into four groups based on how many pages each account has. Accounts that belong to Group A contain five or less than five pages of content; accounts that contain six to ten pages of posts fall into Group B; and Group C includes all accounts that have 11 to 15 pages of content. Other accounts (more than 15 pages) would be categorized to Group D. For accounts that have more than 20 pages, only the first 20 pages would be examined in this research.

The researcher would pick the latest flaunting post from each account in Group A. If there is no flaunting post on page No. 1, the first flaunting post appears would be selected (this rule applies to all). For accounts that have six to ten pages of content (Group B), the researcher would pick two posts, one is the latest flaunting post and the other is the first flaunting post on page 6. Using this method, three flaunting posts (each from page 1, page 6 and page 11) would be selected for each account that has 11 to 15 pages of posts (Group C). Four flaunting posts (each from page 1, page 6, page 11 and page 16) would be selected for each account in Group D. Employing this sampling strategy, the author has collected a total of 280 flaunting wealth posts. Each of the 280 posts is given a serial number according to their published date (No. 001 post was posted on March 4th, 2010 and No. 280 post was posted on September 25th, 2011). All the posts were collected on two consecutive days of September 25th and September 26th on 2011. Given that the content on the Internet can be easily removed by its author and the fact that the flaunting posts are often removed due to criticisms from the public, all the posts gathered are preserved in the form of snapshot.

There are two coding sheets for the current research. Coding sheet 1 measures the descriptive aspects of the Weibo homepages of the flaunting wealth accounts, from

which we could learn some basic information of the individuals who flaunt their wealth in Cyberspace. The second coding sheet deals with the flaunting wealth posts on Weibo. A series of items were examined, including the flaunted luxury brand names as well as the overall tone of the comments of each post. These coding categories provided us with empirical evidence of the flaunting wealth behavior on Weibo.

With respect to the qualitative content analysis, Hsieh and Shannon (2005) have identified three approaches. According to them, the conventional approach to describe an emerging phenomenon or categories is usually adopted during data analysis process. In contrast, the directed approach which applies pre-existing theories to form the initial coding scheme works better prior to data analysis. Last but not least, the summative approach is used mostly to examine how the meaning of specific terms or content is interpreted in the context. The current study investigates flaunting wealth phenomenon in Cyberspace. Given that no previous study has addressed this issue, all the themes regarding motivations to flaunt wealth was generated during the content analysis process. The author decided to conduct a pilot study before the actual coding process. Each post that has “1” as the last digit of its serial number was extracted for this pilot research (for example, No.1, No.11, No.21... No.261, No.271). By using this screening process, 28 flaunting wealth posts (10% of the entire sample pool) were extracted from the whole sample. The author viewed the posts one by one carefully without undertaking any coding procedure. After examining the posts, the author then reviewed all the samples several times and developed the initial coding scheme. The themes generated through this process served as the primary categories of analyzing

motivations to flaunt wealth. Several changes were made during the actual coding process and higher-level themes were also developed from the initial categories.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

Weibo Homepages

All the Weibo accounts under investigation in the current research are acquired from a post on Tianya, as previously discussed. The post has reported over a hundred account addresses of the wealthy women who show off their wealth. As a result, the entire sample in the current research has an inherent gender bias. Other than that, demographic questions are designed to gather basic information about the wealth flaunting individuals.

Several studies have confirmed that Chinese affluent consumers are a lot younger than their counterparts in other parts of the world (Xiaolu & Pras, 2011; Debnam & Svinos, 2008). How about the individuals who flaunt wealth online? An initial goal of this research was to obtain the age information of this segment of conspicuous consumers. Although most of the individuals do not report their ages on Weibo, we are able to categorize them into several age groups based on the author's visual assessments of these individuals' own profile pictures and the pictures uploaded in their posts. Visual assessment could not tell us the exact age of the individual, but it is a useful way of determining the age range of the individual. As a matter of fact, 60 out of the 76 individuals in our sample use their own pictures as the profile pictures and nearly all of them have uploaded pictures of themselves in their posts. Subsequently, the author is able to categorize these individuals into three age groups: under 20 years old, between 20 to 40 years old and over 40 years old. Out of the 76 individuals investigated, 71 individuals (93.4%) are among 20 to 40 years of age and 3 individuals (3.9%) are under 20 years old.

Another objective of our investigation is the geographical distribution of these individuals. The chart below demonstrates that they are geographically scattered all over places, both in and outside of China. Those residing outside China account for 37% of the entire sample. Among the foreign countries these affluent consumers are located in, Canada has the largest segment of the flaunting wealth individuals, followed by the U.S. and Great Britain. With regard to the individuals residing in China, approximately 56.2% of them are located in Shanghai, followed by Beijing and Zhejiang province.

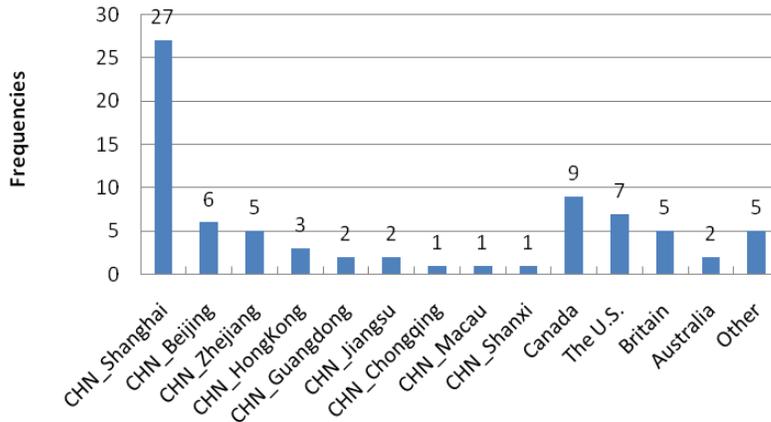


Figure 4-1. Locations of wealth flaunters

China's cities are divided into different tiers based on several criteria, such as population, development of services and infrastructure, and the cosmopolitan nature of the city ("City Tier in China," 2011). Metros like Beijing and Shanghai are basically regarded as Tier 1 cities; relatively smaller cities, such as Nanjing and Xi'an are considered as Tier 2 cities whereas smaller cities are viewed as lower-tier cities. McKinsey's (2011) report demonstrates that the number of China's affluent consumers from second and lower-tier cities is growing. The current research confirms that the affluent consumers who are showing off their wealth online come from both top-tier

cities and lower-tier cities. Among the individuals living in mainland China, 75% of them come from Tier 1 city (Beijing or Shanghai), while 16% and 9% of them come from Tier 2 and Tier 3 city respectively.

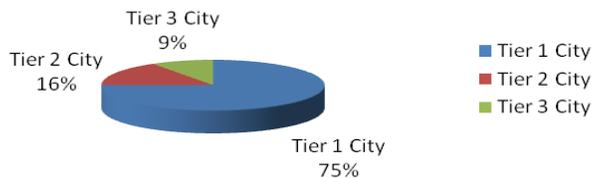


Figure 4-2. Locations of wealth flaunters, breakdown by city tier in Mainland China

The “following” feature of the microblog allowed viewing of updates from selected microblogs, while the “follower” feature enabled discovering of who is interested in us (shown in Figure 4-3 and Figure 4-4). All the individuals in our sample have higher follower numbers compared to following numbers. The number of people they follow varies from 1 to 636, while the number of people following these individuals ranges from 191 to 195,185. The individual who has the most followers is an actress whose authenticity is verified by Sina. Since certified or verified accounts attract more visits than uncertified accounts, the researcher decided to minimize this bias by analyzing only 65 unverified accounts.

In Figure 4-3, the author ranked the individuals (from 191 to 70,247) based on the number of their followers (shown as the RED line). The blue line below shows the number of people each individual follows. As can be seen, even though the verified accounts are removed from our data base, the number of followers each individual has greatly exceeds the number of people the individual follows. Consequently, the blue line

appears to be a straight line at the bottom of the chart. In order to present the data more accurately, Figure 4-4 demonstrates the number of people each individual is following on a scale 100 times bigger than Figure 4-3.

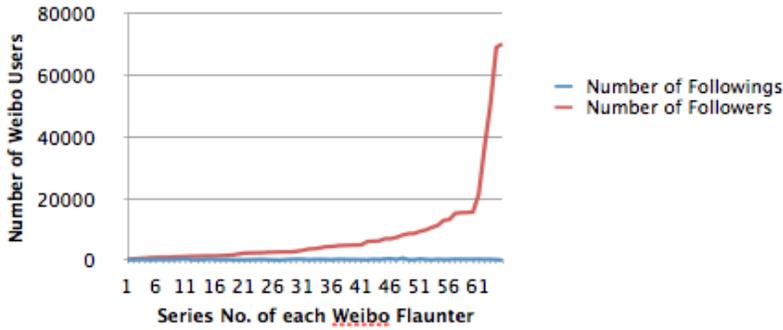


Figure 4-3. Comparison of “follower” number and “following” number of wealth flaunting individual

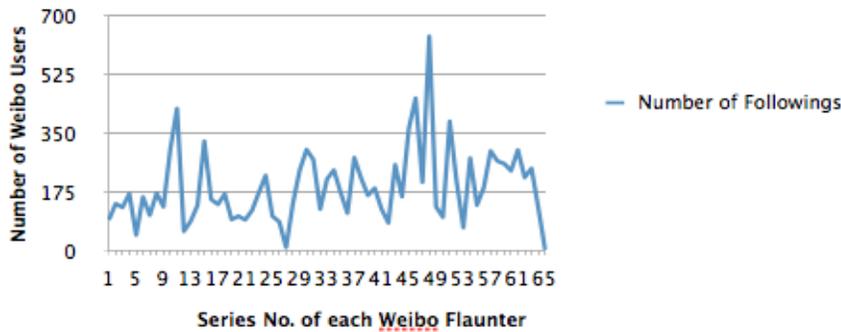


Figure 4-4. “Following” number of Wealth Flaunting Individual on Weibo

In addition to the above information, the current research also examined whether the homepages of the flaunting individuals contain any luxury brand names or logos. Out of the 76 homepages, 28 of them have made reference to luxury brand names or logos either in background, layout or profile pictures.

Flaunting Posts

For the flaunting posts, the first category examined is the type of the post. Eighty-five percent of the samples are original posts, 12% are @ or replying others and 3% are forwarded posts. Nearly all the posts contain pictures (277 out of 280).

The flaunting posts published by the bloggers cover a wide range of product categories. Most posts (80%) have mentioned only one type of product whereas 17% of the posts have incorporated more than one product categories. All the brands mentioned in the posts can be classified into the 11 brand categories. Every time a brand category is mentioned, it is counted once. Out of the 11 brand categories, “Suitcases and handbags” is mentioned the most, followed by “shoes” and “accessories.” “Watches” and “Automobiles” are the least flaunted categories.

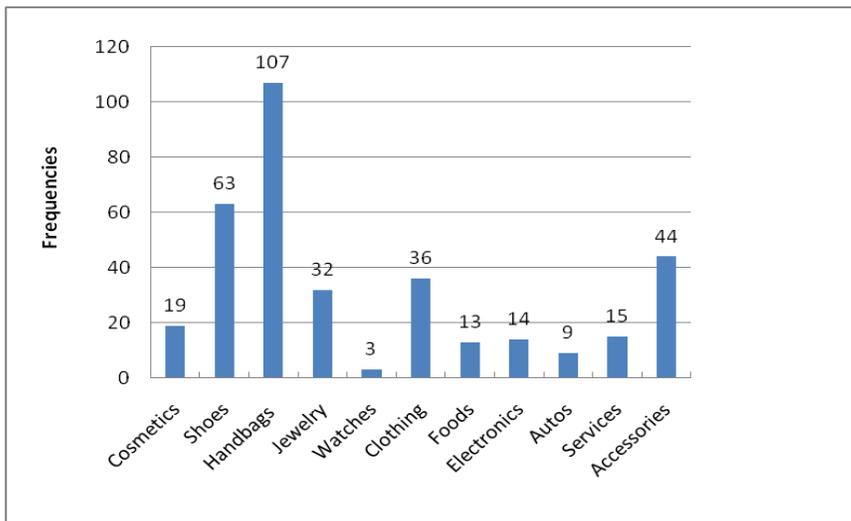


Figure 4-5. Products mentioned in the flaunting posts by category

The author then calculated the luxury brand names mentioned in the posts and lists the top three brand names that appear the most in the posts. Chanel is featured most prominently given it is one of the top three brands in various brand categories. Christian Louboutin enjoys most visibility in the shoes category and Hermes in the

suitcases and handbags category. The percentage of the top three brands in each group is then calculated. A wide variety of brand names is mentioned. Except for “Watches,” “Beverages & Foods,” “Electronic Devices” and “Automobiles,” all of the brand categories mentioned over 10 brand names. This contradicts with the notion that Chinese customers know very few brand names. A list of the brands mentioned in each category can be found in the Appendix of this study.

Table 4-1. Top 3 most mentioned brands by wealth flaunting individuals on Weibo (The number in the brackets is the total times the category was mentioned)

Brand Category	1st	2nd	3rd	Percentage of Top 3 Brands	Numbers of brands mentioned
Cosmetics, Perfumes & Personal Care (19)	Chanel (2)	La Mer (2)	Sisley (2)	31.60%	14
Shoes (63)	Christian Louboutin (15)	Chanel (8)	Roger Vivier (7)	47.60%	28
Suitcases & Handbags (107)	Hermes (46)	Chanel (25)	Louis Vuitton (8)	73.80%	21
Jewelry (32)	Tiffany & Co. (6)	Cartier (4)	Chanel (4)	43.80%	16
Watches (3)	Patek Philippe (2)	Breguet (1)	N/A	100.00%	2
Women’s Wear (36)	Chanel (11)	Miumiu (3)	Alexander McQueen (2)	44.40%	23
Beverages & Foods (13)	Starbucks (5)	Laudree (2)	Louis XIII (2)	69.20%	7
Electronic Devices (14)	Apple (10)	Casio (2)	N/A	85.70%	5
Automobiles (9)	Ferrari (3)	N/A	N/A	33.30%	7
Services (15)	Four Seasons (2)	Ritz Carlton (2)	N/A	26.70%	12
Accessories (44)	Hermes (11)	Chanel (7)	Louis Vuitton (6)	54.50%	23

As illustrated above, one of the major criteria in defining flaunting wealth posts is whether it emphasizes any brand name in its content. Most Weibo posts are composed

of two parts: the text part and the image part. As a result, the luxury products or services are emphasized in different ways in our samples. Fifty-seven percent of the posts do not reveal the brand name in the text but illustrate it in the pictures, whereas twenty percent of the posts mention the brand name of the luxury products in the text section since there are no recognizable cues of the brand name in the pictures. Approximately one fifth of our sample emphasizes the brand names in both text and image.

Having coded the content of each post, this author also examines all the comments attached to the post and identifies five types of comments based on their relationship to the product or service referred to in the post. To decide the overall emotive thrust of the comments to each post, the author first reads all the comments to the particular post, and then calculates the frequencies of each type. The comment type with the highest frequency is coded to the particular post. The description and the example posts are listed below. Nearly half of the posts have received mostly positive comments whereas only 3% of the posts have received generally negative feedbacks. In 20% of all the posts, the comments are mainly about seeking information, compared to 22% of the posts that have received mostly irrelevant comments that have nothing to do with the flaunted products.

Table 4-2. Classification of comments and examples

Content	Description	Example Posts	Frequency (Percentage)
Compliment	The comment praises the product or service mentioned in the post and expresses admiration towards the individual who consumed them	“You are so lucky. The present from your husband is gorgeous.” “The bag is absolutely amazing and it suits you the best”	132 (51.8%)
Denouncement	The comment expresses anger, annoyance or contempt towards the product, service or the individual who flaunts wealth	“I saw you shopping every day without doing any work. Where do you get the money?” “You really should use this money to do some good deeds”	3 (1.2%)
Seeking Information	The comment asks questions regarding the product or the service mentioned in the post	“I looked for the same pair for ages. Where did you get them?” “I hesitated for a long time. Do you think it’s worth the money? ”	51 (20%)
Providing Information	The comment provides relative information regarding the product or the service mentioned in the post	“I have the same bag. It’s on sale in Hong Kong right now” “Many of the stuff they have lined up for this season are pretty. You should check out their belts”	13 (5%)
Irrelevant	The comment is unrelated to the product or service mentioned in the posts	“When are you coming back to China?”	56 (22%)

Thematic Analysis of the Flaunting Posts

The quantitative content analysis has yielded some interesting findings. It outlines the characteristics of the conspicuous consumers who are flaunting wealth on Weibo. It also generates statistical clues to the question of what these consumers are flaunting and how they are flaunting. Since our aim is to understand the underlying reasons for their behavior, a qualitative analysis is conducted to identify thematic variations from the posts. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: materialism, equation of luxury with taste and “luxury routinizing.” Several sub-themes are also applied.

Materialism

Many of the posts in the current study manifest an obsession with materialism. Conspicuous consumers use the microblog platform to show off their recently purchased luxury products, expensive gifts or conspicuous goods they collected in the past. In both text and image, the luxurious nature of the products is emphasized for the audiences. The blogger displays how wealthy she is and seems to enjoy being the object of envy and admiration. The text portion of these posts often includes the brand of the product as well as blogger's delight in possessing it.

At the same time, the image part frequently highlights the product through close-up shots. Furthermore, the packaging imprinted with brand logos is often placed in the background. This is a rather interesting phenomenon. Since the product already informs the audience of its value, the packaging placed in the background is sending out another signal, that is, the product is genuine. As indicated by Debnam and Svinos (2008), counterfeits from China dominate the underground trade in luxury fakes in the world. In China, customers purchase counterfeits for different reasons. Some brand-ignorant customers do not even realize they are buying counterfeit products while others know very well that they are purchasing the fakes but they cannot afford the real ones (Chandha & Husband, 2006). The nouveau riches in this study employ all means to differentiate themselves from those buying counterfeit products. As a result, instead of only displaying luxury products, the individuals put packaging in the background to inform others that their possessions are real.

Three sub-themes are listed below, each followed with two examples.

Consumption

Consumption is the most common sub-theme. The individual normally starts the sentence with “I bought another,” “This is what I got.” The picture followed is usually a visual footnote to the text. In the first example (shown in Figure 4-6), the text reads: “I couldn’t resist the temptation. Bought it in another color: coral. Loved it!” The image reinforces the information in the text. “Bought” is transformed into the black Chanel packaging and the color of the product is presented under the artificial light. Although there is no mention of the brand name in the text, both the logo and the brand name are shown in the picture. In addition, the author uses the word “another” to imply that she owns more than one. In the second example (shown in Figure 4-7), the product is also the centre of attention. The text reads: “I fell in love with this necklace recently. It seems much prettier when I got it. I am so lucky.” Although no brand name is mentioned, several Chanel logos appear in the picture.



Figure 4-6. Example A of the “consumption” sub-theme under the “Materialism” category



Figure 4-7. Example B of the “consumption” sub-theme under the “Materialism” category

Gift

In many situations, the conspicuous goods flaunted come from friends or family members. Instead of expressing appreciation in private, the individual chooses Weibo to amplify her joy. In our first example (shown in Figure 4-8), the text read as “Thanks for the birthday ring from my husband.” The image is composed of two pictures. The first picture in the background is a close-up shot of the particular product. It is a ring with sparkling gems. The high value is made obvious by the ring itself. She uses the smaller picture of the box imprinted with brand name to drive her point home. The image is used to supplement the text and together they form a functioning whole. In the second example (shown in Figure 4-9), the text reads: “Thanks Xiaoyuan for her ‘red rope’. Hope the new beginning really brings some good luck.” The luxury goods were placed on the bag imprinted with the Cartier brand name and logo because the luxury goods are not conspicuous enough. The image is used to reiterate the information provided in the text.



Figure 4-8. Example A of the “gift” sub-theme under the “Materialism” category



Figure 4-9. Example B of the “gift” sub-theme under the “Materialism” category

Collection

Another form of wealth flaunting is to show a collection of luxury products purchased in the past. Compared to the posts discussed earlier which seem to be motivated by a thread of genuine joy at owning expensive products, the posts in this category are entirely driven by a desire to flaunt. In the example provided in Figure 4-10, the individual posts a picture of her closet with a text that reads “Let me flaunt my

collection of Balenciaga.” The products in the pictures were arranged closely to each other. Since there is not enough information to identify the brand in the picture, the text helps us to understand the image. The author uses “flaunt” in the text, implying that she is fully aware of her motive. The second example (shown in Figure 4-11) also displays the luxury products in the same manner. The large quantities of luxury goods remind the audience how wealthy the individual is. Even though no brand name is mentioned in the text, a lot of brand-name shoes can be discerned from the image.



Figure 4-10. Example A of the “collection” sub-theme under the “Materialism” category



Figure 4-11. Example B of the “collection” sub-theme under the “Materialism” category

Equation of Luxury with Taste

As illustrated in previous literature review, Chinese consumers strongly associate luxury products with good taste (Debnam & Svinos, 2008). In this category, the luxury goods are not displayed solely to flaunt wealth, but also to assist the individuals in expressing themselves. The bloggers enjoy the attention the conspicuous goods bring to them, but even more important to them is to be perceived as a person with fine taste. As pointed out by Veblen (1899/1994), conspicuous goods not only signal high social status of their owners, but also provide an opportunity for their owners to differentiate themselves from others. Thus, luxury products function as a uniqueness signal. The products displayed in these posts are not likely to be imprinted with large logos since the owners are more concerned with the aesthetic values of these products.

Fashion

Immanuel Kant believed that fashion was not associated with good taste given that a man of style usually relied on his own power of judgment and did not blindly follow the so-called fashion. Gronow (1993) argued that fashion is not only based on a collective taste of the society but also the individual's own aesthetic preferences. In other words, in consuming fashionable items, people are able to express their uniqueness as well as conform to the social standard of taste. Fashionable items are not necessarily luxury products. However, as discussed above, Chinese consumers do not have a chance to develop their own styles and tastes. That is why they rely heavily on brand name recognition. Dressed in expensive designer clothes with assured taste value, the individuals minimize the chance to expose their own inadequacy in fashion aesthetics.

As shown in the example post (shown in Figure 4-12), several pictures were merged together to create a lookbook (a collection of photographs compiled to present

the style of an individual). The individual incorporated the model in the same dress to her lookbook and a picture taken at a high angle was presented at the bottom right corner of the image. The high angle shot appears in our sample with high frequency. Just like the one in our example, most pictures were taken to show off designer bags or shoes worn by the individual. Except for the two pictures at the bottom right corner, the rest of the pictures signify the supposedly distinctive fashion style of the individual. They respond to the message expressed in the first half of the text which reads “If you can't be No.1, try to be the unique one. If you can't stay with him till the last moment, then treasure the memories of him.” The text reflects the unique and independent lifestyle of the individual. Another part of the post, however, reveals that the individual is brand-conscious. She reminds her audiences that her “high” fashion look is out of the price range of ordinary customers in the text and by presenting the picture of a model in the same dress displaying her Hermes bag. Although she tries to avoid direct flaunting, she sought social differentiation from others nevertheless.



Figure 4-12. Example A of the “fashion” sub-theme under the “Equation of Luxury with Taste” category

The second example (shown in Figure 4-13) is quite similar to the first example. The individual mentioned luxury brand names in her post and made herself the focus of the post. “My Miumiu’s clutch can hold so much stuff. I am a boring person for I only love black, white and grey. The leopard simply cannot change its spots.” The text reads. The image emphasizes what is expressed in the text and the individual displays her style in the image.



Figure 4-13. Example B of the “fashion” sub-theme under the “Equation of Luxury with Taste” category

Lifestyle

Conspicuous consumers try to convince others that they live a high-quality lifestyle by hinting at the fact that they are regular customers of high-end restaurants or hotels. Other than directly flaunting the luxury service they enjoyed, these consumers convey the message in a more subtle way. They are more concerned with maintaining their image of excellent taste than simply displaying the objects. For example (shown in Figure 4-14), “Yesterday I revisited my favorite Ritz-Carlton to have some red wine. The environment on the top floor is so comfortable...Must book the fourth table!” reads the text. From the text, the blogger stresses her high status by discussing red wine, which in

China is usually consumed by affluent customers who aspire to Western lifestyles. In the picture, the lush interior décor echoes the text. The photo has the feel of hotel promotion commercial. The composition is professional and the image quality impeccable. Although there are many elements in the photo, they are organized in a logical way. The glasses of the red wine, the candle, the food and the bottle of white wine are at the bottom half of the picture. The waiter is displayed at the left corner. To fill the blank space in the picture, the landmark building of Shanghai is also presented. The image reiterates the meaning emphasized in the text. The author mentions the name of the luxury hotel and the fact that she often drinks red wine to communicate her tasteful way of living. Likewise, the second example (shown in Figure 4-15) also emphasizes the luxury hotel experiences. The brand name is mentioned in the text and the individual stresses the high floor number to imply that the unique experience of staying in a luxury hotel. The image is a restatement of the meaning expressed in the text.



Figure 4-14. Example A of the “lifestyle” sub-theme under the “Equation of Luxury with Taste” category

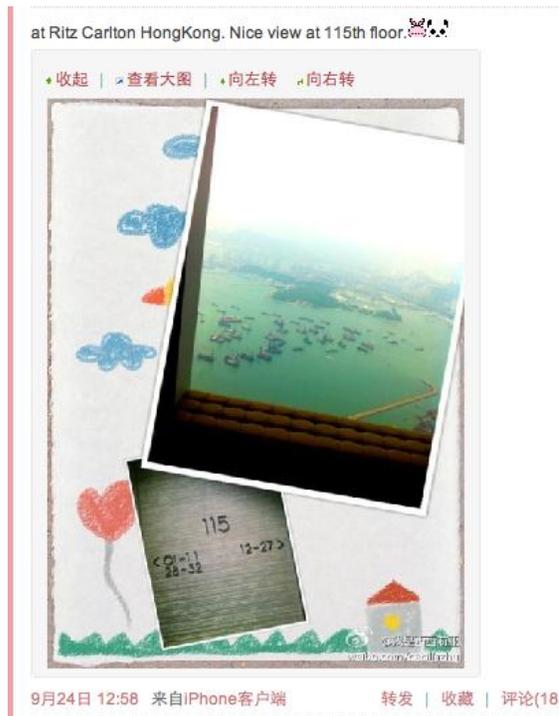


Figure 4-15. Example B of the “lifestyle” sub-theme under the “Equation of Luxury with Taste” category

Luxury Routinizing

Through the routinization of luxury, bloggers imply that, to them, luxury products are just normal items. They are more concerned with the utility function of the luxury products than their status function. In this type of post, flaunting is carried out in a way even more subtle than the “Equation of luxury with taste” theme. Compared to the former themes in which the conspicuous consumers make deliberate attempt to flaunt, the affluent consumers in this category tend to downplay the significance of luxury goods. However, this does not mean that they want their conspicuous consumption to go unnoticed. Rather, they drop hints in their posts for the audiences to figure out. As Miller (2010) stated “One's status dwells in the minds of observers” (p.73); to those who

have no knowledge of luxury brands, a handbag is a handbag, whether it is worth tens of thousands or only hundreds of dollars. Hence, these posts are not intended for the mass audiences on Weibo, but only for those familiar with the luxury brands.

Information sharing and seeking

Since the individuals publishing the posts in this theme appear to focus on the utility function of the luxury products, they often make comments about quality, cost performance and durability. This implies that they are not likely to be overwhelmed by the big brand names. They may also seek product information on Weibo just like a regular customer would, except that the product in question is on the high end. The first post chosen is an example of information sharing regarding luxury products (shown in Figure 4-16). The text could be translated as “Even Louboutin flats hurt my feet. I could hardly walk in these shoes today. This happened every time.”



Figure 4-16. Example A of the “information sharing and seeking” sub-theme under the “Luxury Routinizing” category

心灵手不巧的人要向大家咨询一下啦！对于比较大的丝巾各位是如何绕在包柄上的呢？一般我是先把一头塞在里面，但这样有一段就会显得很窝囊，有没有更好的固定方法呢？



2010-6-10 13:39 来自iPhone客户端
转发(10) | 收藏 | 评论(17)

Figure 4-17. Example B of the “information sharing and seeking” sub-theme under the “Luxury Routinizing” category

Although Louboutin is one of the most expensive brands of shoes, the author of this post clearly has a lot to complain about. She implies in the text that she has owned many pairs of Louboutins, and she is therefore convinced that they are not comfortable to wear. The image exhibits the product and the picture was taken very casually, without much consideration of composition. This leaves us the impression that this the blogger is not deliberately flaunting. The image is simply meant to illustrate what has already been said in the text. The second post (shown in Figure 4-17) is an example of information seeking. In the post, the individual asks: “From a person who is very clumsy, how do you wrap around the handle if you use bigger silk scarf? Normally I would push one end inside, but it looks awkward. Is there a way to fasten the scarf?” The text does not reveal any luxury brand names. It seems like a regular customer asking for advice from peers. The image, however, exposes the true identity of the individual: a conspicuous consumer. The picture was shot from a high angle which makes the bag

prominent. Other than the designer bag, the luxury brand-name scarf, the ring and the button with a Chanel logo all differentiate the individual from regular customers. The image is used to make the text more understandable; however, unnecessary elements are added to ensure the picture's upscale origins.

“Random” snapshots with luxury products in sight

The other sub-theme under this category displays the luxury products in a very inconspicuous manner. The text portion normally discusses something irrelevant to the conspicuous goods demonstrated in the pictures. However, if we look at the image and text more closely, there are still many hints left by the author to suggest her superior status. In the first example (shown in Figure 4-18), the blogger writes, “December, what a rough start,” however, the image she uploaded contradicts her statement. Rather than showing the “rough” life, she merged multiple pictures to show off her luxurious lifestyle. The pictures were clearly taken during a meal at a fancy restaurant. These seemingly random snapshots were carefully chosen and arranged by the individual.



Figure 4-18. Examples A of the “random snapshot” sub-theme under the “Luxury Routinizing” category

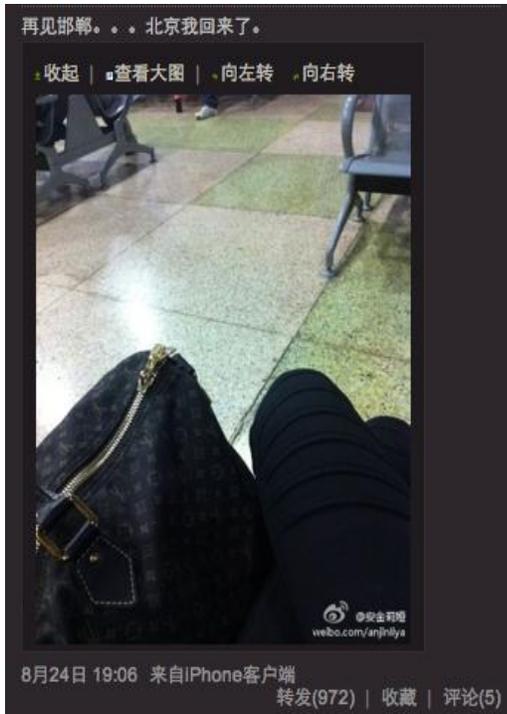


Figure 4-19. Examples B of the “random snapshot” sub-theme under the “Luxury Routinizing” category

For instance, ostensibly, the picture at the top illustrates the individual reading the menu, however, the real focal point is the extremely large diamond ring on her finger. Furthermore, the low angle shot of the exquisite chandelier at the top right corner makes it amply clear that she was dining at a very high-end restaurant. The three pictures at the bottom showing the delicate food reaffirms this point. Last, but not the least, a Hermes bag is also visible in one of the pictures, highlighting the wealth of the individual. Collectively, these pictures project a classy lady in possession of all kinds of luxury accessories and a regular patron in fine restaurants. The content of the picture seems to have nothing to do with the information provided in the text. As a result, the image-text relationship is meant to “decorate,” which means the image does not stimulate any emotional response from the reader and is only used to make the text more attractive. Many posts of this theme have the same image-text relationship. In

these posts, the conspicuous consumers make the display of their wealth in more subtle ways and assume an air of casualness about their luxury life style. It should be noted here that although this post also emphasizes a luxurious style of living, it is different from the example provided in the lifestyle sub-theme since the current post does not deliberately mention any brand name but solely relies on the audience to decipher the status signals. The second example (shown in Figure 4-19) is also a casual snapshot. The text reads: "Good bye, Handan. Beijing, I am back." From the information provided in the text, the image can be decoded: the individual was at a bus station or train station, as can be told from the chairs. The image still looks very confusing because there is no real focal point in the picture; the only thing that attracts attention is the designer bag imprinted with logos. The blogger probably shot the picture out of boredom when she was waiting for the bus or train. For the audience, her flaunting message is very clear.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

General Discussion

The previous section reports the statistical evidence culled from flaunters' homepages and their posts. The three themes emerge from the analysis of these posts are: materialism, equation of luxury with taste and luxury routinizing. In this chapter, we will discuss the relationship between deep-rooted Chinese cultural traditions and individual behavior, as well as the role of the microblog platform in facilitating taste statements. The aim of the current research is build a foundation for further discussion. Before exploring this study's assumptions, first the findings will be compared with the published literature on the subject.

Hedrick-Wong's (2007) survey on affluent Chinese consumers suggests that a majority of these consumers are between 25 to 34 years of age. In this study, 93.4% of the individuals are between 20 to 40 years old and 3.9% are under 20 years old. Twenty and forty are selected as the boundaries of the age group because twenty is the legal age of marriage for women in mainland China and forty is usually considered the starting point of middle age in contemporary Chinese society. The findings of this study demonstrate that the nouveau riches showing off their glamorous lives on Weibo are generally younger than the conspicuous-goods consumers in China. This is because microbloggers in China are mostly youngsters. Based on the statistics collected by Sina (2010), 47% of the Weibo users are under 22 and women are more likely than men to use Weibo. From the content of their posts and through their own disclosure, it was determined that most of the individuals in our sample are non-working wives in wealthy households or children of the affluent. There were a few business women in our sample.

Xiaolu and Pras (2011) have emphasized the importance of studying rich non-working wives and second-generation members of wealthy families in the context of conspicuous consumption in China.

One of the most interesting findings of the current research is that among the wealth flaunting consumers on Weibo, approximately 2/5 of them live abroad. They are mostly wealthy women married at a young age and accompanying their husbands to foreign lands. Judging from their posts, they seem to have little interaction with the local society and are attached to Weibo to connect with friends and families in China. Shanghai seems to have the largest number of Internet flaunters. As noticed by Chadha and Husband (2006), Shanghai is one of the most modern cities in the world and the affluent class in the city has distinctive taste in style and strong desire for material goods. Once a fishing town, Shanghai grew in importance in the nineteenth century when China came into frequent contact with the Western world. This historical background partially explains Shanghai's significance in this study's results. Additionally, when profiling Chinese elite who consume luxury goods, Xiaolu and Pras (2011) note that they generally live in large cities where they have more opportunities to develop international exchanges than the rest of the population. This observation is also reflected in our finding given that 33 out of 76 of the individuals in our sample reside in Tier 1 or Tier 2 cities in China.

With respect to the Weibo platform, the author has found that these Internet flaunters have a large fan base. Although their followers number range from a few hundred to hundreds of thousands, the general trend is that the "followers" significantly outnumber the individuals the blogger is following. This means that the lives of these

affluent housewives and rich college students appeal to a large number of audience on Weibo. Although it may not be their intention to draw so much attention, the huge subsequent crowd of fans has changed the dynamic of the bloggers' motivation to flaunt wealth.

Discussion from a Cultural Perspective

Chinese traditions helped shape the behavior of the Internet flaunters. From our findings, we have learned that these individuals prefer to show off luxury goods in the “shoes,” “handbag” and “accessory” categories rather than the “automobile” and “watch” categories. This is consistent with what KPMG (2008), one of the largest professional services firms have suggested, that the market for bags and fashion accessories has seen stronger growth than other categories of luxury goods in China. The reason for the relative low profile of automobiles is likely due to their extremely high prices whereas the lack of motivation in flaunting watches results from the absence of recognizable logos. Of the categories of affordable luxuries, the most highly-priced brands are favored over their lesser competitors. The best example is the popularity of Hermes among the wealthy Chinese. This one single brand accounts for 43% of mention in the “suitcases and handbags” category. As Chadha and Husband (2006) have noted, people in Western societies generally choose products that define the personality of their owners, while Asian customers prefer products accentuating their group identity. Because of that, the conspicuous consumers in our study are inclined to prefer best known brands to less distinguishable ones. Thus, one of the most important motivating factors in public display of wealth may be to affirm a newly acquired upper-class group identity. To members of this class, possession of luxury items is the entry card to an exclusive club.

The individuals in our focus do seem to be group-oriented, as evidenced by their brand choices and flaunting behavior. Another aspect of collectivism is also related to the current research: the non-confrontational communication style of the bloggers' followers. Since maintaining group harmony is the priority among group members, any form of confrontation is discouraged (Xiaolu & Pras, 2011). For this reason, criticism of flaunting behavior is rarely found in the comments on posts. Most comments are compliments or polite exchanges on a variety of topics. Flaunting wealth may not be a socially acceptable behavior in China; however, in the absence of public condemnation, wealthy individuals may have little reason to change their flaunting behavior.

Many researchers have shown that the tradition of gift exchanging in interdependent cultures contributes to the growth of luxury consumption in those societies (Henriksen, 2009; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). In collectivist cultures such as China, gift giving is often used as a way to maintain and strengthen social relationships. In the context of the current research, showing off gifts from friends or family members is on the rise on the Internet. The individuals who do this can "shoot two birds with one stone," so to speak. By showing off their appreciation of gifts in such a public fashion, they enhance their relationship with the gift givers on the one hand, and gain "face" for both the recipient and the giver. Based on these observations, this study demonstrates that maintaining "face" and promoting "face" is a crucial motivation for individuals to flaunt wealth. The concept of face has two components: material prestige in a society and one's moral standing (Chadha & Husband, 2006). The consumption of luxury products is an important way to demonstrate the otherwise unobservable wealth and

success. In this respect, the author has identified the deep-rooted cultural grounding in understanding Chinese's obsession with luxury goods.

Of course, the individuals in this study are not a homogeneous group. We are able to identify three different types of Internet flaunters based on the themes of the posts. The individuals in the first group are the most conspicuous. They have a tendency to flaunt pricey and well-known brands. In their posts, they always emphasize the brand of the products and highlight them in the pictures. They are the typical conspicuous consumers who mostly shop for the status symbols embedded in the luxury goods. The second type of Internet flaunters is less conspicuous, they are brand-conscious, but unlike the first type, they also pay attention to the style of the luxury product or the quality of the service. Other than shopping for the symbolic values of the luxury products, they use them to express their personalities. In their posts, the products or services are presented more discretely to highlight their taste. The third type of luxury-goods consumers flaunters are the least conspicuous. They may be brand-conscious, but they also care about the utility function of the luxury goods. In their posts, the brand of the luxury item is not emphasized unless it is a necessary part of information exchange regarding the product. To these individuals, they want to leave others an impression that consuming luxury products is a normal part of their life and is not worth making a big fuss about.

The distinction among the consumer types is a key to our discussion of the concept of face. As we have argued, the maintenance and enhancement of face is very important in Chinese society. The first group of individuals has the strongest desire to enhance “face” through public exhibition of the luxury products. They are most likely to

be nouveau riche or what the Chinese call “bao fa hu.” Since they have just become wealthy, they are eager to be recognized as such (Braun & Wicklund, 1989). The conspicuous consumers in our third category are likely to be those who have enjoyed their wealthy status for a while. They are less interested in enhancing their face through direct flaunting but inclined to maintain their status through a casual attitude toward luxury items in their posts. The second type of consumer is situated between the two. They are less conspicuous than the first type of consumer since they rarely directly boast about their belongings. Also, they have higher level of conspicuousness than the third type of consumer given that they often emphasize brand names in the text.

Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) have examined the relationship between the concept of face and conflict solving styles from an intercultural perspective and proposed that individualistic cultures, such as the United States, tend to use more direct face threatening conflict resolution styles, whereas collectivistic cultures, such as China with greater degree of interdependence, tend to use more indirect mutually face-saving conflict resolution styles. As we have previously indicated, a majority of the comments found on flaunting wealth posts is either complimentary or regarding topics unrelated to the luxury products or services. Even the few critical remarks do not directly assault the author of the post. For instance, a disapproving comment on the individual displaying a stack of boxes imprinted with various big brand logos goes as following: “If I were rich enough, I would donate some money to someone who really needs it instead of buying these luxury goods. Giving away excessive wealth wouldn't affect my quality of life negatively at all, but it would make a huge difference to someone else's life. Anyway, never mind what I say and have a nice day.” Obviously, the person who wrote this

comment disapproves of the flaunting wealth behavior. However, instead of denouncing the wealth flaunting behavior, the comment suggests a hypothetical alternative way of dispensing wealth. The last sentence even retreats from that position to avoid invoking any tension. What this example shows is that the flaunting wealth behavior on Weibo is unlikely to face social censure and strong condemnation because of China's face-saving culture.

So far this study has examined the connection between the traditional cultural values and wealth flaunting behavior on Weibo. We find that establishing group identity and enhancing or maintaining face among peer group are the two major motivations for such behavior. The Chinese emphasis on group harmony and traditional face-saving culture mean that wealth flaunting behavior is largely left unchecked which in effect encourage the individuals to continue flaunting unabated.

The Weibo Platform

According to taste performance theory, people craft their personal identities through personalized "taste statements" which are based on patterns of material and cultural consumption (Parks, 2011). As our research shows, the individuals who flaunt wealth on Weibo do so to establish their identity. But most of them have no concept of personalized identity and can only focus on group identity. Weibo allows them to construct that identity without having to leave home. Besides making taste statement in their posts, these individuals communicate other messages as well. The author has investigated whether luxury brand names or logos are featured in these individuals' homepages as well. As it turns out, 28 out of 76 individuals have indicated their attachment to luxury goods on their homepages. One of the individuals uses a Chanel bag as her profile picture and several other individuals adopt luxury brand logos as the

backgrounds of their homepages. Also, Weibo allows users to add tags describing their interests. It offers another opportunity for the individual to stress her interests.

It should be pointed out here that Weibo made deliberate efforts to learn from Twitter, the forerunner of microblogs, both in format and operating principle, such as the 140 characters limits (Wen, 2011). At the same time, the company has also developed many features of its own to enhance user experiences. After examining the homepages of the wealth flaunting individuals, the author has identified several unique functions of Weibo that have particular appeal to those who wish to brag about their luxurious lifestyle to others.

Richer Media

This is the most popular feature of Sina Weibo. Users are allowed to post pictures, videos, music or polls directly from their main page without any plugins. In contrast, Twitter did not allow its users to upload photos directly until the August of 2011. To individuals who wish to flaunt their wealth, this is a must-have feature. Most of them prefer images to words in expressing themselves. Instead of saying “I got another Chanel bag” in the text, they prefer to take a close-up shot of the product with the packaging imprinted with large Chanel logo in the background. In addition, Weibo offers a wider range of emoticons for the young users to choose from (Falcon, 2011). To those who are only interested in displaying luxury goods, emoticons are especially helpful in eliciting emotions and saving the trouble of typing characters. In a word, the richer media forms on Weibo allow the affluent consumers in China to present themselves in more flexible ways.

Verified Account

This feature is related to the hierarchical nature of Chinese society. The verified accounts are created specifically for celebrities, managers, or anyone with power and influence. Sina set up a dedicated page for celebrity users to bring in more users (Falcon, 2011). The name of a verified account user is indicated by a red letter “v” and is linked to the person's webpage. To some wealthy consumers in China, the verified account feature helps them to pursue prestige in the society along with demonstrating it through conspicuous goods.

Posts with Threaded Comments

As illustrated above, one of the factors that motivate people to brag about their wealth on the Internet is the feedback from strangers. On Twitter, one can only reply to the author but cannot see others' comments directly. On Weibo, however, users' comments are threaded under each post. The author can also join the comments to communicate with other users. This feature appeals to the Chinese netizens because they prefer to interact in groups. It is common to see thousands of comments under one single post. Some conspicuous consumers enjoy being the opinion leaders of their own fans group by communicating with their followers in the threaded comments. Their virtual identities are thus presented to the audience in a very realistic way.

Forward with Comments

China's microblog also provides the function of making comments when forwarding others' post. This feature is most useful when having contradictory opinion or adding information to the original post. Conversations are thus preserved in this way (Landwehr, 2011). This feature is often used by conspicuous consumers to draw attention, such as requesting the price or details of certain luxury goods that have been

posted by dealers or emphasizing that they have the same luxury products that are displayed by others. In this kind of posts, the bloggers are not directly presenting the luxury goods, but are making their taste statements through commenting on others' posts.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

As a tentative research on flaunting wealth phenomenon in China, the current study has several limitations. First, the study only investigated a group of women who exhibited such behavior on Weibo. Obviously, such behavior is not confined to women. As we have discussed in the literature review, some researchers have suggested that men are also guilty of showing off their wealth online. In order to have a more complete picture of conspicuous consumers, future studies should incorporate male respondents as well.

In terms of methodology, the current study has employed both quantitative and qualitative content analysis techniques and retrieved user accounts from an existing crowdsourcing project on a forum. For future quantitative investigators, a larger sample size is needed in order to attain a more holistic view. Meanwhile, the qualitative analysis in the current study is solely based on the author's own interpretations. Additional perspectives on flaunting wealth messages should be considered.

Besides, to determine whether an act is flaunting or not depends on many factors, such as the knowledge of luxury brands and the sociological status of the observer. For instance, the posts categorized under the third theme of our qualitative analysis may not be considered as flaunting wealth to observers with little knowledge of luxury goods. It is thus problematic to investigate such phenomenon from a single point of view. Future

studies should also examine the voices from the other side through focus groups or in-depth interviews with bloggers who exhibit luxury goods online.

Furthermore, the major objective of the current study is to interpret the flaunting wealth phenomenon from a cultural perspective. Two of the most common doctrines of Chinese traditional values are selected for the current study. Future cultural researchers interested in cultural analysis should explore additional aspects of traditional cultural beliefs and practices.

Finally, the current study sheds some light on media's function as "taste container." However, our analysis is based on limited observations and does not provide sufficient empirical evidence. Given its increasing influence on Chinese society, Weibo deserves further scholarly attention. It is especially important that future researchers examine the microblog platform from an intercultural perspective, since people from different cultures tend to consume media very differently.

APPENDIX A
COMMON TEXT-IMAGE RELATIONSHIPS AND THEIR DESCRIPTION
(MARSH & WHITE, 2003)

Text-image Relationship	Description
Functions expressing little relation to text	
Decorate	Image is used to make the text more attractive without producing any real effects on reader's perception
Elicit Emotion	Image is used to stimulate emotional response from the reader
Control	Image is used to stimulate other more active reactions from reader
Functions expressing close relation to the text	
Reiterate	Image is used to restate the meanings in the text
Organize	Image is used to assist the text and to form a functioning whole
Relate	Image is used to help the reader identify the concepts embedded in the text.
Explain	Image is used to make the text more understandable to its reader
Functions that go beyond the text	
Interpret	Image is used to illustrate complex ideas in the text
Develop	Image is used to further illustrate the idea in the text by degrees or in detail
Transform	Image is used to recode the text into concrete form; relate components to each other and facilitate the reader to recall the content in the text by providing organization

APPENDIX B
CODING SHEET SAMPLE: WEIBO HOMEPAGES

1. Number of people the individual follows

2. Number of followers the individual has

3. Where is location of the individual as shown on the homepage?

4. Does the individual use her own picture as the profile picture?

A. Yes

B. No

C. Not sure

5. Which age group does the individual belong?

A. Under 20

B. 20~40

C. Over 40

D. Not applicable

6. Does the homepage of the individual contain logos or names of any luxury brand?

A. Yes

B. No

C. Not sure

APPENDIX C
CODING SHEET SAMPLE: FLAUNTING WEALTH POSTS

1. Time the message was posted

2. Type of post

A. Original post

B. Forward other's post

C. @reply

3. Does the post contain pictures?

A. Yes

B. No

4. What's the content of the picture, describe here

5. Does the post contain more than one brand?

A. Yes

B. No

C. Not sure

6. Which brand is mentioned in the post?

7. Which category does the flaunted product belong?

A. Cosmetics, perfume & personal care

B. Shoes

C. Suitcases & handbags

D. Jewelry

E. Watches

F. Women's wear

G. Beverages and foods

H. Electronic devices

I. Automobiles

J. Services

K. Accessories

L. Others (Specify)

8. How is the brand emphasized in the post?

A. Mentioned in the text

B. Brand logo appeared in the pictures

C. Both

D. Not applicable

9. How many comments does the post have?

10. Which of the following is the dominant theme of the comments?

A. Complement

B. Denouncement

C. Seeking information

D. Providing information

E. Not relevant to the post

F. N/A

APPENDIX D
BRANDNAMES MENTIONED IN EACH CATEGORY

Product Category	Description
Cosmetics, perfume & personal care	Chanel, Clinique, Dior, Harajuku, Hermes, Jurlique, Lancome, La Prairie, La Mer, Lanvin, Mark Jacobs, Sisley Cosmétiques Paris, SK-II, Style Nanda
Shoes	Adidas, Alexander McQueen, Alexander Wang, Balmain, Celine, Chanel, Charlotte Olympia, Clot Inc., Givenchy, Gucci, Hermes, Jimmy Choo, Louboutin, Marc Jacobs, Mastermind JAPAN, Miu Miu, Penny Loafer, Prada, Roger Vivier, Salvatore Ferragamo, Sergio Rossi, Staccato, Stella McCartney, Ugg, United nude, Versace, Yves Saint Laurent
Suitcases & handbags	Alexander McQueen, Balenciaga, Banana Taipei, BCBG, Cambridge Satchel, CC Skye, Celine, Chanel, Chanel, DIOR, Dolce & Gabbana, Franck Muller, Gucci, Hermes, Louis Vuitton, Miu Miu, Roger Vivier, Samsonite, Yves Saint Laurent
Jewelry	Bvlgari, Cartier, Chanel, Dior, Dolce & Gabbana, Emerald Ring, Harry Winston, Hermes, Joyce, Juicy Couture, Prada, Tiffany Co., Valentino, Van Cleef & Arpels, Versace
Watches	Breguet, Patek Philippe
Women's wear	Adidas, Alexander McQueen, ASOS, Balenciaga, Chanel, Chloe, Club Monaco, Dolce & Gabbana, Gap, Givenchy, H&M for Lanvin, Hale bob, Helmut Lang, Hermes, Miu Miu, Paul Frank, Richard Nicoll, Rojita, SLY, Valentino, Vera Wang
Beverages and foods	Chateau Cablanc, Godiva, Laduree, Louis XIII, Perrier Jouet, Starbucks, Veuve Clicquot
Electronic devices	Apple, Canon, Casio, Lumix, Vertu
Automobiles	Aston Martin, BMW, Ferrari, Lamborghini, Land Rover, Maserati, Mercedes-Benz,
Services	Bottega Louis, DFS, Hong Kong Palace, Four seasons, Kaiseki Cuisine, Le Pre Catelan, Limo, Marriott, Morton's, Pierre, Puli hotel, Ritz Carlton
Accessories	Alexander McQueen, Cartier, Celine, Chanel, Chloe, Chrome Hearts, Fendi, Givenchy, H&M for Lanvin, H&M, Hello Kitty, Hennes, Juicy Couture, Karen Walker, Louis Vuitton, Marc Jacobs, Miu Miu, MMJ, Murua, Philip Lim, Prada, Salvatore Ferragamo, Vintage
Category L. Others	Cartier, Chanel, Hello Kitty, Hermes, Montblanc

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Xiaomo Chen was born in Anhui, China. At age nine, she moved to Beijing with her parents. At age 16, she attended No.13 Senior High, an institute with 82 years of history. The campus was part of the former residence of Zaitao, a prince in the Qing Dynasty. Surrounded by historical relics for three years, Xiaomo started to grow interest in liberal arts. She attended Communication University of China, majoring in Broadcasting Editing and Directing when she was 18. In college, Xiaomo learned basic skills in making short films and editing Television documentaries. After completing her Bachelor of Arts degree in 2009, she attended the College of Journalism and Communications at University of Florida. She continued to pursue her interest in media with a focus on intercultural communication.

Upon completion of her thesis and the receipt of Master of Arts degree in the fall of 2011, Xiaomo is preparing to work in the media industry as an entry level worker.