Face consciousness and conspicuous luxury consumption in China

Xin-an Zhang
Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China, and
Wangshuai Wang
Shanghai University of International Business and Economics, Shanghai, China

Abstract
Purpose – Luxury consumption in China is featured by clear conspicuous purposes. The purpose of this paper is to investigate this phenomenon from the indigenous perspective of face consciousness.
Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on Ho’s (1976) framework of gaining vs losing face process, the authors decomposed the construct of face consciousness into two dimensions, namely, desire to gain face and fear of losing face, and developed a multi-dimensional scale for face consciousness. Then, a survey that consisted of 338 participants was conducted to test the relationship between face consciousness and luxury consumption.
Findings – The face consciousness scale was shown to be reliable and valid. Furthermore, the authors found both desire to gain face and fear of losing face had a unique contribution in explaining why Chinese consumers purchase luxury products.
Originality/value – This paper fills the gap in the extant literature by developing a multi-dimensional face consciousness scale, providing convenience for empirical research in future. Moreover, this research shows that Chinese consumers’ luxury consumption behavior contains both promotion and prevention motivation.
Keywords Luxury, Conspicuous consumption, Desire to gain face, Face consciousness, Fear of losing face
Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction
Since joining the World Trade Organization, the luxury market of China has been skyrocketing. To date, more and more luxury brands have entered China. Some of them have even penetrated their products into the second and third-tier cities in China (Wang and Zhang, 2006). Despite the import tax of luxury products increased by 20 percent in early 2006, the luxury market of China still increased by more than 20 percent that year, ranking the first in the world for four consecutive years (Jin, 2007). By 2009, China had surpassed the USA to become the world’s second largest luxury consumption market. According to the Boston Consulting Group, China will replace Japan to become the largest luxury consumption market in the world (Liu, 2011). The rapid expansion of luxury market has made a significant impact on the consumption habits and social morality of the Chinese society, such that the excessive luxury consumption of the rich social class weakened the sense of social justice and intensified social conflicts (Gao, 2007; Miao, 2006).

The rise of the luxury consumption market in China provided a research topic worth exploring. An intuitive explanation for this phenomenon covered in Western media is that more and more people have become wealthy due to the economic growth, which led to the increasing demand for luxury products (Reuters, 2007). The theoretical base for this explanation is Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption, or the Veblen Effect, which was proposed by an American economist named Veblen (1899). Veblen believes that when people have gained enough wealth, they will turn to pursue social recognition and status. In order to achieve these goals, simply...
possessing wealth is not enough. Individuals have to further let others know their wealth. Luxury consumption is the best way for people to show their economic conditions in exchange for social status. Because of the Veblen Effect, the economists even asserted that “if a retailer sells a luxury product at a low price, it will destroy the brand” (Economist, 1993).

The Veblen Effect attempts to explain why Chinese consumers prefer luxury products from the perspective of income growth. This explanation contains an implicit premise: after achieving material abundance, consumers will turn to pursue social recognition and status, which is consistent with Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs. In addition, the Veblen Effect assumes that wealth can bring social glory, which is also consistent with the Western culture, such that money and wealth are generally considered to be the most common ways to display personal success (Richins and Dawson, 1992). If consumers believe that success can be demonstrated in a tangible way by luxury products, it is also very natural for them to buy and use certain products.

Nevertheless, does the luxury consumption in China only serve as an external manifestation of income and wealth? The Veblen Effect originates from Western society, which is completely different from the Chinese society. For Chinese consumers who are deeply influenced by traditional Confucianism, can their luxury consumption behavior be fully explained by the Western theory? If the answer is negative, what factors affect Chinese consumers’ luxury consumption behavior?

First, showing off is the main purpose of Chinese consumers’ luxury consumption. For Western consumers, perceived value is the main reason for their choices of luxury products, while Chinese consumers emphasize the conspicuousness of luxury products (Guo and Su, 2007; Zhu and Lu, 2006). An obvious example is: most of the luxury products purchased by Westerners are household goods, but Chinese consumers prefer clothes, jewelry and watches, which are socially visible (Liu, 2006). Another similar example is that some luxury brands are very implicit and lay low in the Western countries, but when sold in China, they all carry explicit logos (Wang and Zhang, 2006). Second, Chinese consumers attach great importance to the symbolic meanings of luxury products (Yang and Lin, 2007). Indeed, many consumers do not have enough money to consume luxury products. If they want to buy a certain product, they usually need to be on a budget for months. Therefore, they purchase top brand accessories (e.g. ties, wallets, handbags and shoes) to imply that they are also members of the top social class (Gong and Li, 2007; Jin, 2007). For these consumers, the purchase of luxury products is not motivated by the external manifestation of their wealth. In fact, they intend to express their desired position in the social hierarchy through luxury consumption (Zhu and Lu, 2006). Third, in China, many consumers purchase luxury products not for their own use, but as gifts for others (Feng, 2007). Through luxury gifting, the givers show their economic capabilities and generosity, and the recipients feel being valued and respected simultaneously. Thus, gifts occupy a large share of Chinese luxury market (Guo and Su, 2007; Zhao, 2005).

Given the aforementioned characteristics, the rapid expansion of the luxury market in China cannot be simply attributed to the reason that wealthy consumers try to show their material wealth. The Veblen Effect developed in Western culture seems to be somewhat “inadequate” when interpreting the luxury consumption behavior of Chinese consumers. One possible explanation is that luxury consumption behavior is not only related to economic conditions but also to social and cultural factors (Duboisand and Duquesne, 1993; Soares et al., 2007; Tsai, 2005; Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). Previous research shows that we can use social and cultural factors to explain the uniqueness of Chinese consumers’ behavior (Lu, 2005). It is unlikely for marketing scholars to ignore the impact of Confucian culture when studying Chinese consumers’ behavior. The research conducted by Zhou and Hui (2003) provides an excellent example for this argument. They find that in mainland China, under the impact of hierarchical awareness and social comparison, the primary reason why consumers buy foreign products is the high symbolic value embedded in these products. Once the symbolic value of foreign brands is weakened, consumers’ purchase intentions toward them will be significantly reduced.
In behavioral research, the best way to explain indigenous phenomena that can hardly be explained by Western theories is through the interpretation of indigenous construct (Tsui, 2006; Yang, 1993). Given that Chinese consumers value the symbolic meanings and that the luxury products in China are extremely conspicuous, we believe the traditional Chinese concept, face, may be an important factor affecting luxury consumption behavior. Surprisingly, as a very important indigenous concept, face receives little attention in the extant literature, most of which is qualitative and examines how face influences interpersonal communication in China. Although some important findings have been revealed (Huang, 2004; Zhai, 2006), quantitative investigations are quite insufficient. Restricted by the lack of measurements, marketing research on face is also stagnant. When researchers try to explore the impact of face on consumer behavior, it is often difficult for them to conduct quantitative analyses. For example, due to the lack of scales, even though Wong and Ahuvia (1998) proposed theoretical inferences regarding the influence of face on luxury consumption, they were unable to test these hypotheses empirically. Joy (2001) could only conduct qualitative studies to explore the role of face in gift-giving behavior. Although scholars have tried to solve this issue in recent years, the existing scales all treat face consciousness as a unidimensional construct and fail to examine its potential multi-dimensional property. As a result, it is difficult to reveal the complex impact of face on consumer behavior, especially for luxury consumption behavior (Bao et al., 2003).

Previous research has pointed out that marketing research needs to view face consciousness as a multi-dimensional concept, and to empirically explore its impacts on consumer behavior as well as the underlying mechanism (Bao et al., 2003; Li and Su, 2007; Zhang et al., 2010).

In the current research, based on the analyses of the face gain and loss processes in the extant literature, we divide consumer's face consciousness into two dimensions: desire to gain face and fear of losing face. We develop a corresponding scale for face consciousness and empirically test its relationship with Chinese consumers' luxury consumption behavior. Theoretically speaking, this research reexamines the Western conspicuous consumption theory under the concept of face, thus providing an indigenous explanation for the luxury consumption in China. In terms of practice, testing how face affects Chinese consumers' conspicuous luxury consumption behavior has significant practical value for both companies and policy makers.

2. Literature review

2.1 Face consciousness

The concept of face originated from the Confucian society in ancient China. It is the most common psychological and behavioral interaction among Chinese. For over a hundred years, people who paid close attention to the behavior of Chinese all believe that face serves as a core principle governing the social life of Chinese, whether they are Chinese or foreigners, scholars or writers (Bond, 1996; Fairbank, 1962; Hsu, 1981; Smith, 1894; Lin, 1935; Lu, 1991). For example, Lu (1991) mentioned that face is the guiding principle of the Chinese spirit. Chinese people, especially the upper class, like to gain face from everything. Lin (1935) also said in his book that face is abstract and indecipherable, but it is the most delicate standard to regulate Chinese behavior. Face is the key for Westerners to understand Chinese. Arthur Smith, a famous missionary who authored The Chinese Characteristics more than 100 years ago, systematically introducing Chinese to the West. The first chapter of this book is about the Chinese concept of face (Smith, 1894).

In recent years, scholars from Hong Kong and Taiwan have conducted a series of research on face. For example, Ho (1976) clarified the concept of face by elaborating what face is not. Redding and Ng (1982) examined how face affects the behavior of Chinese managers in organizations. Jin (1988) analyzed the impact of face and shame on Chinese behavior. Huang Guangguo, a Taiwanese scholar in China, explored the underlying rules governing the operation of Chinese society through the view of face and favor (Huang, 2004).
Scholars in mainland China mainly focus on the sociology and psychology nature of face. For example, Zhai (1995) examined the differences and similarities between face and lien (lian), and constructed a face consciousness model. Based on these analyses, Zhai (2006) further took the formation of bureaucratic style as an example to analyze the role of face in the social system of China. Fu and Sun (2003) studied children’s face-lying behavior. Wu (2003) explored face consciousness among university students.

Generally speaking, the research on face is scattered in many fields, including anthropology, sociology, linguistics, psychology and management. However, due to the discrepancies in research methods and paradigms, different fields share few common elements. Even the definitions of face are still controversial (Wang and Yang, 2005; Wu, 2004). Therefore, when scholars try to examine face, they find that a lack of theoretical support hampers follow-up quantitative research that further advances our knowledge of face. However, the existence of these limitations does not mean that marketing researchers cannot study the behavior of Chinese consumers through face consciousness. At present, we observe two main characteristics of the current consumer research on face.

First, more and more scholars have been aware of the importance of face in consumer research. It is an emerging trend to explain marketing phenomena that other constructs cannot explain drawing on the perspective of face. What is more, with the development of cross-cultural research in recent years, when scholars find that many consumer research questions emerged in Confucian society cannot be interpreted by Western marketing theories, the need for indigenous concepts (e.g. face consciousness) becomes more and more intense. For instance, Wong and Ahuvia (1998) argue that different cultural values across East Asian and Western societies are the main reasons for the differences in luxury consumption. Specifically, East Asian consumers pay more attention to socially visible possessions than Western consumers because of the higher consciousness of face. Joy (2001) analyzes the behavioral patterns of Hong Kong consumers in choosing gifts to maintain social relations. He believes that these characteristics were closely related to several traditional Chinese values such as face, empathy and courtesy. Lu (2005) also believes that when studying Chinese consumers’ behavior, it is necessary to consider the influence of face and favor.

Second, a widely accepted face scale for marketing research is absent at present. In fact, other related research fields, such as organizational behavior of employees in East Asia, also suffer from this problem (Kim and Nam, 1998). Because of the extreme reliance of consumer research on empirical methods, marketing scholars cannot conduct further studies without valid scales. In the current literature, Bao et al. (2003) used convenient samples to develop a unidimensional scale for measuring face consciousness, which is, to the best of our knowledge, the only published face scale in marketing journals. Although this scale is basically reliable, it simplifies face consciousness into a unidimensional concept. Moreover, it is consisted of as few as four items, so its validity seems to be insufficient and it is difficult to manifest the complexity of face.

Researchers have realized that consumer’s face consciousness is not a unidimensional construct. On the contrary, it contains different dimensions, which may affect different aspects of consumer behavior (Zhang, 2010). For example, according to Ho (1976), the failure for an individual to gain face does not necessarily lead to face loss, meaning that face gain and loss cannot be treated as two extremes of a unidimensional variable. In fact, they should be considered two different social processes (Ho, 1976). According to Ho’s analyses, individuals’ pursuit of face gain and avoidance of face loss may represent two different motivations for face. In this research, we follow these analyses and divide consumers’ face consciousness into two dimensions: desire to gain face and fear of losing face. Moreover, we will develop corresponding scales for desire to gain face and fear of losing face, respectively.
2.2 Conspicuous consumption behavior

Veblen (1899) analyzed the consumption behavior of the nouveaux in American society in his book named *On the Leisure Class*, and put forward the concept of *conspicuous consumption*. At that time, the American society was experiencing urbanization. Due to high social mobility, people were often in new and strange social groups. Veblen believes that in such circumstances, the visible property is the main criterion when judging the status of a stranger. Consequently, if a person wants to impress the people around him/her, he/she can only constantly show his wealth. However, Veblen did not define conspicuous consumption, let alone operationalize it.

Leibenstein (1950) studied consumers’ motives for consuming commodities and divided them into functional and non-functional needs. Non-functional needs are further divided into the Bandwagon Effect, Snob Effect and Veblen Effect. The Bandwagon Effect refers to the conditions in which consumers’ demands for certain products increases when these products are consumed by others. On the contrary, the Snob Effect describes the conditions when consumers’ demands for commodities decrease with the increasing number of the same commodities consumed by others. The Veblen effect refers to conspicuous consumption, which means consumers’ demands for goods increase when the prices increase. Afterward, the research on conspicuous consumption mainly took game theory or information economics approaches, which focus on group-level analyses and ignore the need for research at the individual level (Mason, 1984). In the mid-twentieth century, after social psychology was introduced into marketing research, conspicuous consumption started to be regarded as a consumer research question (Lu et al., 2006).

Mason (1981) called for empirical research on conspicuous consumption behavior in his book *Conspicuous Consumption: A Study on Abnormal Consumption Behavior*. However, he also realized that it was not easy. For example, because of social desirability, consumers are generally less likely to admit their conspicuous consumption behavior (Mick, 1996). In fact, other similar research questions, such as status consumption and symbolic consumption, are also faced with these problems.

Therefore, researchers have studied conspicuous consumption through other concepts for a long time. For example, conspicuous consumption is often thought to be induced by materialism. Some literature even equates these two concepts (Wong, 1997). The research on materialism peaked in the 1980s and 1990s, when related papers were continuously published in *Journal of Consumer Research* (e.g. Belk, 1985, 1988; Richins and Dawson, 1992). Researchers mainly studied materialism in two ways. First, they regarded materialism as a trait. Belk (1985) documented that materialism consists of three kinds of individual tendencies: possessiveness, non-generosity and envy. Second, materialism is regarded as a personal value. Richins and Dawson (1992) proposed that materialism includes three kinds of beliefs, namely, acquisition centrality, possession represents success and possession represents happiness. Follow-up empirical studies further show that materialists value the acquisition and display of wealth. They are in a fever for valuable products that can show their identity and enhance the social image. Thus, they can never be satisfied with their possessions.

With the development of methods to rule out social desirability, scholars have started to develop scales to measure conspicuous consumption behavior. For example, Marcoux et al. (1997) developed an 18-item conspicuous consumption scale, which contains five factors. More recently, O’Cass and McEwen (2004) also used a seven-item conspicuous consumption scale in their research. Chinese scholars have also begun trying to develop and use similar scales (e.g. Zhu and Lu, 2006; Guo and Su, 2007; Zhang, 2005).

2.3 The impact of face consciousness on conspicuous consumption behavior

In behavioral research, as Bond (1988) pointed out, researchers’ own cultural backgrounds usually affect their interpretation of social phenomena. Western researchers tend to
interpret conspicuous consumption behavior from the perspective of materialism, which is consistent with the individualism culture. In the individualistic society, an individual bears little pressure from the social norm, and his attitude is usually the dominant factor of his behavior (Triandis, 1995). Therefore, both materialistic traits and values naturally lead to consumers’ conspicuous consumption behavior, which conveys their status and success to others. However, in the Confucian society, consumers buy conspicuous products for other reasons, rather than simply for displaying their status. For instance, Western consumers purchase products when they desire them, whereas Chinese consumers, in many cases, are driven by necessities (Zhu and Lu, 2006).

Different patterns of conspicuous consumption behavior between Eastern and Western consumers may be due to their different definitions of self (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). In Western culture, individuals tend to consider themselves to be independent of others (i.e. independent self). In the Eastern culture, however, people think that they are highly interdependent with each other (i.e. interdependent self). Therefore, the Eastern culture is filled with interdependent elements (Ho and Peng, 1998). Individuals must take social implications into account before acting because maintaining face and justifying the objects of social interactions are very important (Huang, 2004). As success and wealth can earn face (Hu, 1944), purchasing expensive luxury products helps consumers maintain or earn face (Li and Su, 2007). Buying luxury products as gifts not only allows givers to earn face, but also makes the recipients feel proud (Joy, 2001).

At present, since scales are limited, no scholar has empirically explored how consumer’s face consciousness affects conspicuous consumption, but some of them have tested others similar concepts. For example, Zhang (2005) decomposes Confucian cultural values into three factors: behavior and status congruence, maintaining family reputation and valuing others’ opinions. Furthermore, behavior and status congruence factor has a significant impact on female consumers’ symbolic consumption behavior. Although Zhang (2005) used convenient samples in her research, and only three items were used to measure behavior and status congruence, the finding is still of great significance: Behavior and status congruence reflects consumers’ face consciousness to some extent, thus providing evidence for the potential impact of face on conspicuous consumption.

In addition, many scholars have discussed the influence of face on luxury consumption, symbolic consumption, and status consumption. For example, Wong and Ahuvia (1998) compared and contrasted the differences of cultural values between the East and West, believing that Western consumers are more concerned about personal feelings, hobbies and tastes when buying luxury products. Eastern Asian consumers, on the other hand, purchase luxury to maintain their own and their families’ face. Cao (2006) proposed that face consciousness affects luxury consumption behavior in three ways. First, most of the luxury products purchased by Chinese consumers are visible, including clothing, jewelry, cosmetics, etc. Second, most Chinese luxury consumers are young. Though they are generally not as rich as elderly consumers, they have stronger face needs because of more frequent social interactions. Third, luxury products often serve as gifts, which are used to maintain and strengthen social relationships. In addition, Bao et al. (2003) compared how face consciousness influences Chinese and American consumers’ decision-making styles. They find that American consumers have a weaker sense of face consciousness and place more emphases on the intrinsic attributes of products (e.g. quality, value, etc.) that help meet intrapersonal needs. In contrast, Chinese consumers with high face consciousness focus on social needs. They hope that consumption can reflect their status and signal to the group members. Therefore, they pay much attention to the external attributes of products or services (e.g. brands, reputation, etc.). Considering the close relationship between external attributes of products and conspicuous consumption, this research also supports our speculation that face consciousness might affect conspicuous consumption.
3. Method
In order to examine the relationship between face consciousness and luxury consumption behavior, we conducted two empirical studies. The first study aimed to examine the dimensional structure of face consciousness and develop a measurement scale for face. We thereby transformed the concept of social face into a research construct which can be measured. The second study used the scale developed in the first study to test the impacts of different face dimensions exert on luxury consumption behavior.

3.1 The dimensional structure and measurement scale of face consciousness

3.1.1 Definition. Among the face literature, Ho (1976) has an extremely high impact. According to him, the concept of social face cannot be replaced by other similar concepts, such as “a standard of behavior,” “a personality variable,” “status, dignity or honor” or “prestige” (Ho, 1976). Face has both quality and quantity characteristics. For instance, a person’s face obtained through personal qualities has a “quality difference” compared with it obtained in social relationships. Meanwhile, the quantity of a person’s face changes with the variation of contexts or social status. Based on these analyses, Ho (1976) defines face as the respect or obedience that individuals demand from others according to their positions in the social network. In this study, we follow this definition of face and extend it into marketing research. It should be noted that the definition of face in this study does not include moral components. In English, face contains both moral and social components. In Chinese, however, face includes two levels of meanings: one is social face, and the other is moral face (Hu, 1944; Zhai, 1995). Although these two words are inseparable in English, they can be clearly distinguished by different words in Chinese. Therefore, Huang (2004) suggests that the word “face” in English should be divided into social and moral face. In this study, we focus on the concept of social face rather than the moral face.

Ho (1976) believes that individuals may gain face through achievements that exceed social expectations, and may lose face because of inappropriate social performance. Moreover, gaining and losing face have different evaluation criteria, which represent two distinct social processes and cannot be simply regarded as the opposite ends of one single dimension. Specifically, if people want to gain face, they need to exceed social expectations, but individuals who fail to exceed social expectations do not necessarily lose face. When one’s behavior is lower than social expectations, he/she will lose face. Nevertheless, it is impossible for individuals to obtain face by just satisfying the standard of “not losing face” (Ho, 1976). According to Ho’s distinction between the procedures of face gain and loss, we expect that an individual’s face consciousness should also be manifested in two aspects, namely, desire to gain face and fear of losing face. These two dimensions are not the opposites. Individuals may want to gain face while being afraid to lose face during the same event. For example, consumers may want to gain face by wearing distinctive clothes, and they also worry that these clothing may not be in line with their identity, which renders themselves to lose face. As a result, consumers’ face consciousness reflects the extent to which individuals wish to acquire or avoid certain products and brands in order to obtain or avoid the loss of respect or obedience. It should be treated as a multi-dimensional rather than a unidimensional concept. It is entirely possible for consumers to have a contradictory mindset, such that they not only desire to gain face but also fear of losing face. The typology of these two dimensions can enhance the explanatory power of face on consumer decision-making and purchase behavior.

3.1.2 Measurement items. Based on previous theoretical definitions of dimensions, we collected 77 questions as the initial items of face consciousness scale. These items were mainly from in-depth interviews, and we have also used some items mentioned in previous literature. Among them, 46 questions regards desire to gain face (e.g. “When I do well in my job, I hope my supervisor can praise me in public”), and 31 questions regards fear of losing
face (e.g. “I will be embarrassed if I make a stupid mistake in public”). Following the item generation steps, ambiguous items were eliminated, resulting in a revised pool of 61 items. Five PhD students in management then acted as judges in evaluating the content validity of the items. In this process, the five judges were shown the definition of each dimension, some related explanations, and an example item. They were then asked to connect the statements with each dimension or with a “not applicable” category. Items that did not receive consistent connection by at least four of the five judges were eliminated. This procedure resulted in 47 statements for the two dimensions of face consciousness. Finally, according to Hinkin (1998), we asked another five PhD students to independently evaluate whether the remaining items can clearly reflect the dimensions they were trying to measure on a three-point scale, where 1 represents “clearly reflect,” 2 means “reflect” and 3 means “cannot reflect.” We only reserved the items that at least three judges chose “clearly reflect,” and then 13 questions were deleted.

3.1.3 Exploratory factor analysis. The following survey contained the remaining 34 items. We recruited 173 students (111 male and 62 female; $M_{age} = 20.6$ years, SD = 1.4) from a large public university to fill in the questionnaire. They were required to respond to each item on a seven-point “strongly agree/strongly disagree” Likert scale. These students majored in a range of disciplines, including management, economics, physics, mathematics and engineering.

Before conducting exploratory factor analysis, we examined the item-to-total correlations between each item and the dimension it belongs to. Eight questions were deleted as their coefficients were below 0.30. We used SPSS13.0 and set the orthogonal rotation (Varimax method) to distinguish different dimensions. The scree plot clearly showed that two main factors could be extracted from the items. The percentage of variance explained by each factor was 18.6 and 11.9 percent, respectively. To select items for the final scale, we used a minimum factor loading of 0.40 as the cut-off value (Ford et al., 1986). Besides, items with high loadings on both or neither of the first two intended factor were also eliminated. The final face consciousness scale includes 11 questions, and the results of exploratory factor analysis are shown in Table I. The first factor contains six items, reflecting the extent to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Factor loading</th>
<th>Item-total correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I hope people think that I can do better than most others</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hope I can talk about things that most others do not know</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hope that I can possess things that most others thirst for</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important for me to get praise and admiration</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hope to let people know that I have association with some big names</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hope that I have a better life than most others in others’ view</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I always avoid talking about my weakness</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to avoid letting others think that I am ignorant, even if I really am</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do my best to hide my weakness before others</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I work in an organization of bad reputation, I will try not to tell others about that</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is hard for me to acknowledge a mistake, even if I am really wrong</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Descriptive statistics, factor loadings and corrected item-total correlations

Notes: $n = 173$. Rotation method = Varimax
which an individual hope to gain face, which is the “desire to gain face” dimension (e.g. “I hope people think that I can do better than most others”). The second factor contains five items, reflecting the extent to which a person worry about losing face, that is, the “fear of losing face” dimension (e.g. “I always avoid talking about my weakness”). These two factors explained 43.5 percent of the total variance.

Both dimensions had acceptable internal reliability. The Cronbach’s $\alpha$ of desire to gain face and fear of losing face dimension was 0.76 and 0.74 respectively. In addition, the correlations of all items with their belonged dimensions were no lower than 0.45. Deleting any item led to the decrease of scale’s reliability. The correlation coefficient between the desire to gain face and fear of losing face was 0.33 ($p < 0.01$), which was slightly higher than the weak correlation level, indicating that the two dimensions represented two different psychological constructs.

### 3.1.4 Confirmatory factor analysis

As the scale that emerged was derived from a convenient university student sample, it was necessary to test the generalizability of the two-factor solution in a different sample. A combined sample from three separate studies was collected. It consisted of 411 adults, including 201 MBA students in a major university in East China (49 percent), 95 non-degree business training students in the same university (23 percent) and 115 managers in a large state-owned enterprise (28 percent). The respondents were asked to evaluate their agreement on each item of the developed scale on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree”; 7 = “strongly agree”). In this sample, 64 percent were male and 36 percent were female. Ages ranged from 23 to 57 ($M_{age} = 35.6$ years, $SD = 7.2$). More than 75 percent of respondents in all three samples had undergraduate degrees. It should be noted that although this is not a random sample, it is still representative for luxury consumers in China. Thus, it is suitable for the purpose of the present study.

We used LISREL 8.20 to test the fit of the two-dimensional structure of face consciousness scale. According to the previous analyses, desire to gain face should be moderately correlated with fear of losing face, so we set the correlation between the two dimensions to be freely estimated. The results showed that the two-dimensional model was well supported in the current samples ($\chi^2 = 89.30; df = 43$). The ratio of $\chi^2$ to degree of freedom was 2.07, lower than the commonly accepted standard of 5.0 (Hinkin, 1998). The goodness of fit index (GFI) was 0.96, higher than the acceptable level of 0.90. The adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) was 0.94, higher than the acceptable level of 0.80. The normed fit index (NFI) was 0.91, higher than the standard of 0.90 (Kelloway, 1998). Finally, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was 0.05, far below the acceptable level of 0.10 (Steiger, 1990).

According to the procedures suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), we compared the fit of the two-dimensional baseline model with three competitive models. In the first competitive model, considering that previous literature once regarded face as a unidimensional construct (Bao et al., 2003), we examined whether merging the two dimensions into one would result in a better fit. In the second competitive model, we set no correlation between desire to gain face and fear of losing face to test whether these two dimensions belong to the broader concept of face consciousness. The third model was a three-dimensional model forcibly extracted from the exploratory factor analysis to determine whether the 11 items included in the face consciousness scale also measured other dimensions. In addition, we also compared the fit of the null model.

Table II shows the comparison results between the baseline and competitive models. First, combining desire to gain face and fear of losing face into one dimension yielded a worse fit, manifested by the significant increase in the $\chi^2$ value ($\Delta\chi^2 = 370.56, p < 0.01$), RMSEA indicator, and a decrease in the GFI/AGFI/NFI index. Second, setting no correlation between the two dimensions or splitting the items to three dimensions also resulted in a
worse fit of the models ($\Delta \chi^2 = 31.99, p < 0.01; \Delta \chi^2 = 42.07, p < 0.01$). Taken together, these results indicated that the baseline model provided the best fit. Desire to gain face and fear of losing face are two distinct dimensions of an individual's face consciousness, and they are correlated to each other.

3.2 The influence of face consciousness on conspicuous luxury consumption behavior

3.2.1 Sample and procedure. The main purpose of this study is to test whether face consciousness can predict consumers' luxury consumption behavior, which calls for several requirements for sampling. We need to sample from consumers with luxury consumption experiences rather than randomly sampling from the population. To identify an adequate group, we notice an interesting phenomenon: The large Chinese luxury market is not supported by the rich people in China. The young Chinese consumers, instead, are main luxury buyers, even though they only have average income (Ford et al., 1986). It is reported that most luxury consumers are highly educated young people with monthly income of 5,000–50,000 yuan, aging 20–40 years old (Zhou, 2010). In fact, through media coverage, we can find many cases like this: “Miss Liu, who works in a foreign company, earns 8,000 yuan per month. She likes to collect all kinds of name brands’ information from fashion magazines, and to purchase expensive clothes and accessories occasionally. Sometimes a pair of pants can cost her a few months’ earnings, but she feels it worthwhile” (Fan and Xiao, 1998).

Therefore, we recruited participants for this study from MBA students. The demographics of MBA students are in line with luxury consumers. MBA students are generally young, have a high education level, and show strong interest in luxury products. In the university we sampled, a luxury appreciation course was being offered to MBA students. We handed out questionnaires to MBA students during class breaks, and asked them to fill out the questionnaires and to give them back to a research assistant. We did not inform the respondents of the research purpose. Instead, we just told them that this was a survey about consumer behavior. The respondents were also told that no identifiable private information needed to be revealed. In this way, we would like to ensure the anonymity of the research.

A total of 338 MBA students participated in the survey. They all had formal jobs and only attended classes in evenings and at weekends. The sample included 231 males (68 percent) and 107 females (32 percent). In terms of age, 112 participants were between 20 and 29 years old (33 percent), 206 were between 30 and 39 years old (61 percent), and 20 were over 40 years old (6 percent). As for the education level, 335 had a bachelor or higher degrees (99 percent). The monthly income distribution of this sample was: 6 (2 percent) participants were below 2,000 yuan; 15 (5 percent) participants were between 2,001 and 5,000 yuan; 115 (34 percent) participants were in the range of 5,001–10,000 yuan; and 180 (53 percent) participants were above 10,000 yuan.

3.2.2 Measurement. Conspicuous luxury consumption behavior. This measurement was adapted from Marcoux et al. (1997) and O’Cass and McEwen (2004). We used six items to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$\Delta \chi^2$</th>
<th>GFI</th>
<th>AGFI</th>
<th>NFI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Null</td>
<td>1,508.24</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two correlated factors (baseline model)</td>
<td>89.30</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1,418.94**</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One factor</td>
<td>459.86</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>370.56**</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two orthogonal factors</td>
<td>121.29</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>31.99**</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three factors</td>
<td>131.37</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>42.07**</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. LISREL models for the scale items

Notes: $n = 411$. $\Delta \chi^2$: the increment of $\chi^2$ compared with baseline model. **$p < 0.01$
measure consumers’ conspicuous luxury consumption behavior. A sample item is: “I once bought expensive luxury brands simply because I knew that people would notice them.” Respondents answered these questions on a five-point Likert scale (1 = “disagree”; 5 = “agree”). The Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was 0.77.

Face consciousness. We used the two-dimensional scale developed earlier to measure the extent to which participants desired to gain face feared of losing face. They answered these questions on a five-point Likert scale (1 = “disagree”; 5 = “agree”). A confirmatory factor analysis supported the two-dimensional structure of the face consciousness scale ($\chi^2 = 179.80$, df = 43, GFI = 0.91, AGFI = 0.86, NFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.09). Combining the two dimensions into a single factor significantly reduced the model fit ($\Delta\chi^2 = 691.32$, $p < 0.01$). The Cronbach’s $\alpha$ of desire to gain face and fear of losing face was 0.81 and 0.79, respectively.

Control variables. We controlled for age, gender, education level and income in this study. In addition, we also controlled for several other variables mentioned in the literature that affects luxury consumption behavior, including materialism, decision-making styles, frugality, desire for unique products, long-term orientation and socially desirable responding. The reasons for controlling these variables and how they were measured are as follows:

1) Materialism: according to the Veblen Effect, consumers engage in conspicuous consumption because they want to make positive impressions by showing the material wealth they own. Therefore, Western scholars believe that materialism is the closest concept to conspicuous consumption. We measured materialism using the scale developed by Richins (2004), a short version (six items) of the original scale developed by Richins and Dawson (1992). A sample item is: “I admire people who own expensive homes, cars, and clothes.” Respondents answered these questions on a five-point Likert scale (1 = “disagree”; 5 = “agree”). The Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was 0.80.

2) Consumers’ decision-making styles: decision-making styles reflect the consumers’ mental orientation in purchasing choices. Consumers with different decision-making styles focus on different product attributes when purchasing. Sprotles and Kendall (1986) proposed eight different decision styles and developed corresponding scales, including quality first, brand orientation, fashion orientation, hedonic orientation, price orientation, impulsiveness, inability to choose and habitual purchase. We chose three of them that might influence luxury consumption behavior, which were brand orientation, fashion orientation and price orientation. The brand orientation scale includes five items, such as “The well-known national brands are best for me.” The fashion orientation scale includes four questions, such as “Fashionable, attractive styling is very important to me.” The price orientation scale includes three questions, such as “The lower-price products are usually my choice.” These questions were measured on a five-point scale (1 = “disagree”; 5 = “agree”). A confirmatory factor analysis supported the dimensional structure of the three purchasing decision styles ($\chi^2 = 190.30$, df = 51, GFI = 0.91, AGFI = 0.87, NFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.09), and the Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for each dimension was 0.79, 0.83 and 0.66, respectively.

3) Frugality: frugality refers to the extent to which consumers constrain their own lifestyles (e.g. limit the purchase or use of goods or services that costs money) for long-term goals (Lastovicka et al., 1999). For Chinese consumers, as luxury products are quite expensive, consumers need to save money for luxury consumption. Therefore, we controlled for frugality in the following analyses. We used the scale developed by Lastovicka et al. (1999), which includes eight items. An example item is: “If you can re-use an item you already have, there is no sense in buying something new.” These questions were measured on a five-point scale (1 = “disagree”; 5 = “agree”). The Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was 0.82.
Long-term orientation: long-term orientation refers to the cultural value of how consumers perceive time. Long-term oriented consumers have a holistic view of time, who value both the past and future, rather than just focusing on the current or short-term gains (Bearden et al., 2006). Ruling out the influence of long-term orientation is very important in this study because the Chinese have the highest long-term orientation scores in the world (Brunstein, 1993). Long-term orientation may affect consumers' luxury buying behavior, as long-term oriented consumers are more likely to compress current consumption desires to purchase luxury in future. We used the scale developed by Bearden et al. (2006) to measure this construct. A sample item is “I plan for the long term.” The items were measured on a five-point scale (1 = “disagree”; 5 = “agree”). The Cronbach’s α was 0.77.

Desire for unique products: according to the uniqueness theory, everyone needs to believe that they are different from the mainstream to maintain their self-esteem (Snyder and Fromkin, 1977). When individuals’ uniqueness feelings are threatened, they tend to enhance such feelings through purchasing or using luxury products that are only available to few people (Tian et al., 2001). Since luxury products can help consumers differentiate themselves from the others, the need for uniqueness should affect luxury consumption behavior. We used the scale developed by Lynn and Harris (1997) to measure this construct, which includes six items, such as “I am more likely to buy a product if it is scarce.” The items were measured on a five-point scale (1 = “disagree”; 5 = “agree”). The Cronbach’s α was 0.85.

Socially desirable responding: the social desirable responding effect refers to the measurement bias caused by the motivation to create a good impression in survey research (Fisher, 1993). Since luxury consumption is socially desirable per se, consumers may be influenced by certain bias in reporting their luxury consumption behavior, thus it is necessary to rule out the influence of social desirability (Mick, 1996). We used the scale developed by Reynolds (1982), which consists of ten items. A sample item is: “I am always courteous, even to people who are disagreeable.” Respondents answered these questions on a binary scale (1 = “inaccurate”; 2 = “accurate”). The Cronbach’s α was 0.61. Although the reliability of this scale was low, it was quite close to the threshold (0.66) proposed by Reynolds (1982).

4. Results
Table III presents the descriptive statistics of the research variables, including means, standard deviations, reliability coefficients and correlation coefficients. Conspicuous luxury consumption behavior was significantly and positively correlated with desire to gain face ($r = 0.38, p < 0.01$) and fear of losing face ($r = 0.36, p < 0.01$), which provides initial support for our proposition that face consciousness affects luxury consumption behavior. In addition, we found that luxury consumption behavior and face consciousness were related to most of the control variables. Therefore, in the following regression analyses, we ruled in all these control variables in models to eliminate the possibility of spurious correlations.

Table IV summarizes the results of the regression analyses. In order to examine whether desire to gain face and fear of losing face have an irreplaceable contribution in explaining conspicuous luxury consumption behavior, we performed regression analyses step by step. In Model 1, we added all the control variables. In Model 2, we added desire to gain face as the independent variable. In Model 3, we added fear of losing face as the independent variable. In Model 4, we added both desire to gain face and fear of losing face to the regression model simultaneously to test whether their predictive abilities crowded each other due to overlaps. In each step of regressions, we evaluated whether the addition of a new independent
Table III. Descriptive statistics, reliability, and correlation coefficients of research variables

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Conspicuous consumption</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>(0.77)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Desire to gain face</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>(0.81)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Fear of losing face</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.37**</td>
<td>0.39**</td>
<td>(0.79)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Materialism</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>0.39**</td>
<td>0.36**</td>
<td>(0.80)</td>
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<td>5. Brand orientation</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.48**</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>0.26**</td>
<td>0.40**</td>
<td>(0.79)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Fashion orientation</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.40**</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
<td>0.47**</td>
<td>0.51**</td>
<td>(0.83)</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Price orientation</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>(0.66)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Frugality</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.13**</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.030</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.37**</td>
<td>(0.82)</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Need to be different</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.44**</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.33**</td>
<td>0.53**</td>
<td>0.51**</td>
<td>0.60**</td>
<td>0.11**</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>(0.77)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Long-term orientation</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
<td>0.17**</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.26**</td>
<td>0.35**</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>(0.83)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Social desirability</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.14**</td>
<td>-0.30**</td>
<td>-0.28**</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.17**</td>
<td>(61)</td>
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<td>responding</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Gender</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.13**</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>-0.11*</td>
<td>-0.11*</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.11*</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Age</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.100</td>
<td>-0.19**</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.20**</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.13*</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.11*</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.19**</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Education</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>0.07</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Income</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.12*</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.16**</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: n = 337. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01
variable significantly enhanced the model's explanatory power by the significance level of the independent variable's coefficient and change of coefficient of determination ($\Delta R^2$).

First, after adding face consciousness to the regression model, Model 2 was significantly better than Model 1 ($\beta = 0.19$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.03$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that desire to gain face could still significantly predict conspicuous luxury consumption behavior even after controlling for the covariates. Similarly, in Model 3, fear of losing face also significantly predicted conspicuous luxury consumption behavior ($\beta = 0.21$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.04$, $p < 0.01$), thereby enhancing the model's explanatory power. Finally, in Model 4, we found that when desire to gain face and fear of losing face simultaneously served as two independent variables, both of them remained significant (desire to gain face: $\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.05$; fear of losing face: $\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$; $\Delta R^2 = 0.05$, $p < 0.01$), indicating each of them had a unique contribution to conspicuous luxury consumption behavior.

5. **General discussion**

Luxury consumption in the Confucian society has many characteristics different from it in the Western culture, so it is not enough to fully understand the uniqueness of Chinese consumers' luxury consumption behavior by simply considering their personal values such as materialism (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). In China, where collectivist culture and interdependent relationships prevail, the products and brands consumers purchase and use signal their tastes, incomes, and preferences. Therefore, when examining Chinese consumers' behavior, others' opinions are factors that cannot be ignored (Zhang, 2010). In line with this notion, this study ruled in face consciousness, an indigenous construct, to investigate whether consumers' attention to other people's opinions and evaluations affects their own luxury consumption behavior. Based on Ho's (1976) analyses for face gain and loss process, we divided consumers' face consciousness into desire to gain face and fear of
losing face, developed the corresponding scales and tested how the two dimensions of face were related to conspicuous luxury consumption behavior. The findings from the current research help researchers to understand and explain the principles of the Chinese market.

This research has made three contributions to the indigenous consumer behavior theory. First of all, the typology of face provides offers for this concept, providing convenience to its application in marketing research. Face is believed to be the key to understanding Chinese behavior (Smith, 1894). When it comes to face, every Chinese seems to know what it means. However, once an accurate definition is required, most people are confused (Lu, 1991). Ho (1976) analyzed how face can be gained and lost, providing a good opportunity to study face consciousness. Following Ho (1976), we decompose face consciousness into two different dimensions: desire to gain face and fear of losing face. Theoretically speaking, they are not two opposite ends of the same dimension, but are manifestations of two different aspects of face consciousness, thus they are able to coexist. These analyses address the limitation that the face is generally regarded as a unidimensional concept in previous marketing research, advancing our understanding for how it can regulate and influence the behavior of Chinese consumers.

It is noteworthy that the distinction between desire to gain face and fear of losing face can also be supported by a stream of social psychology research, which shows the psychological defensive mechanism triggered by potential self-threat (Cupach and Carson, 2002). To some extent, this indicates that fear of losing face, rather than desire to gain face is more likely to induce psychological defense. Roth et al. (1986) proposed two types of self-presentation: one is to show positive qualities, and the other is to hide negative qualities. These two kinds of self-display are not conflictive, which is consistent with our differentiation of the dimensions of face consciousness: Desire to gain face may lead to more positive quality exhibition, whereas fear of losing face may be more effective in predicting negative quality hiding behavior. Therefore, the typology of desire to gain face and fear of losing face helps to connect face consciousness with the existing literature.

The second contribution this study makes to indigenous consumer behavior is the scale we developed. Previous consumer research is limited by the lack of measurement tools, thus it is often difficult to conduct in-depth analyses. For example, in our data, desire to gain face was significantly and positively correlated with age ($r = -0.19, p < 0.01$), while fear of losing face was not ($r = 0.02, ns$). This indicates that young Chinese consumers are less concerned about gaining face than elderly Chinese consumers, but both young and elderly consumers try to avoid losing face. In addition, desire to gain face was significantly correlated with price orientation ($r = 0.20, p < 0.01$) and long-term orientation ($r = 0.17, p < 0.01$), while fear of losing face was not correlated with either of them (price orientation: $r = 0.07, ns$; long-term orientation: $r = -0.09, ns$), which shows that desire to gain face and fear of losing face may exert different influences on decision-making styles. In fact, when Bao et al. (2003) investigated the influence of the face on consumers’ purchase decision-making styles, they already realized that treating face as a unidimensional construct limited their further analyses. More recently, Zhang et al. (2011) found that consumers’ face consciousness significantly affects their subjective well-being. Specifically, consumers with stronger face consciousness experience lower subjective well-being. However, given that they used a unidimensional face scale, this conclusion also has obvious limitations. Theoretically speaking, the two dimensions of face consciousness may have completely different impacts on subjective well-being. On the one hand, fear of losing face may reduce consumers’ subjective well-being, because the excessive attention paid to social evaluations can induce a psychological defensive mindset, which results in tension and anxiety (Christopher and Schlenker, 2004). On the other hand, however, fear of losing face may also enhance well-being, because consumers who want to save face usually set goals for themselves, and goal setting is an effective means to improve subjective well-being (Brunstein, 1993). The two-dimensional face consciousness scale developed in this study can effectively distinguish different dimensions of face, and has been
shown to have sufficient reliability and validity in a number of different samples. Future studies can use this scale to further investigate the possible impact of face consciousness on consumer behavior.

Finally, the conclusion of this study can help explain the special patterns of luxury purchasing and using behavior of Chinese consumers. Our research shows that their luxury consumption behavior has not only promotion motivation, but also prevention motivation. The reasons for consumers to purchase luxury can either be social status enhancement or negative evaluation avoidance. Therefore, our explanations of why consumers choose luxury products from the perspectives of desire to gain face and fear of losing face are consistent with the regulatory focus theory developed by Higgins (1998). This theory suggests that individuals can either focus on goals to increase their benefits (promotion focus), or on goals that avoid loss (prevention focus). In the extant literature on luxury and conspicuous consumption behavior, scholars have paid significant attention to the promotion motivation, but failed to notice the prevention motivation. In a recent analysis for the motivation of conspicuous consumption, ten factors were mentioned, including attracting the attention of others, identity display, status signaling, etc. But none of them belongs to preventive motivation (Shukla, 2008). In fact, the Veblen Effect and materialism both emphasize the fact that luxury products can convey users’ personal success information to the public, but they also ignore the function of preventing personal failure message from being exposed (Fitzmaurice and Comegys, 2006). According to the present research, luxury consumption possesses both promotion and prevention functions: It can help consumers gain face and avoid losing face. We encourage future research to adopt the classification of desire to gain face and fear of losing face, combining the regulatory focus theory to conduct more in-depth research on related topics.

Practically speaking, our findings are implicational to the luxury marketing practice in Chinese market. A direct implication is that luxury enterprises should try their best to associate their brands with face consciousness, through which they can increase the attractiveness of their products to consumers. Luxury brands can be associated with face by activating consumers’ motivation to gain face, or by inducing the motivation to avoid face loss, both of which can effectively promote consumers’ purchase intentions. Besides, for the public policy makers, our research is also helpful for them to correctly guide the trend of consumption. Policy makers can lead consumers to establish the notion that extravagance and ostentation does not equal to face, or even lead them believe that certain behavior may lead to face loss. In this way, the negative social ethos can be mitigated.

It should be noted that this research has several limitations. First, the samples we used in the two studies are not random, with significantly higher education and income level than the average, and are homogeneous in terms of demographic characteristics. Although these samples are in line with the characteristics of the luxury consumer groups, our findings need to be replicated in more general samples to improve the generalizability. Second, although we analyzed how face consciousness affects conspicuous luxury consumption behavior, we did not examine its underlying mechanism. It is thus not clear why face consciousness affects conspicuous luxury consumption behavior. In recent research, Zhang et al. (2010) pointed out that face consciousness enhances susceptibility to normative influence, thereby increasing status consumption. Considering that they used a unidimensional scale in their study, it is highly likely that susceptibility to normative influence may simply be a partial mediator, which mediates the influence of fear of losing face. Because the violation of social norms can directly lead to face loss, but following the social rules does not necessarily result in face gain. Therefore, in addition to susceptibility to normative influence, future research also needs to look for other possible mediators (e.g. social comparison tendency) to fully understand the psychological mechanism through which face consciousness affects consumer behavior.
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Further reading


Corresponding author

Wangshuai Wang can be contacted at: wwssjtu@163.com

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