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Revenge or Rationality? Investigating Post-Pandemic Luxury Purchase Intentions in Guangzhou Through an Extended TPB Framework

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Abstract: This study examines whether post-pandemic luxury purchase intentions in Guangzhou are primarily driven by emotional compensation ("revenge consumption") or rational deliberation. Based on an extended Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) model—incorporating brand trust and digital engagement—the analysis uses SEM on 412 consumer responses. Findings indicate that core TPB constructs significantly predict intention, and additional variables enhance explanatory power. Interaction effects suggest that emotional and cognitive mechanisms jointly shape behavior, forming a continuum. The study offers empirical insights into evolving consumer psychology in digitally mediated luxury markets.

Keywords: Theory of Planned Behavior; Luxury consumption; Post-pandemic behavior; Brand trust; Digital engagement; Consumer psychology

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered significant shifts in luxury consumption. In China, a rapid post-crisis rebound was evident, notably in Guangzhou. Two psychological trends emerged: emotional "revenge consumption" and rational, value-conscious spending. Bain & Company (2024) reported a 12% year-on-year growth in China's luxury market, while McKinsey & Company highlighted a shift toward responsible and identity-aligned purchases [1]. Guangzhou, with its affluent, digitally connected consumer base, offers a pertinent context to examine whether luxury purchases reflect compensatory impulses or rational discernment in a post-pandemic economy.

1.2. Research problem and research questions

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, luxury consumption behaviors in urban China have evolved beyond short-lived "revenge spending." While many studies emphasized immediate consumption rebounds, fewer

addressed longer-term shifts toward rational, digitally influenced, and ethically aware purchasing. Existing TPB frameworks often omit key drivers such as brand trust and digital engagement, leaving explanatory gaps.

This study addresses these limitations by investigating: Whether luxury purchase intentions are primarily emotional or rational; How extended TPB variables—brand trust, digital engagement, and cultural values—influence these intentions; The moderating effects of demographic factors. Focusing on Guangzhou as a representative tier-one city, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of post-pandemic luxury behavior within a digitalized and socially dynamic environment.

1.3. Theoretical framework and conceptual model

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) explains behavioral intention through attitude (ATT), subjective norms (SN), and perceived behavioral control (PBC) (Ajzen, 1991)[2]. While effective in various consumption studies, traditional TPB lacks sensitivity to post-pandemic shifts in luxury purchasing.

This study incorporates three context-specific constructs into the TPB framework:

(1) Brand trust (BT): Reflecting confidence in brand authenticity and value consistency under economic uncertainty.

(2) Digital engagement (DE): Capturing the influence of social media and online interactions on luxury perception.

(3) Cultural value orientation (CVO): Addressing the influence of social identity, status aspiration, and collectivist norms.

Together, these variables enhance TPB's explanatory capacity by capturing both emotional and rational elements of post-pandemic luxury decisions. The resulting extended model forms the conceptual basis for hypothesis development and empirical testing.

1.4. Significance of the study

This study contributes theoretically by extending the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to include brand trust, digital engagement, and cultural value orientation—factors increasingly relevant in post-pandemic luxury consumption. This enriched model responds to calls for adapting TPB to evolving market and psychological contexts, particularly in non-Western, digitally embedded societies like urban China.

Practically, distinguishing between emotional and rational consumption patterns enables luxury brands to calibrate marketing strategies. Emotion-driven consumers may respond to exclusivity and identity narratives, while rational consumers prioritize trust, value, and sustainability.

Socio-culturally, the research sheds light on shifting values among China's urban middle class. Findings offer implications for consumer policy, ethical marketing, and domestic brand development, particularly as post-crisis consumption increasingly reflects a blend of self-expression and calculated discernment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical foundation: Extended TPB perspective

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), developed by Ajzen (1991), posits that behavioral intentions are shaped by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. While widely applied in consumer behavior studies, TPB's standard constructs have limitations in explaining luxury consumption, particularly in post-crisis contexts where emotional, symbolic, and social drivers intensify.

This study extends TPB by incorporating brand trust, digital engagement, and cultural value orientation—contextual variables reflective of China's evolving luxury landscape. These additions enhance the model's capacity to account for both rational deliberation and emotionally charged decisions, positioning the extended TPB as a more context-sensitive framework.

2.2 Emotional versus rational motives in luxury consumption

Luxury consumption is shaped by both affective and cognitive mechanisms. Emotional drivers—such as self-reward, stress relief, and identity signaling—have gained salience in the post-pandemic context, particularly in the form of "revenge consumption." Concurrently, rational considerations, including price–value assessment, brand credibility, and long-term utility, have become more prominent amid economic uncertainty.

This duality reflects a shift from traditional conspicuous consumption to a more nuanced behavioral spectrum. Recent studies in urban China suggest that consumers increasingly balance symbolic gratification with calculated judgment. Hence, a comprehensive analysis must account for the interaction between emotion and rationality rather than treat them as mutually exclusive forces.

2.3. Evolving patterns of luxury consumption in post-pandemic China

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated structural shifts in China's luxury market. While early stages saw an upsurge in emotionally driven "revenge buying," this trend has gradually transitioned into more deliberate consumption patterns. Urban consumers increasingly emphasize brand authenticity, ethical sourcing, and alignment with personal values.

Furthermore, digital platforms now play a pivotal role in shaping luxury preferences, not only by expanding access but also by facilitating peer influence and curated identity expression. As consumers recalibrate their priorities amid economic ambiguity, luxury purchases are becoming expressions of both emotional recuperation and rationalized self-investment.

2.4. Extending TPB: Incorporating brand trust, digital engagement, and cultural values

To enhance the predictive capacity of TPB in luxury consumption, this study incorporates three contextually salient variables. Brand trust captures consumers' reliance on perceived authenticity and credibility, which moderates impulsive buying tendencies in uncertain times. Digital engagement reflects how social media and virtual interaction influence behavioral intention through curated brand narratives and peer validation. Cultural value orientation accounts for collective norms, status signaling, and identity expression prevalent in Chinese society. These additions allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how emotional and rational motivations coalesce in shaping post-pandemic luxury consumption.

2.5. Conceptual model and hypotheses

Building upon the extended TPB framework, this study proposes that attitude (ATT), subjective norms (SN), and perceived behavioral control (PBC) significantly predict luxury purchase intention. Further, brand trust (BT) and digital engagement (DE) are posited to moderate the effects of ATT and SN, respectively.

The following hypotheses are formulated:

(1) H1: ATT positively influences luxury purchase intention.

(2) H2: SN positively influences luxury purchase intention.

(3) H3: PBC positively influences luxury purchase intention.

(4) H4: BT moderates the ATT–intention relationship.

(5) H5: DE moderates the SN–intention relationship.

The conceptual model integrates these relationships, capturing both rational and affective dimensions influencing luxury consumption in the post-pandemic era.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the applicability of an extended Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) framework in explaining post-pandemic luxury purchase intentions in Guangzhou. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was selected due to its capacity to estimate complex relationships between latent constructs and account for moderating effects. A cross-sectional survey method was employed to collect primary data, enabling both confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural path modeling to assess reliability, validity, and hypothesis testing within a unified empirical structure.

3.2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

The conceptual model builds upon Ajzen's (1991) TPB, encompassing the original constructs of attitude (ATT), subjective norm (SN), and perceived behavioral control (PBC), and is extended by incorporating brand trust (BT), digital engagement (DE), and cultural value orientation (CVO). Interaction terms (e.g., ATT × BT, SN × DE) are included to reflect the interdependence of rational and emotional pathways in luxury decision-making.

The following hypotheses were formulated:

(1) H1: Attitude positively influences luxury purchase intention.

(2) H2: Subjective norm positively influences purchase intention.

(3) H3: Perceived behavioral control positively influences purchase intention.

(4) H4: Brand trust positively moderates the relationship between attitude and purchase intention.

(5) H5: Digital engagement positively moderates the relationship between subjective norm and purchase intention.

(6) H6: Cultural value orientation has a direct positive effect on purchase intention.\

This extended model provides an integrated framework for capturing both utilitarian and expressive dimensions of luxury consumption behavior in a post-pandemic context.

3.3. Sampling and data collection

Given the study's focus on luxury consumers in post-pandemic Guangzhou, the target population comprised urban residents with a history or intent of luxury purchases. A non-probability purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that respondents possessed adequate exposure to luxury consumption and digital platforms. This approach was suitable for theory-driven modeling where generalizability is secondary to construct validation.

The survey instrument was distributed online via major Chinese platforms (WeChat, Wenjuanxing), and screened for completion, consistency, and eligibility. Respondents had to be over 18 years of age, reside in Guangzhou, and demonstrate awareness of luxury brands. Data were collected in April 2025 over a two-week period, yielding 412 valid responses after screening.

This sample size exceeded the minimum threshold for SEM analysis, as guided by Krejcie & Morgan (1970)

and supported by Hair *et al.* (2019), which recommends a minimum of 10 responses per estimated parameter [3, 4]. The final dataset allowed for robust estimation of the extended TPB model with multiple moderators.

3.4. Measurement instrument and operationalization of variables

The questionnaire was developed based on validated scales adapted to the context of luxury consumption in China. Each construct was measured using multi-item Likert-type scales ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 7 ("Strongly Agree").

(1) Attitude (ATT), Subjective Norm (SN), and Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC) were operationalized following Ajzen's (1991) original TPB specifications.

(2) Brand Trust (BT) was measured using items from Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán (2005)[5], emphasizing reliability and integrity perceptions.

(3) Digital Engagement (DE) was captured via adapted scales reflecting social media influence, online interaction, and digital exposure, aligned with Kapferer and Bastien (2021) [6].

(4) Cultural Value Orientation (CVO) encompassed status motivation, collectivism, and identity signaling, adapted from Zhang and Kim (2023) [7].

(5) Purchase Intention (PI) was measured using three items assessing the likelihood of purchasing luxury goods in the near term.

A pre-test involving 30 Guangzhou-based consumers was conducted to ensure content validity and linguistic clarity. Minor adjustments were made based on feedback, ensuring cultural relevance and psychometric adequacy.

3.5. Data analysis methods

Data were analyzed using a two-stage approach. First, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was employed to assess the reliability and validity of the measurement model, using indices such as Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and model fit indicators (e.g., CFI, RMSEA).

Second, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was applied to test hypothesized relationships among latent variables, consistent with the extended Theory of Planned Behavior framework. Moderation effects (e.g., BT × ATT, DE × SN) were examined via interaction terms.

The software packages SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0 were used for statistical analysis. Demographic variables were included as controls to account for heterogeneity in age, gender, income, and education.

This methodological strategy ensured robust testing of both direct and interaction effects while accounting for measurement error and latent construct interdependencies.

3.6. Common method bias control

To minimize common method bias (CMB), both procedural and statistical remedies were employed. Procedurally, anonymity was ensured, question wording was refined to reduce social desirability, and measurement items were psychologically separated.

Statistically, Harman's single-factor test was conducted; the first factor accounted for less than 40% of the total variance, suggesting that CMB was not a serious concern. Additionally, a marker variable approach was applied, using an unrelated variable to confirm the robustness of relationships among theoretical constructs. These measures collectively ensured the validity of self-reported responses and enhanced the credibility of structural

modeling outcomes.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Descriptive statistics

A total of 412 valid responses were retained for analysis. The demographic profile of the respondents indicated a balanced distribution across gender, age, and income, with a substantial representation of digitally active consumers in urban Guangzhou. **Table 1** summarizes the key demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents (N = 412)

Demographic variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	183	44.4%
	Female	229	55.6%
Age	18–25	94	22.8%
	26–35	167	40.5%
	36–45	93	22.6%
	46+	58	14.1%
Monthly Income	< RMB 8,000	49	11.9%
	RMB 8,000–15,000	154	37.4%
	RMB 15,001–25,000	131	31.8%
	> RMB 25,000	78	18.9%
Education	Undergraduate or below	219	53.2%
	Postgraduate or above	193	46.8%
Luxury Purchase Freq.	Once/year or less	109	26.5%
	2–3 times/year	187	45.4%
	More than 3 times/year	116	28.2%

Descriptive statistics of the latent constructs (e.g., ATT, SN, PBC, BT, DE) confirmed sufficient variability and absence of extreme outliers. Skewness and kurtosis values were within acceptable thresholds, supporting the assumption of multivariate normality for SEM analysis.

4.2. Measurement model assessment

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to validate the reliability and validity of the measurement model. Standardized factor loadings for all observed variables exceeded the 0.6 threshold, indicating satisfactory indicator reliability. Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values were above 0.7 across constructs, confirming internal consistency.

Table 2. Reliability and validity assessment

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
ATT	0.82	0.86	0.67
SN	0.79	0.84	0.64
PBC	0.76	0.82	0.61
BT	0.85	0.88	0.69
DE	0.83	0.87	0.68

Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values surpassed the 0.5 benchmark, establishing convergent validity. Discriminant validity was confirmed as the square root of AVE for each construct exceeded inter-construct correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) [8]. Model fit indices for CFA indicated satisfactory fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.14$, CFI = 0.948, TLI = 0.936, RMSEA = 0.053, SRMR = 0.042—within recommended thresholds (Hu & Bentler, 1999) [9]. These results validate the robustness of the measurement model and its suitability for structural equation modeling.

4.3. Structural model results

The structural model was tested using SEM to evaluate hypothesized relationships. Fit indices confirmed good model adequacy ($\chi^2/df = 2.09$, CFI = 0.951, TLI = 0.939, RMSEA = 0.051, SRMR = 0.045).

Based on **Table 3**, all three core TPB predictors had significant positive effects on luxury purchase intention: Attitude ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$); Subjective Norms ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$); Perceived Behavioral Control ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$). The extended constructs also showed strong effects: Brand Trust ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$); Digital Engagement ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$); Interaction analysis revealed two significant moderating effects: ATT × BT ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$) and SN × DE ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$). These findings underscore that consumer intention is shaped by both internal beliefs and contextual factors such as trust and digital exposure, validating the extended TPB model's applicability.

Table 3. Structural model path coefficients

Path	β	*p*-value
ATT → PI	0.37	< 0.001
SN → PI	0.29	< 0.001
PBC → PI	0.26	< 0.001
BT → PI	0.31	< 0.001
DE → PI	0.27	< 0.001
ATT × BT → PI	0.15	< 0.01
SN × DE → PI	0.18	< 0.01

4.4 Comparative Motivation Analysis: Revenge vs. Rationality

This section examines whether luxury purchase intention in post-pandemic Guangzhou reflects revenge-driven impulses or rational deliberation. Descriptive comparison and interaction analysis reveal a hybrid pattern rather than a binary outcome.

Consumers scoring high on brand trust and perceived behavioral control tend to exhibit calculated decision-

making, aligning with rational consumption. In contrast, individuals highly engaged with digital platforms—particularly those exposed to luxury content and influencer marketing—demonstrate stronger affective motivations, indicating traits of revenge consumption.

Multigroup analysis by age and income further supports this segmentation. Younger, digitally active respondents showed a higher susceptibility to emotional cues, while older, high-income consumers emphasized durability, investment value, and brand legacy. This distinction illustrates a continuum of motivations, shaped by demographic and contextual factors (**Figure 1**).

Motivation Continuum: Emotional–Revenge vs. Rational–Deliberative Drivers

	Emotional (Revenge) Drivers	Rational (Deliberative Drivers
Trigger	Post-lockdown compensation	Financial planning and value evaluation
Dominant Channel	Social media, influencers	Brand history, product reviews
Consumer Profile	Young, digitally immersed	Mature, higher-income, brand-conscious
Decision Style	Impulsive, gratification-oriente	Cautious, utility- and investment-oriented
Psychological Anchors	Identity affirmation, emotional release	Long-term value, symbolic capital, justification

Figure 1. Motivation continuum: Emotional-revenge vs. Rational-deliberative drivers

Rather than viewing revenge and rationality as mutually exclusive, findings support an integrative perspective: luxury consumption decisions are dynamically shaped by affective impulses and cognitive justifications in response to evolving post-pandemic realities.

5. Conclusion and implications

5.1. Summary of key findings

This study employed an extended Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to examine luxury consumption intentions in post-pandemic Guangzhou. SEM results confirm the significance of core predictors—attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control—while also highlighting the role of brand trust and digital engagement as key contextual moderators. Rather than discrete motivations, the findings reveal a dynamic continuum blending emotional gratification and rational evaluation.

5.2. Theoretical contributions

First, the integration of brand trust and digital engagement enriches TPB, extending its relevance to emotionally complex, digitally mediated consumption. Second, the study supports a dual-process mechanism, wherein affective impulses interact with rational appraisals. Third, the research underscores the influence of cultural and collective norms, reinforcing the social embeddedness of purchase intention in urban China.

5.3. Managerial implications

Brand managers should segment audiences by motivational orientation. Younger, digitally immersed consumers respond to immersive campaigns and influencer narratives. Older consumers value consistency, authenticity, and heritage. Cultivating brand trust through transparency and ethical branding is vital, especially in a market sensitive to credibility. Rational framing—such as trial opportunities, digital previews, or post-purchase assurances—can legitimize consumption under perceived risk.

5.4. Limitations and future research

The study's geographic focus on Guangzhou may limit generalizability to broader Chinese or global luxury markets. Cross-sectional data constrain longitudinal inferences. Future studies should pursue mixed-method and longitudinal designs, explore emerging domains such as digital or sustainable luxury, and examine psychological rationalizations—such as virtue signaling—as mechanisms reconciling indulgence and pragmatism.

5.5. Concluding remarks

Luxury consumption in post-COVID China reflects a hybrid psychological process—emotional desires strategically justified through cognitive framing. This synthesis, captured through an enriched TPB model, offers a nuanced framework for understanding consumer behavior amid volatility and digital acceleration. Scholars and practitioners alike must recognize that today's luxury consumption is neither purely hedonic nor strictly calculated, but a negotiated act within evolving socio-cultural and economic realities.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

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