

The Joint Effects of Need for Status and Mental Imagery Perspective on Luxury Hospitality Consumption in China

Abstract

Given the increasing influence of social media on the hospitality industry, luxury hotels have begun to utilize social media platforms as primary marketing tools. This research reveals the joint effects of mental imagery perspective and need for status on Chinese consumers' intentions to partake in luxury hotel experiences after viewing social media photos about luxury hotel consumption. For affluent consumers with high need for status, photos taken from a first-person (vs. third-person) perspective lead to higher behavioral intentions. This research further demonstrates that immersion serves as an underlying mechanism. The findings have important implications for luxury hotel managers.

Keywords: Luxury Hospitality, Mental Imagery Perspective, Status-Seeking, Need for Status, Chinese Consumers, Luxury Hotel Marketing, Luxury Consumption, Social Media, Immersion, Luxury Hotel

Introduction

Thanks to rapid economic growth, more Chinese consumers are able to purchase luxury products than ever before. In its 2017 Worldwide Luxury Market Monitor brief, Bain & Co. estimated sales in the Chinese luxury market to be 22.07 billion dollars and projected a 20% increase in 2018. Chinese consumers capture 32% of the global market; by comparison, American and European consumers capture 22% and 18% of the global market, respectively. The development of social media has created new channels for service and product distribution (Dieck et al., 2017; Lueg et al., 2006). Consumers seek, share, and exchange information on social media platforms, which in turn impacts their purchasing preferences (Song & Yoo, 2016). In addition, luxury brands use social media to build relationships with their consumers (Chu, Kamal, & Kim, 2013; Kim & Ko, 2010; Phan, Thomas, & Heine, 2011). Social media platforms such as social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, WeChat), microblogging sites (e.g., Twitter, Weibo), and video sharing sites (e.g., YouTube) are widely used to increase brand exposure and facilitate consumer interaction as they “like,” “comment” and “share” brand information (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Because China is one of the largest luxury markets, it is important to investigate the motivations and factors that influence Chinese consumers' behaviors. Theoretically, recent literature suggests that Chinese consumer's luxury consumption is significantly different from other nationalities (Liu et al., 2016). For example, some scholars suggest that Chinese luxury consumers are high in Need for Status (NFS) and more conspicuous compared to western consumers (Zhan & He, 2012). Need for status (NFS) is regarded as an important motivation process whereby individuals acquire social status by engaging in conspicuous consumption of luxury goods and services. People who have an intense need for status tend to consume luxury products to distinguish themselves from less affluent consumers, and tend to have negative attitudes towards products preferred by less affluent consumers (Berger & Heath, 2008). Unlike

consumers from western cultures, Chinese consumers tend to seek social status from luxury consumptions, and highly value social benefits of the luxury goods, but at the same time, they have relatively limited knowledge about luxury brands (Atsmon & Dixit, 2009; Zhan & He, 2012). On the other hand, there are variations among Chinese consumers. Some younger generations and more experienced luxury consumers may not use luxury products to signal social status (Shukla et al., 2015). Given little literature available in the tourism and hospitality setting that specifically investigates Chinese luxury consumers' behaviors, it is meaningful to research how Chinese consumers with different levels of NFS view luxury hospitality consumptions.

In addition, the influence of mental imagery has been recognized in both practice and research in recent years. Evidence from prior research indicates that mental imagery plays an important role in the consumption decision-making process and in shaping consumers' preferences (Escalas, 2004; Farace et al., 2017). However, in some circumstances, mental images of future experiences may not effectively increase the likelihood of consumption, and sometimes may even produce negative effects (Petrova & Cialdini, 2005). For example, mental images can be from the first-person perspective (less abstract) or the third-person perspective (more abstract) (Libby & Eibach, 2002). Researchers have proposed that people are motivated to take actions when they use mental imagery to imagine possible future scenarios (e.g., goals, beliefs and success), but taking actions can be perceived as more difficult when visualizing from a higher abstraction level (Libby, Shaeffer & Eibach, 2009; Taylor et al., 1998). Therefore, this research also investigates whether social media posts from the first-person perspective can be more effective in enhancing consumers' desire for luxury hospitality services than posts from the third-person perspective, and whether such an effect will differ based on consumers' NFS.

In sum, the current study aims to: (a) investigate the effects of NFS and mental imagery perspective on Chinese consumers' intentions to purchase luxury hospitality experiences; (b) provide theoretical insights that help explain why the first-person and third-person perspectives may influence consumers with different NFS in different ways; and (c) offer suggestions that will help luxury hotel managers increase the effectiveness of their online marketing content. In order to achieve these goals, we employ an experimental design method to examine the effect of mental imagery perspective (first-person vs. third-person) on luxury consumption intention for Chinese consumers with different levels of need for status.

Literature review

Luxury consumption in China

The word "luxury" originates from the word "luxus" and relates to the enjoyment of extravagant living (Tynan et al., 2010). In Webster's dictionary (2002), luxury is defined as "non-essential items or services that contribute to luxurious living; an indulgence or convenience beyond the indispensable minimum." Berry (1994) defined luxury as objects of desire that provide pleasure. Eastman et al. (1999) pointed out that consumers who seek to improve their social status are motivated to engage in conspicuous consumption of luxury goods and services. In other words, the more people seek status, the more they engage in conspicuous consumption. According to Veblen's (1899) theory of the leisure class, people use possessions to impress others and enhance social status. Generally, luxury products and services distinguish affluent people from less affluent groups. People recognize others' social status through their possessions, the properties of which

represent the extended self (Belk, 1988). Possessions are used as tools of comparison to determine access to social groups. Individuals distinguish themselves from lower classes by acquiring more material resources and exercising greater power of consumption; in other words, they tend to imitate higher-level classes to elevate their social status (Yang & Mattila, 2017).

China has become an emerging and attractive luxury market. Almost all luxury brands target Chinese consumers and are rapidly expanding their retail stores, employing a growth-at-all-costs strategy. Buckley, Clegg, and Tan (2006) researched the motivational elements of luxury consumption in Chinese culture, and found that Chinese seek long-term, stable, healthy social relationships, and more importantly, they value the recognition of their social status. Chinese consumers are especially concerned about the social meanings of products and strive to develop social relationships by acquiring material possessions (Wang & Lin, 2009). To Chinese consumers, a product's symbolic value is an important consideration, in addition to its utility in displaying wealth and status (Adams, 2011). Due to a strong desire for status in Chinese culture, luxury products typically are treated as tools for acquiring social recognition (Gao et al., 2009). Consequently, Chinese consumers are motivated to purchase luxury products to gain respect or dignity and improve their social status because material success has become an essential indicator of achievement (Cavender & Rein, 2009). Social comparison plays a significant role in influencing Chinese consumers' attitudes toward luxury consumption (Zhang & Kim, 2013), and this influence is more powerful in Chinese society than in others (Chen & Sethi, 2007). Although the symbolic value of luxury products is an essential component of Chinese culture, it may not always have a significant impact on consumption decisions in luxury hospitality contexts (Wu & Yang, 2018). For example, Tynan et al. (2010) identified five luxury value dimensions including utilitarian value, hedonic value, symbolic value, relational value and financial value. Interestingly, Wu and Yang (2018) revealed that rather than symbolic values, some consumers are making luxury consumption decisions to maximize experiential enjoyment and hedonic pleasure. In other words, while status-signaling is one of the key drivers for luxury consumption (Han et al., 2010) and Chinese consumers value the recognition of their social status, not all Chinese consumers engage in luxury consumption to enhance social status (Zhan & He, 2012). Therefore, in order to better understand Chinese luxury consumers' behavior, it is critical to consider their need for status.

Need for status

In their 4Ps framework, Han et al. (2010) identified four groups of individuals based on their wealth and desire for status: patricians, parvenus, poseurs, and proletarians. Both patricians and parvenus are affluent consumers, but they have different levels of Need for Status (NFS). Patricians are individuals born into the upper class whose wealth often can be traced back multiple generations, whereas parvenus are ordinary people who rapidly achieve success or wealth and ascend to the upper class of society (Bauman, 2001). Notable differences between patricians and parvenus are cultural capital and the desire for conspicuous consumption (Bourdieu, 1984). Because parvenus have low levels of cultural capital and crave status, they are more likely to purchase luxury products that can be recognized easily by everyone, whereas patricians only desire to be noticed by their in-groups (other patricians). Moreover, parvenus are concerned about being separated from less affluent groups that are unable to afford luxury products and desire approval from both patricians and parvenus. Berger (2008) argued that consumers who are willing to send conspicuous signals to others through luxury consumption are more likely to refuse to purchase luxury products that individuals in less affluent groups can afford. To avoid misidentification, they

prefer products that can effectively signal their social status; as such, luxury products that are popular among less affluent consumers are perceived as contaminated. As a result, attitudes toward these brands become negative.

Both poseurs and proletarians are less affluent consumers, but they differ on their levels of NFS. Poseurs have a strong desire for social status, but lack the financial means necessary to engage in luxury consumption. Motivated by a desire to be associated with affluent groups and to dissociate from less affluent people, they are more likely to purchase fake or counterfeit luxury products to show off their status and make other less affluent people envious (Wee, Tan, & Cheok, 1995). Proletarians also are not wealthy, but unlike poseurs, they also have low NFS and are not interested in luxury consumptions. Unlike tangible products, consumers are less likely to find fake or counterfeit intangible services. Therefore, the current study will mainly focus on Patricians (low in NFS) and Parvenus (high in NFS) who can afford real luxury hospitality experiences.

Although ample research has demonstrated the effect of NFS on luxury consumption, how NFS affects luxury consumers' perception when they view others' luxury consumption is unclear. In this research, we probe this issue from the mental imagery perspective and argue that photos from first-person versus third-person perspective can lead to different luxury consumption intentions.

Mental imagery perspective

Thomas (1997) defined mental imagery as the visualization of pictures in the mind. It can also involve imagining other sensory perceptions such as sounds, smells and tastes. Individuals can engage in mental imagery by visualizing the environment from the first-person perspective as if viewing it with their own eyes, or the third-person perspective, whereby they can visualize both themselves and their surroundings simultaneously (Soliman et al., 2017). For instance, a teacher may visualize a classroom where she is standing in front of the blackboard teaching students. In this scenario, the teacher could be likened to an observer standing outside the window of the classroom (i.e., the third-person perspective). In contrast, the teacher may visualize the classroom as she sees it, without her in the scene, with a focus on students' faces as she teaches them (i.e., the first-person perspective). Different perspectives of mental imagery determine the cognition process that leads to actions.

Some researchers have proposed that mental imagery perspective determines the abstraction level at which people define actions (Libby, Shaeffer, & Eibach, 2009). For example, when people engage in mental imagery from the third-person perspective, they tend to focus on broader life goals, beliefs and other abstract meanings (e.g., to become healthy or commit to charity). In contrast, when people adopt the first-person perspective, they tend to focus on short-term goals and tasks with concrete meanings (e.g., to lose weight or win the lottery). In other words, the third-person perspective tends to initiate deep reflection on *why* something should be done, whereas the first-person perspective tends to direct the focus toward *what* should be done. In addition, some studies have revealed that people pay more attention to concrete details of events when thinking from the first-person perspective rather than the third-person perspective (McIsaac & Eich, 2004) due to decreased psychological distance (Kross, Ayduk & Mischel, 2005).

Regardless of perspective, mental imagery influences individuals' current emotions and future actions (Ross & Buehler, 2001; McIsaac & Eich, 2002). Creating mental images of the

future is a crucial means of expressing of goals (Conway, Meares, & Standart, 2004), and increases the likelihood of taking actions toward attaining them (Gregory, Cialdini, & Carpenter, 1982). With the increasing power of social media, this research particularly investigates the mental imagery perspective in social media content, and explores the differences between first-person perspective and third-person perspective in motivating luxury hospitality consumptions.

Mental imagery perspective in social media content

Social media is a key source of hotel information for consumers. A popular entertainment platform and communication tool for people's daily lives, social media is a general term for internet-based applications based on the Web 2.0 that enable users to transmit and receive information and create and exchange user-generated content (Campbell et al., 2014; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Leung et al., 2013). Given its global popularity and enormous user base, social media is changing how the hospitality industry communicates and collects information (Goldsmith, 2006). Social media is an important information delivery and cognitive modeling tool. An increasing number of consumers across a wide variety of market segments are searching social media platforms for relevant visual evidence (i.e., videos, pictures) about experiences and accommodations; thus, the potential power of social media to influence final hospitality-related consumption decisions should not be ignored (Keller & Berry, 2003). In the luxury market, consumers' attitudes toward social media ads and brand consciousness positively affect their attitudes and behavioral responses toward luxury consumption (Chu, Kamal, & Kim, 2013).

In fact, social media is an important advertising and communication platform for luxury hotel brands. More than 50% of luxury purchase behaviors are influenced by others' experiences reported on social media (Dauriz et al., 2014). Huang et al. (2018) described social media as an ideal delivery system for marketing luxury experiences. Simon et al. (2015) reported that social media platforms enable brands to tangibilize the intangible experiences and closely engage with consumers to influence their attitudes. When consumers search social media for information about luxury hotel consumption experiences, descriptions that evoke sensory perceptions can promote the construal process, mental imagery, and consumption intentions towards these hotels.

The research on mental simulation has a long history in psychology, and recently has been extended to concepts such as advertisements. By posting on social media, either via official accounts or icon groups with millions of followers, luxury hotels can promote their facilities, decor, service, etc., thereby enhancing relationships with consumers and influencing their behaviors (Kim & Ko, 2012). Product preferences are strongly influenced by mental imagery evoked by advertisements that inspire consumers to imagine themselves using the actual products (Bone & Ellen, 1992; MacInnis & Price, 1987). Thus, if consumers imagine having enjoyable experiences at luxury hotels, they are highly likely to feel the urge to book stays at such establishments. How does the mental imagery drive these behavioral intentions? We argue the mechanism of immersion as the mechanism that explains such phenomenon.

Immersion

To examine the degree of purchase motivation and intention changes, many researchers have explored consumer responses to mental imagery from different perspectives. Closely related to involvement and cognitive absorption, immersion is a psychological state in which one can be engrossed within an environment (Agarwal & Karahanna, 2000; Hamilton et al., 2016; Novak et

al., 2000; Oh et al., 2007; Witmer & Singer, 1998; Zha et al., 2018). Immersion is not new to the online environment. For example, immersion can contribute to engagement, enjoyment of experience and effectiveness of learning (Grinberg et al., 2014; Hamari et al., 2016). It also has an important effect on individual's sense of presence (Baños et al., 2004). Prior research found that social media can create a sense of immersion (Pelet et al., 2017) and followership (Carlson & Lee, 2015). Consumers experiencing high level of immersion in social media can result in high value of brand perceptions (Hamilton et al., 2016).

There is scant literature in the tourism and hospitality field that has illustrated the effect of immersion. Within the limited literature, immersion was found to positively influence tourists' experience (Gyimóthy & Mykletun, 2004; Ooi & Laing, 2010), and memorability of experiences (St-James et al., 2018). Unlike entertainment and educational offering at a tourist destination that tourists usually "absorb", tourists can enjoy the esthetic and escapist experiences by "immersing" in the environment (Oh et al., 2007). Importantly, Weinstein et. al, (2009) argue that the degree of immersion may influence the effect of mental imagery. Hence, this research will investigate how immersion influences the impact of mental imagery perspective on luxury consumption intention.

Hypotheses development

Building on the literature on luxury consumption and mental imagery, this study is aimed at investigating the interaction effect of NFS and mental imagery perspective on consumers' behavioral intentions in the luxury hospitality context.

Meyers-Levy and Peracchio (1996) pointed out that camera angles can be used to convey product information from the user's (i.e., first-person) perspective by photographing just the product, or from the observer's (i.e., third-person) perspective by photographing both users and products. Close-up shots of products from the user's perspective that provide information about concrete details or features. In contrast, spatially distant photos typically perceived as reflecting an observer's perspective tend to evoke a high level of abstraction, regardless of available concrete information (Henderson et al., 2011). Consequently, it can be argued that: (a) close-up photos from a user's perspective can lead to mental imagery from the first-person perspective; and (b) wide angle photos shot from a distance can lead to mental imagery from the third-person perspective.

Compared to products, hospitality services are more abstract due to the intangible and heterogeneous nature of experiences, which makes comparison difficult. For this reason, affluent consumers high in NFS likely prefer concrete material possessions over abstract luxury hospitality services (Yang & Mattila, 2014). As a result, when consumers with high NFS engage in mental imagery about luxury consumption, they likely conjure images of items that would enable them to show off and facilitate comparison, such as expensive clothes, bags and watches. Although hospitality services traditionally have been difficult to visibly display and compare, social media now enables consumers to post tangible evidences about luxury consumption experiences to signal social status and impress others. For example, some celebrities tend to post pictures of luxury hotel experiences such as high tea on social media to show off their elegant and extravagant lifestyles. Therefore, it can be predicted that when consumers with high NFS imagine luxury experiences from the first-person perspective (more concrete details), their intentions to engage in such experiences are stronger than when they imagine such experiences from the third-person

perspective (high level of abstraction).

H1: For consumers with high NFS, photos taken from a first-person (vs. third-person) perspective lead to greater intentions to engage in luxury hospitality consumption.

On the other hand, affluent individuals low in NFS tend to view luxury consumption as an everyday activity; luxury products and experiences do not have special meaning to them or members of their in-group (i.e., other patricians), thus they have no incentive to use it to distinguish themselves from others. For this group of consumers, the motivation effect of mental imagery perspective is likely to be attenuated regardless of perspective, because they do not view luxury consumption as a way to distinguish themselves from others. Therefore:

H2: For consumers with low NFS, photos taken from the first- and third-person perspectives lead to similar intentions to engage in luxury hospitality consumption.

Hotel brands use various contents on social media to engage their potential consumers. Research show that contents that provide sensory immersion can benefit a brand by extending time consumers spend with the advertising message (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Slater and Wilbur (1997) elaborate the important impact of immersion on attitudes and preference, and level of immersion determines the motivation intensity of positive mental imagery (Weinstein et. al, 2009). They argue that when participants are immersed in the artificial environment, their extrinsic aspirations will be enhanced. Following this stream of literature, if consumers immerse in the imagery of luxury hotel consumption experience, their desire for engaging in such experience will be increased. Therefore, the effect of mental imagery perspectives on luxury consumption intention will be mediated by immersion.

H3: Immersion mediates the relationship between mental imagery perspective and intentions to engage in luxury hospitality consumption.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework for this study.

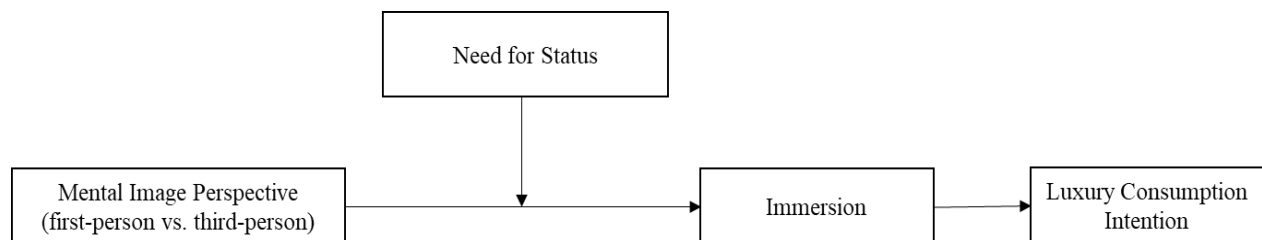


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Methodology

Pilot test

A pilot test was conducted to ensure the effectiveness of the manipulations for mental imagery perspective. A total of 58 participants viewed randomly assigned photos of luxury consumption experiences in hotels (i.e., high tea) taken from the first- and third-person

perspectives. Female participants only viewed images featuring female consumers, whereas male participants only viewed images featuring male consumers. Twelve photos were tested: three photos from each perspective (first-person vs. third-person) for each gender (male vs. female). All photos were intended to construe mental images of enjoying high tea in a luxury hotel. The photos taken from first-person perspective were close-up shots of the delicate workmanship of the porcelain and delicious desserts with no actors in the field. Photos taken from the third-person perspective showed items on the table, diners, and the surrounding environment. Variations in the camera angles were controlled.

After viewing a randomly-assigned photo, participants responded to the following statement, which was presented in both English and simplified Chinese: “Please choose the perspective you feel best fits the photo: the first-person perspective or the third-person perspective.” Participants also provided demographic information. Among the 58 participants, 37.9% were male, 62.1% were female; 96.6% were from China; 98.1 % were between the ages of 18 and 59; 98.3% held a bachelor’s degree or above; 89.7% reported an annual income over 100,000 RMB. Among participants exposed to a photo taken from the first-person perspective, 76% correctly identified the perspective; among those exposed to a photo taken from the third-person perspective, 63% correctly identified the perspective. Thus, the manipulation was successful.

Main study

200 Chinese consumers from a consumer panel (wjsx.cn) were recruited. Participants were first screened to ensure that they were affluent consumers who could afford to engage in luxury consumption. Participants responded to a screening question that assessed whether they had experienced luxury services (e.g., stays at five-star hotels, fine dining, spa treatments, first class flights, etc.) within the past 2 years. Then they were asked to indicate their gender in order to match with the same-gender stimuli. NFS was measured using 10 items validated in previous studies (Eastman et al., 1999; Eastman & Eastman, 2011; Yang & Mattila, 2014). Participants responded to items using a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., “I am interested in new products with status;” 1 - strongly disagree; 7 - strongly agree). Behavioral intentions (BIs) were measured using 9 items developed and validated by Zeithaml et al. (1996). Participants responded to items using a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., “How likely are you to recommend this hotel to someone who seeks your advice?” 1 - not at all; 7 - very much). Immersion was measured using items developed by Weinstein et al. (2009) (e.g., “How much did you feel that you were in the places you saw?” 1 - not at all; 7 - very much).

To rule out the potential confounding factors, questions “To what extent do you think the post is fun/appealing?” (1 - not at all; 7 - very much) were included (Campbell & Keller, 2003; Luna & Peracchio, 2005). Participants also provided demographic information such as age, gender and education level. Participants’ familiarity and frequency of using social media were captured. All scales are highly reliable (Cronbach’s alpha for NFS = 0.901; Cronbach’s alpha for immersion = 0.870; Cronbach’s alpha for BI = 0.881).

Results

Respondents

Among the 200 participants, 120 were female (60%); 63 of the participants (31.5%) were between the ages of 18 and 29; 125 (62.5%) were between the ages of 30 and 39; and 12 (6%)

were between the ages of 40 to 49. All participants are originally from Mainland China. 180 held a bachelor’s degree or above (90 %). 86 (43%) reported monthly income of RMB 5,000 to 10,000; 80 (40%) reported monthly income of RMB 10,000 to 19,999; 34 (17%); reported monthly income of over RMB 20,000. 94.5 % of the participants indicated that they are familiar with social media, and 92.5% of the participants used social media more than once a day.

Hypotheses testing

First, following Hayes’ (2013), PROCESS Model 1 was used to test H1 and H2, with NFS and mental imagery perspective (first-person vs. third-person) as independent variables, and BIs as the dependent variable. As shown in Table 1, the results show a main effect of NFS on BIs to engage in luxury hospitality consumption. Moreover, the effect is qualified by an interaction between NFS and mental imagery perspective ($p < 0.05$, 95% CI: -0.4698, -0.0155). The Johnson–Neyman technique showed that NFS at a value of 5.9945 is the turning point from non-significance to significance of the effect of mental imagery perspective (first-person versus third-person perspective). When NFS is greater than 5.9945, the first-person perspective is associated with significantly greater consumption intention than the third person perspective. When NFS is below 5.9945, the difference between the first-person perspective and the third-person perspective is not significant (See Figure 2.). Therefore, H1 and H2 are supported.

To test the mediation effect of immersion, the PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes, 2013) was utilized with the recommended bias-corrected bootstrapping technique (number of bootstrap samples = 10000). In the model, mental image perspective was specified as the independent variable, NFS was specified as the moderator. The dependent variable was BIs. The bootstrapping results revealed a significant mediation process of immersion for both first-person perspective (indirect effect = 0.2206, 95% CI = 0.1051 to 0.3435) and third-person perspective (indirect effect = 0.1361, 95% CI = 0.0033 to 0.2816). Thus, H3 is supported.

In addition, t-test results show that participants perceived the first-person and third-person perspective photos equally fun ($M_{\text{first-person}} = 5.37$; $M_{\text{third-person}} = 5.14$; $t[1, 198] = 1.390$; $p = 0.532$) and appealing ($M_{\text{first-person}} = 5.73$; $M_{\text{third-person}} = 5.66$; $t[1, 198] = 0.445$; $p = 0.480$), which ruled out the confounding factors.

Table 1. Predictors of Behavioral Intentions to Engage in Luxury Hospitality Consumption

Variable	Behavioral Intentions					
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
					LL	UL
Constant	2.3209	0.4510	5.1561	0.0000	1.4315	3.2104
Mental imagery perspective	1.1441	0.5912	1.9351	0.0544	-0.0219	2.3100
NFS	.5681	0.0860	6.6024	0.0000	0.3984	0.7378
NFS * mental imagery perspective	-.2427	0.1152	-2.1067	0.0364	-0.4698	-0.0155
<i>R</i>				0.4988		
<i>R</i> ²				0.2488		

MSE	0.5998
$F(3, 196)$	21.6359
p	0.000

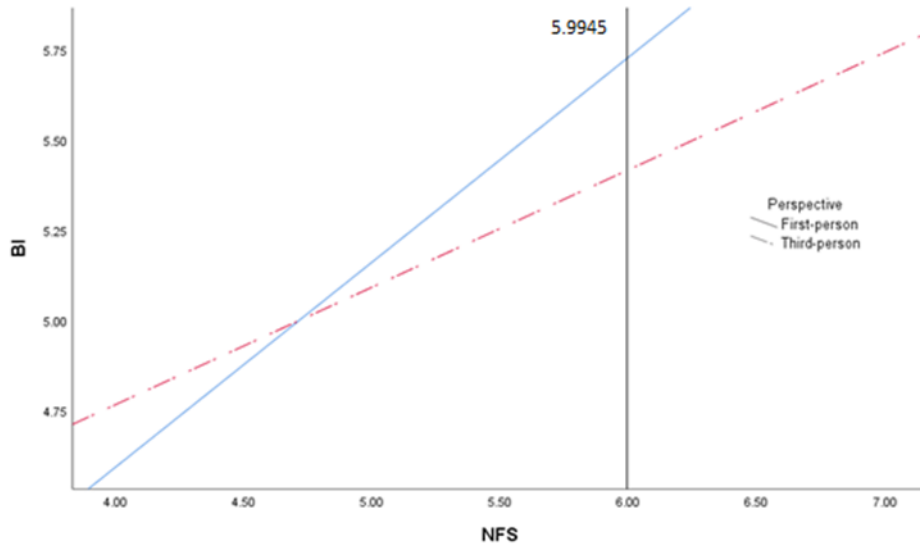


Figure 2. Interaction plot between NFS and mental imagery perspective.

Discussion

Theoretical contributions

The findings of the current study contribute to the NFS literature by extending its impact to the social media context. Although previous studies investigated the impact of NFS on consumers' responses to post online reviews (e.g. Zhang and Yang, 2019), little attention has been paid to how consumers with different NFS levels react to social media posts. In fact, social media posting is a popular method among both practitioners and consumers to share the intangible luxury hospitality experiences, especially the tangible aspects of hospitality experiences (e.g., bathroom amenities, food and beverages, furniture) can be captured in photos and easily shared via social media. The current study assesses the joint effect of mental imagery and NFS on consumers' reactions to social media postings. The results of this study confirm that for consumers with high NFS (i.e., parvenus), viewing images from the first-person perspective significantly increases their intentions to engage in luxury hospitality consumption. Conversely, for affluent consumers with low NFS (i.e., patricians), viewing photos does not seem to affect their intentions to engage in luxury consumption in hospitality contexts, regardless of mental imagery perspective. Patricians are not influenced by photos of luxury hotel experiences because they do not feel a need to distinguish themselves from less affluent consumers (Han et al., 2010); moreover, they view luxury consumption as a normal, everyday activity.

Additionally, the current study contributes to the literature of mental imagery. Although some researchers have proposed that images from the third-person perspective may have a more powerful motivation effect than those from the first-person perspective due to the high level of abstraction involved in information processing (Libby & Eibach, 2002; Libby et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 1998; Vasquez & Byehler, 2007), results of this study reveal a moderating effect of consumers' NFS in the context of intangible hospitality services. Because of the intangible nature of hospitality services, consumers high in NFS tend to prefer photos from first person perspective which showcase more concrete details of luxury consumption. In other words, when using photos to tangibilize the intangibles, first person perspective photos can be more effective to trigger consumers' behavioral intentions.

This research also incorporates a novel concept called immersion that drives luxury consumption intention in the social media context. Our additional mediation analysis supports the argument that immersion generated from viewing photos on social media can contribute to positive behavioral intentions towards the company.

Managerial implications

Besides the theoretical contribution, the results of the current study could reflect the current luxury consumption behaviors in China and offer managers with important implications. An increasing number of celebrities are posting photos of their luxury hotel experiences on social media (e.g., Weibo, RED); these posts are effectively functioning as subtle hotel advertisements. The findings of this research suggest that luxury hotel marketers can effectively post photos on social media to promote consumption. For example, when a famous celebrity shares photos of a high tea experience at The Peninsula, followers may desire to have a similar experience. Understanding high in NFS consumers' psychology and behavior has high commercial value in Chinese market.

Chinese desire to establish long-term, stable and healthy social relationships and to have their social status recognized (Buckley et al., 2006). The social meanings of products and services are vital for Chinese consumers because they enable them to distinguish themselves and improve their social status (Wang & Lin, 2009). In reality, high in NFS consumers comprise a significant proportion of the Chinese luxury market. Understanding the different reactions of high vs. low in NFS consumers to images of luxury hotel experiences on social media could help luxury hotel marketers significantly improve the effectiveness of their social media campaigns. For example, marketers at Four Seasons Hotels have implemented innovative social media strategies by highlighting unique aspects of their properties (i.e., delicate food presentation in Michelin restaurants); as a result, the company is attracting an increasing number of followers and boosting sales. To satisfy high in NFS consumers' needs for tangible consumption evidences, the results from this study suggest that luxury hotels should collaborate with key opinion leaders (KOLs) on social media, encourage them to post first-person perspective photos to promote concrete mental imagery of luxury hotel consumptions.

In addition, hospitality companies are encouraged to create immersive and vivid information to their consumers online. For instance, social media posts can highlight the details and process of a service experience. Companies can utilize technology to create interactive

contents such as polls, joint live streams, or virtual reality. The findings of this research suggest that such information can result in visit intention, favorable word-of-mouth, loyalty, and potentially increases the company's profit.

Limitations

While this research offers an initial investigation into the effects of mental imagery and need for status on luxury consumption, social media involves other interesting elements. For example, different objects in the photo (e.g., scenery, people, food, decor, etc.) posted on social media influence perceptions of luxury consumption. A photo's origins (i.e., posted by a consumer or a company) may influence viewers' perceptions of authenticity. Social media platforms also might have differential effects. For instance, WeChat posts are more private than Weibo posts. In the future, researchers can also investigate cross-cultural differences in the motivation to partake in luxury service experiences. Moreover, with the development of technology, researchers can examine the effects of not only photos, but also videos and live streams posted on social media platforms. Future research can expand the effect of mental imagery in non-luxury consumption context.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine the behaviors of Chinese consumers with different NFS in luxury hospitality contexts and compare the effects of photos taken from different perspectives (i.e., first- vs. third-person) on their BIs. Results show that NFS plays an important role in moderating the influence of mental imagery perspective on BIs. More importantly, the current study established a framework that demonstrates the joint effect of mental imagery perspective and NFS, thereby contributing to theoretical foundations of future consumer behavior research in the luxury hospitality context.

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