

Unconventional luxury brand collaborations: a new form of luxury consumption among young adults in China

Unconventional
luxury brand
collaborations

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Received 26 April 2022
Revised 26 September 2022
2 December 2022
3 March 2023
17 April 2023
Accepted 24 April 2023

Abstract

Purpose – This study conceptualizes a form of luxury consumption in which luxury brands collaborate with unconventional non-luxury partners. These unconventional luxury brand collaborations are growing in popularity among Chinese luxury consumers of the post-1990s generation. Luxury brands are exploring new branding strategies due to the growing commercial importance of Chinese luxury consumers.

Design/methodology/approach – An in-depth qualitative study informs this paper. Interviews with young adult luxury consumers self-identifying as Chinese reveal a growing interest for luxury brands that collaborate with odd partners in social media and online culture.

Findings – Unconventional collaborations between luxury brands and non-luxury partners catalyze shifting meanings of luxury through the following juxtapositions: *ephemeral* instead of *timeless*, *trendy* rather than *inaccessible*, and *playful* in contrast with *traditional*. First, young Chinese consumers construct luxury meanings through ephemerality, like digital possessions, social media fame and fleeting experiences. Second, luxury meanings emerge in *trendiness* among social media influencers and online culture rather than in the seemingly inaccessible taste regimes of the upper class. Third, younger consumers appreciate fun, rebellious and over-the-top aesthetics in luxury brands.

Originality/value – The study contributes to the nascent field of unconventional luxury by conceptualizing how unusual, odd and unexpected collaborations constitute new forms of luxury consumption. The shifting meanings of luxury consumption that this study conceptualizes raise new opportunities and challenges for luxury brands. One of such is the release of limited collections with non-luxury partners seemingly at the opposite spectrum of design, image and values. Moreover, the study adds nuance to the understanding of luxury consumption among young Chinese consumers.

Keywords Luxury, Branding, China, Unconventional luxury, Brand collaborations

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Researchers in international luxury study culturally situated understandings of luxury across countries (Christodoulides and Michaelidou, 2022; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2022), including cultural differences between Western countries and East Asia (Chadha and Husband, 2010; Schmitt and Lee, 2015; Seo *et al.*, 2015; Shukla *et al.*, 2015; Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). The emphasis on East Asia reflects the region's growing importance to the luxury industry. Forecasts predict that it will become the world's largest market for personal luxury goods, raising US\$ 330–370bn in 2025 and growing at an annual rate of 10% (D'Arpizio *et al.*, 2021).



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International Marketing Review
Vol. 40 No. 7, 2023
pp. 1-21
Emerald Publishing Limited
0265-1335
DOI 10.1108/IMR-04-2022-0099

Consultancies expect China to reach more than half the global market value of luxury goods by 2025 (IPSOS, 2020; McKinsey, 2019; Statista, 2021). Because of its increasing commercial importance, luxury research focusing on China is growing (Jiang and Shan, 2018; Jin *et al.*, 2015; Sinha, 2014).

Current research uses the country, China, as the unit of analysis (Jin *et al.*, 2015; Sinha, 2014), comparing it with other countries (Shukla *et al.*, 2015; Yang *et al.*, 2018). This approach suggests that Chinese luxury consumption is homogeneous, even though research shows nuance and complexity (Godart and Zhao, 2014; Jiang *et al.*, 2022; Rovai, 2014, 2016; Siu *et al.*, 2016; Zhang and Zhao, 2019). Consequently, one gap in the literature is the lack of research on the internal dynamics of Chinese luxury consumption.

The current amount of luxury research on China does not reflect its commercial importance. Veloutsou *et al.* (2022, p. 385) observe that “[a]lthough China is *en route* to becoming the largest luxury market globally, it is interesting that its research output on international luxury marketing is almost five times smaller than that of the United States, and three times smaller than the research originating from the U.K.” Whereas the previous quote refers to the output of luxury research by Chinese authors, a broader case can be made about the need for more research about China’s luxury consumption dynamics due to its economic relevance for the luxury industry (McKinsey, 2019).

This study focuses on the segment of post-1990s young Chinese adults whose consumption behavior differs from that of their parents and international peers because of their economic prowess, always-online presence, international mobility and taste for luxury consumption (Chung *et al.*, 2009; Godart and Zhao, 2014; Jiang *et al.*, 2022; Ngai and Cho, 2012). As the luxury consumption practices of the post-1990s generation in China lack sufficient research, this study proposes the following research question: *What are the new forms of luxury consumption among the post-1990s generation of Chinese young adults?*

The paper reports on an in-depth qualitative study of how young adult luxury consumers who self-identify as Chinese engage in new forms of luxury consumption; specifically, their preferences for luxury brand collaborations. Table 1 contains examples of collaborations between luxury brands and odd non-luxury partners.

This study contributes to unconventional luxury (Thomsen *et al.*, 2020), new forms of luxury consumption (Christodoulides *et al.*, 2021) and international luxury research (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2022). Unconventional luxury emphasizes experiential (Holmqvist *et al.*, 2020a; von Wallpach *et al.*, 2020) and digital (Creevey *et al.*, 2022; Holmqvist *et al.*, 2020b) aspects of luxury. This paper extends this field by proposing alternative understandings that constitute the markers of singularity and exclusivity in luxury. Unusual collaborations constitute convey rarity and exclusivity because the collections will not repeat. For international luxury (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2022), this study breaks down a generational approach to Chinese consumption; hence, adding nuance to existing research that approaches the country as a unit of analysis. Building upon the generational divide in Chinese luxury consumption (Byun *et al.*, 2020; Godart and Zhao, 2014; Jiang *et al.*, 2022; Zhang and Zhao, 2019), this paper conceptualizes how young Chinese consumers use luxury to navigate transient social media, ephemeral digital possessions and fleeting experiences.

2. Conceptual framework

The conceptualization of luxury in the literature is evolving (Christodoulides and Wiedmann, 2022). Early researchers studied the characteristics of luxury goods because these products do not conform to the economic logic of supply and demand. Luxury goods offer signals of social status, prestige and exclusivity (Grossman and Shapiro, 1988). Economists studying luxury goods focused on pricing, as items such as private jets and yachts were prohibitively expensive for most people.

Brand	Year	Design collaboration	Description	Type of collaboration
Gucci (apparel)	2019	Disney (entertainment)	Gucci's spring-summer collection featured a collaboration to celebrate Mickey Mouse's 90th Anniversary	Icon of popular culture
Louis Vuitton (luxury)	2019	League of Legends (videogame)	Louis Vuitton launched a product line for video game League of Legends	Online gaming and digital culture
Balenciaga	2021	Afterworld (videogame)	Balenciaga used the videogame Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow to release its collection	Online gaming and digital culture
Gucci (apparel)	2021	Doraemon (cartoon character)	Gucci's collection celebrated the beloved character from Japanese Manga	Icon of popular culture
Estée Lauder (cosmetics)	2021/ 2023	Shushu Tong (Chinese fashion designer)	The leading beauty brand partnered with a homegrown fashion designer brand to offer a limited-edition box celebrating the Qixi Festival	Homegrown designers
Glenfiddich (whiskey)	2021	Stephanie Fung (Digital artist)	The whiskey brand paired with a local digital artist to produce a collection of NFTs	NFT digital fashion collection
Perfect Diary (cosmetics)	2021	Arena Of Valor (Videogame)	The cosmetics brand launched a brand extension to celebrate "singles' day"	Online gaming and digital culture

Source(s): Own creation based on the press releases by the brands (“Balenciaga | Fall 21 | Press”, 2021; Galvan, 2018; Lozano, 2019; Wu, 2023)

Table 1.
Examples of luxury design collaborations

More recently, luxury has been conceptualized as a business strategy (Hoffman and Coste-Maniere, 2012), in which luxury managers create a sense of exclusivity by embedding meanings of singularity and uniqueness into commercial offerings. For example, by emphasizing heritage, provenience and aesthetics, luxury brands sell cosmetics and personal care products as luxury items even if these product categories are not intrinsically luxurious. As a result, luxury managers use tools, including a high price tag, to convey a sense of exclusivity, the characteristic without which luxury cannot exist (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009, p. 315). Table 2 proposes a glossary of concepts.

2.1 Conventional luxury

The conventional understanding of luxury in the literature conceptualizes luxury goods as high-quality products sold at high prices for wealthy buyers (Ko *et al.*, 2019), conveying superior quality (Dubois and Duquesne, 1993). Luxury brands are crucial for the luxury strategy as they are symbols imbuing authenticity, prestige and exclusivity to build a sense of uniqueness worthy of commanding premium prices (Ko *et al.*, 2019, p. 406). As a business strategy (Kapferer, 2015; Kapferer and Bastien, 2017), luxury conveys a sense of singularity through the following three dimensions: (1) timelessness, (2) inaccessibility and (3) tradition.

Timelessness refers to the permanence of luxury over time, resisting the whims of fashion fads and the passage of time. “The perfect luxury product should in fact be timelessness, a concept that is antithetic to that of obsolescence called on by price reduction” (Hoffman and Coste-Maniere, 2012, p. 94). Whereas fashion is associated with changing trends, luxury has been considered timeless, because durable materials, fine artisanship and classic design signal wealth permanence. The symbols of luxury encapsulate lasting wealth and ageless

Key concept	Definition	References	Example
Luxury good	Products which are not necessary, or essential, but are hedonic, and highly desired by wealthy or affluent people to signal social exclusivity	Grossman and Shapiro (1988)	Some goods are perceived as luxurious because they are unaffordable to most people – e.g. yachts, private jets, and mansions
Luxury brand	An offering that consumers perceive to be of high quality and worthy of commanding premium price. It conveys a prestigious image due to authentic and desirable benefits that resonate with consumers	Ko <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Brands like Louis Vuitton, Dolce & Gabbana, Givenchy, and Balenciaga convey prestigious images to the owners
Luxury strategy	The luxury strategy aims at creating the highest brand value and pricing power by leveraging all intangible elements of singularity, i.e. time, heritage, country of origin, craftsmanship, man-made, small series, prestigious clients, etc.	Bastien (2015), Kapferer and Bastien (2017)	Managers use a luxury strategy to transform goods to be perceived as luxurious even though they are for mass consumption – e.g. personal care and cosmetics
Unconventional luxury	Whereas traditional views on luxury emphasize intrinsic product-focused traits, unconventional luxury focuses on the epistemologically scarce, experiential, and agentic elements of luxury	Holmqvist <i>et al.</i> (2020a, 2020b) Thomsen <i>et al.</i> (2020, p. 442)	Consumers seek “moments of luxury” to recreate hedonic escapism from their daily routines

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table 2.
Glossary of key
concepts in the luxury
literature

esthetics. For example, precious stones and rare metals signal that an object will retain financial value over time and classic designs signal resilience to changing tastes.

Exclusivity is “one of the keywords of luxury” (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012, p. 85). There is no luxury without “the feeling of exclusivity” (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012, p. 51), which is “the feeling of having one’s social standing reinforced through the brand, the feeling of being a special person” (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012, p. 20). Veblen’s theory of the leisure class is foundational in luxury as it describes how members of the upper class use luxurious goods and leisure activities to show their wealth (Veblen, 2009). Today, luxury brands remain tokens of status, and thus, “the conventional understanding of luxury remains centered on how wealthy consumers display signals to convey social exclusivity” (Holmqvist *et al.*, 2020a, p. 503). Inaccessibility operationalizes exclusivity by using taste regimes and insider codes to establish social distinctions and to create boundaries between insiders and outsiders. The notion of “taste regimes” means the concerted judgments of esthetic qualities, consecrated through cultural competence and social credit (Arsel and Bean, 2013). For example, coveted groups use taste regimes, like art appreciation, to signify social class.

When taste regimes remain stable through time, they become tradition, which is an important dimension of luxury (Holmqvist *et al.*, 2021). It codifies symbolic meanings, solidifying them through rituals that pass down through time (Langlois, 2001). Signifiers can become traditions because they solidify as they pass from the past to the present, reifying unwritten rules. Research shows the importance of tradition for luxury consumption (Schade *et al.*, 2016) because the enactment of long-standing social rituals encapsulates the present as an outcome of the past (e.g. heritage and country of origin).

2.2 Unconventional luxury

Unconventional luxury is a recent stream (Thomsen *et al.*, 2020) that studies alternative ways to convey exclusivity and uniqueness in digital and experiential contexts. For example, digital possessions can be perceived as luxurious even though they lack the conventional markings of permanence (Holmqvist *et al.*, 2020b), and experiences can be luxurious by enabling hedonic escape from daily routine (Holmqvist *et al.*, 2020a).

At its core, unconventional luxury studies the paradox of rarity. Whereas most people should be aware of luxury brands, the offering must appear out of reach (Kapferer and Bastien, 2017; Kapferer and Valette-Florence, 2022). Luxury brands cast an aura of unattainable rareness by evoking prestige that is aspirational and singular. For Kapferer (2012), one way to create rarity is the *cult of the designer*, in the name of the creator and its singular esthetics convey a sense of uniqueness.

New forms of luxury consumption are emerging in the sharing economy (Christodoulides *et al.*, 2021; Holmqvist *et al.*, 2020b). Some examples include co-ownership and second-hand luxury (Bardhi *et al.*, 2020). A puzzling aspect of luxury in the sharing economy is its temporality (Christodoulides *et al.*, 2021, p. 93), like leasing a supercar for an evening or posting fleeting experiences on Instagram. Luxury brand extensions at accessible prices are other emerging forms of luxury (Kapferer and Laurent, 2016). This *democratization* of luxury requires unconventional strategies to create and maintain a sense of rarity (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2021), including personalization, limited collections and partnerships.

2.3 Luxury consumption in China: a generational divide

The luxury industry is increasingly focusing on China. For the consultancy firm McKinsey, “Chinese consumers are now the engine of worldwide growth in luxury spending” (Kim *et al.*, 2019, p. 1), driven in part by a cohort of consumers “born between 1980 and 2015 [. . .] are reshaping global luxury” (McKinsey, 2019, p. 1). This generational divide is a uniquely Chinese phenomenon (Jiang and Shan, 2018; Ngai and Cho, 2012) that stems from 1990s economic reforms and the one-child policy.

China’s economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping during the 1990s incentivized foreign investment, including luxury-related investment (Rovai, 2014, 2016), in special economic zones in Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Xiamen. Attracted by rapid urbanization and the concentration of wealthy individuals in a handful of cities, global luxury brands such as Hermès, Cartier and Chanel opened stores in first-tier cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

The one-child policy also shaped China’s social fabric. This policy is a government program that started in 1979 to restrict Chinese families to one child each; hence, shaping a generation for which one child is the center of attention of the extended family (Cameron *et al.*, 2013; Fong, 2016). One child is the sole recipient of emotional and financial resources in the family. In 2016, the two-child policy replaced the one-child policy. In 2021, the policy allowed three children.

During the 1990s, media reports called the segment “Little Emperors” and “Little Empresses” to emphasize how parents and grandparents offered undivided attention and financial support to a single child (Byun *et al.*, 2020; Fastoso *et al.*, 2018). Contrary to its ostensive meaning, the little emperors’ segment is not a group of entitled children. The cohort encompasses young adults from across society who are not necessarily narcissists. What they do have in common is the opportunity to express themselves in ways that their parents could not—through consumption (Cappellini and Yen, 2013).

From a market segmentation perspective (Diaz Ruiz and Kjellberg, 2020), the organic or *feral* categorizations that analysts use to classify Chinese consumers are relevant to understand how the label “little emperors” relates to local market conditions. Media, journalists and analysts coined the term to represent local realities without employing formal market research techniques. However, even though the segment is not backed by formal

market research, it is insightful because it contains the cultural interpretations by China's longtime observers.

Analysts often subdivide the cohort into two: an affluent post-1980s generation consolidating their careers and the post-1990s generation characterized by social media savviness (McKinsey, 2019). This study focuses on the post-1990s generation, as they navigate influencers, online media, video games and designers, following trends that shift continuously via social media apps such as WeChat, Douyin, Weibo and Xiaohongshu.

Research into the consumption patterns of young Chinese adults (post-1990s) shows that the ownership and display of designer brands constitute a form of social capital needed to advance in society (Kim *et al.*, 2019). One reason is that consumption in China still reflects a "Confucian worldview" in which community is essential (Rovai, 2016, p. 77). Social signifiers position people under the social hierarchy of a reference group (Mainolfi, 2020, p. 291). However, younger people struggle in a digitally connected world because the social signifiers shift per the relentless stream of online content and social media influencers.

Luxury brands targeting young Chinese consumers are pivoting to online culture, which is not luxury's traditional area of expertise (Holmqvist *et al.*, 2020b). However, brands are innovating digital strategies. For example, Balenciaga released digital skins and virtual accouterments for the videogame Fortnite (Parkes, 2021), and Louis Vuitton designed the look of a popular character in the videogame League of Legends (Favis, 2020). A pivot online to collaborations with videogame franchises and digital pop culture constitutes an ongoing reconfiguration of luxury that the literature is yet to conceptualize fully.

Along with their digital savviness, international mobility is relevant. Industry reports show that Chinese young adults make luxury purchases abroad, "a majority of them, about 70%, will be doing their luxury spending overseas, as a result of an increasing affinity for outbound travel and the price differential resulting from China's import tax regime" (McKinsey, 2019, p. 4).

3. Method

This study is qualitative with an interpretive approach (Doz, 2011), as part of a learning activity in the context of a master's class on cultural consumption. Researchers in management education proposed that merging case study research and student learning in class would be productive (see course research in Christensen and Carlile, 2009). Theory development and teaching can benefit from course research. Enrolling students as course researchers enriches theory building and the student's learning because students shift from being recipients to co-creators of learning. Under the close supervision of the second author, course researchers conducted the fieldwork as part of a postgraduate course focusing on new forms of consumption in Asia.

The investigation required students to conduct, analyze and interpret semi-structured interviews with young adult luxury consumers self-identifying as Chinese. Students discussed the interviews in the context of the literature and presented their findings in course assessments. Students used reflective notes to propose new consumption phenomena. In addition, they learned to develop semi-structured interview guides as part of an in-class workshop. In turn, the authors collaboratively designed and vetted the participant sampling criteria, approved the interview guide and aligned the data-collection procedures to uphold ethics and data transparency. The project sought and received ethics approval according to the Australian code for the responsible conduct of research prior to fieldwork.

Recruitment followed a purposive sampling approach (Gentles *et al.*, 2015), which is a common qualitative sampling technique that uses pre-established judgment criteria to choose participants. Course researchers each had to identify two prospective respondents meeting the criteria of the media descriptions: young adults born in or after the 1990s, self-identifying

as Chinese and consumers of luxury brands. In addition, respondents had to be knowledgeable about unconventional luxury brand collaborations.

As a result, the potential participants were screened using four main criteria: (1) 18–30 years old; (2) identifies as Chinese; (3) in the last two years, has purchased at least one luxury fashion product from a pre-defined list of popular brands (Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Armani, Rolex, Yves Saint Laurent, Dior, Hermès, Burberry, Versace, Fendi, Balenciaga, Moschino, LeSportsac, Miu Miu, Valentino) and (4) is familiar with recent unconventional luxury collaborations from a pre-defined list (LV × LOL, Sims × Moschino, Gucci × Donald Duck, LV × The Adventures of Zoooom with Friends, LeSportsac × Hello Kitty, Miu Miu × Disney, luxury styling in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*).

Course researchers proposed potential respondents and selected respondents who met these criteria. After eliminating three respondents who did not identify as Chinese, the final sample resulted in eighteen interviews. Current guidelines for sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research shows that researchers generally achieve saturation with a range of 9–17 respondents (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022). Table 3 gives a description of the respondents. Most of the participants have pursued opportunities to study and live abroad in Canada, Australia and the United States of America.

The fieldwork included semi-structured interviews with a predesigned guide that covered participants' life narratives, their experiences purchasing personal luxury goods and their views and experiences of unconventional luxury design collaborations. The interview guide further explored the personal and cultural significance of luxury. A semi-structured depth interview format enabled interviewers to cover a set range of topics and provided a basic scaffold for the interview interaction. At the same time, the semi-structured approach allowed interviewers to uncover new themes and issues that are important to participants and that extend beyond the researchers' pre-understanding.

To facilitate an improvisational dimension of the interview, as part of their pre-fieldwork training, each interviewer prepared and practiced interviewing and probing during an in-class workshop. This approach aligns with the flexibility and sensitivity that is a hallmark of qualitative research and promotes a deeper understanding of emerging forms of luxury (Christodoulides and Michaelidou, 2022). To assure data transparency, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Each course researcher submitted a data package that included the consent form, audio recording and verbatim transcription for each interview. Interview data totaled 739 audio minutes and 314 single-spaced pages of transcription. Table 4 contains an illustrative selection of quotes.

Following Christensen and Carlile (2009), course researchers participated in weekly in-class discussions, wrote reflective essays and joined one-on-one consultations. The analysis proceeded through a back-and-forth movement between three levels of analysis (Doz, 2011). The first is a holistic understanding of each participant's narrative through general themes. In the second level, the codes were grouped and re-grouped to build commonalities, variations and tensions across the interviews. For example, while all participants had purchased luxury before and were familiar with unconventional luxury collaborations (Table 1), contestations emerged about whether these luxury collaborations were of "good taste." The third level brought our emergent understanding into conversation with the extant luxury literature, leading us to conceptualize unconventional luxury collaborations as a set of three oppositional meanings, which we discuss below.

4. Findings

4.1 *An ongoing reconfiguration of meanings of luxury*

Whereas the conventional understanding of luxury in the literature emphasizes timelessness, we find that our young Chinese respondents value luxury offerings in which rarity emerges

Pseudonym	Gender, Age	Ethnic Background	Education	Occupation
Caitlyn	F, 23	Chinese, lives in Australia	Graduated University	Radiographer
Jaye	F, 22	Born in New Zealand to Chinese parents; single child; identifies as Chinese	Graduated University	Internship. Applying for Masters in China
Nicole	F, 30	Chinese from Shenzhen, studied in Hong Kong	Graduated University	Senior Analyst
Sarah	F, 22	Chinese, lives in Australia	University Student	Marketing Assistant
Zoe	F, 30	Hong Kong native lives in Canada	Graduated University	Corporate Finance
Maddie	F, 22	Chinese, lives in Australia	University Student	PhD Student
Emily	F, 25	Chinese, lives in Australia	Graduated University	Marketing Specialist
Monica	F, 24	Chinese, lives in France	University Student	Student
May	F, 23	Chinese, lives in the USA	University Student	Internship
Emma	F, 27	Chinese, studied in USA, lives in China	Undisclosed	Officer In Skincare Company
Ian	M, 23	Chinese, lives in Australia	University Student	Postgraduate Student
Harry	M, 22	Chinese, lives in the USA	Graduated University	Marketing
Paula	F, 22	Chinese lives in Canada	Undisclosed	PR Associate in Fashion
Hana	F, 21	Chinese, lives in Australia	Medical Student	Student
Wendy	F, 18	Chinese, lives in Australia	University Student	Communications
Becky	F, 22	Chinese, studied in the U.K., lives in China	Graduated University	Finance
Shan	F, 24	Chinese, lives in Korea	Graduated University	Architect
Joanne	F, 27	Chinese lives in Canada	Graduated University	Communications Officer

Table 3.

Respondents' profiles

Source(s): Authors' creation based on fieldwork

through somewhat odd collaborations. Even though the branding literature establishes that brands should find matching partners (Michel and Willing, 2020), our respondents enthusiastically discuss how luxury brands are exciting when they collaborate with unconventional partners.

Collaborations become a source of rarity for a generation that is accustomed to luxury consumption. As Paula recalls, luxury consumption is so intertwined in daily life that "everyone" seems to own luxury brands. A high level of luxury use means that the luxury brand cannot be a source of distinction, but instead, it becomes the norm.

I feel like in China it [luxury] is somewhat part of our culture. [. . .] Now, I feel like it's a norm in China, almost everyone I know has luxury products. [. . .] I remember going to middle school. Everyone had a backpack that was Chanel or Louis. So, it starts off pretty young. [. . .] The state I come from is called Zhejiang; [it is] one of the most . . . it is the richest state in China. So, everyone has luxury products there. So, it's very common. For example, with Lamborghinis, I feel like we are more likely to be surprised with Lamborghinis or Ferraris or whatsoever in North America. (Paula, interview)

Respondent	Quote
May	Gucci, this year, they have collaborated with Doraemon, the cartoon. I shared it with my friends, I told them that I want that, I felt like cute, because the Year of Cow, for this year, right? I found this one, really cute, and I want it
Jaye	It's a culture there (in China). It is a culture of buying luxury brands. In China, if you go on the streets, the subway, in the shopping malls, people just wear luxury brands. Everyone. Everyone wears them. (...) With a Gucci classic, you're just going to look the same as everyone else. But if you have a playful personality, or youthfulness, then you want to show it. You want to show people that I have that side of me. I might go for the collaboration instead of a classic
Shan	I like collaborations because they mark something special, and they do not come back. I remember this bag that I liked, and it sold out completely. I couldn't purchase the bag that I wanted, it was like a collaboration thing, and I didn't want a classic LV backpack. So, if I buy a collab, no one else will have it
Nicole	Take me as an example. As a senior analyst in the company, when the new interns come in, they are always nervous to face me. But, if they think my bag is cute, I think it will reduce nervousness. If my leader uses this bag, I will think she's so nice, easy going, and could be friends
Emily	Old school kind of cartoons are for people in their mid-20s or late 20's. So, they are in my era, I was born in 1998 and growing up, I watched Doremon and Disney shows, Archie comics were quite big back then and Pokémon also. The kids now play League of Legends and video games kind of thing, so I am not aware of that
Becky	I got luxury stuff from a really young age. I think, when I grew up, my mum loves to have a lot of bags and shoes and all that stuff. So, I think a lot of that is influenced by her. I wouldn't be able to pinpoint an exact age, probably primary school, but my mom gave me luxury backpacks, that kind of thing. (...) Right now, I am a really big fan of Balenciaga. I really like their style, it's very alternative and very different. But it's also quite simple in some of their pieces, so I do like that. They are everywhere online. They popped up on my feed and I think 'Hey! that looks quite interesting.'
Joanne	I am careful with the kind of image I want to portray. To me having a cartoon character is more like fun and young, it is for teenagers. But the kind of vibe I want to portray is like calmer and more professional, more mature. When I go to the office, I don't think I would bring a bag with a cartoon character on it, because I want to be taken seriously
Monica	Yeah, I think that luxury brands really want to seduce youngsters because their purchasing power is so strong. I think in this generation, they are used to getting everything from their parents. (...) and they are all now playing Fortnite, LoL (League of Legends), and Honor of Kings, so no surprise
Caitlyn	I did buy a collaboration from Louis Vuitton before as well but it's Supreme and Louis Vuitton. [...] When they collaborate, it's like a cool and high-end kind of thing

Source(s): Own creation based on the authors' fieldwork

Table 4.
Illustrative quotes

Our respondents are familiar with luxury brands from an early age. For instance, Paula reflects upon her upbringing in the province of Zhejiang, China, where even middle-school pupils wear designer backpacks to school. This high penetration of luxury consumption does not mean that everyone is from the upper social class. Instead, it means that even parents who cannot entirely afford luxury brands must equip their children with these items.

The broad access to luxury brands affects what luxury means to Chinese society. Whereas the luxury strategy in the West intends to emphasize social distinctions, the role of luxury changes when most people around the consumer own and display luxury brands. The social pressure transforms luxury consumption into a tool for *fitting in* with the group, rather than *standing out*. In turn, brands must find ways to create a sense of uniqueness and rarity, including via design collaborations, limited editions and collectibles that appear to increase the perceived rarity of an offering.

I just bought it [showing necklace], maybe two weeks or three weeks ago, in Chengdu. I can tell you this brand, I think it's called the Buccellati [. . .] it is (a limited edition celebrating) the 100th anniversary of the brand, so they tell me there are only a thousand items in the whole world! I mean, girl, if you hear that, you definitely want to buy it, and you really want one of them. [. . .] I felt like it is unique because people will buy something like Tiffany or Chanel. I felt like there are a lot of people wearing those brands. But for this one, people just, maybe, they will think I am unique! (May, interview)

Table 4 conceptualizes three inversions transforming the conventional elements of luxury into unconventional meanings present in Chinese luxury consumption. These inversions change how consumers decode meanings of uniqueness, irreplaceability and superior value. For instance, whereas the conventional codes of luxury emphasize timelessness, our respondents discuss luxury through ephemerality. While conventional luxury constructs meanings of exclusivity through taste distinctions, our respondents find luxury brands relatable through their lens of Chinese culture and youth-oriented activities. Finally, while luxury brands tend to emphasize their tradition, our respondents emphasize playfulness.

4.2 Ephemeral vs. timeless

Unconventional collaborations are an alternative source of rarity because they are transient and ephemeral. Ephemeral consumption means that activities and offerings constitute, disperse and reconstitute in ways that are recognizable but never identical (Diaz Ruiz *et al.*, 2020, p. 1019). Luxury brand collaborations are ephemeral when they shift from luxury's focus on permanence. Instead of a durable lasting object, collaborations are rare because they are transitory, existing only briefly.

Limited editions will not be repeated. As Ian describes, "*I like the idea because it's limited; everyone wants to buy the product, which is like special because you only got limited numbers, so I think it's like a special meaning.*" Therefore, brief collaborations add a layer of ephemeral uniqueness because they are available for a limited time.

In the literature, conventional luxury accentuates fine materials, craftsmanship and design to confer the impression of permanence. For example, a Tiffany jewel is valuable because its timeless design and quality materials mean that the object will retain financial value in the future. However, designer collaborations can make other offerings seem irreplaceable. For example, luxury brand Balenciaga's collaboration with The Simpsons and Fortnite has been received positively (Parkes, 2021), even if the partnering brands may lack a clear fit.

Collaborations between luxury brands and odd partners convey hype because of the implicit promise that they will exist once. One of our respondents, Emma, finds luxury brand collaborations exciting. She views her Gucci purchase as rare because it is the outcome of an ephemeral collaboration with a well-known art museum. She considers it important that others recognize all three brands: Gucci, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and New York.

I bought one t-shirt, Gucci; they collaborated with MET Museum in New York. I think that was the first item that I bought from Gucci. The t-shirt price in Gucci, sometimes, I felt like it was a little higher than what I am thinking about, but because it is a collaboration with the MET Museum, I bought it. Because they printed words on the t-shirts, and they printed the whole building on the t-shirt. I felt like that was special. And yeah . . . especially the color because that t-shirt is pink! [. . .] I am the type of person I don't care what [the words printed in the t-shirt] say. Words from other people. [The] only [thing] I am thinking about is [if] I wear it, and it makes me happy, that's it. (Emma, interview)

In the literature, luxury should resist fads (Kapferer and Bastien, 2017), and yet collaborations work through fads to build a sense of rarity. Luxury brands appeal to the younger generation through messages and icons that are familiar to the shifting tastes of online culture.

I think adding, like . . . collaborations with cartoons or anime could be cute. [. . .] And also, I think many of my friends like the collaborations with cartoons that brands like Louis Vuitton did. I have many friends that are, they are very rich, and they buy them a lot, like very frequently.

Interviewer: So, could you say that they buy it because it's cute or 'cause it's in the luxury category?

I think for both reasons, and also, for me more of the latter, more like because of its luxury. [...] I think that cobrand add[s] a new element to the luxury brand. (Harry, interview)

If design collaborations are too common, or last for too long, then the illusion of singularity dissipates. Design collaborations infuse the idea of uniqueness because the object is hard to find, which implies that not all consumers may purchase them. Only those in the know can hope to obtain the collaboration.

Most of my friends from China . . . They like to wear more flashy, like, these collaboration designs. I imagine, because of cultural differences, how they perceive things. Like, in China it's, like, if you have wealth, you want to show it. Based on what I see when I go to China, sometimes people are, like, 'Oh! Wow, your limited edition! Where? How did you get this? Oh my gosh! You must have connections.' (Maddie, interview)

4.3 Trendy vs. inaccessible

Our data shows that the rise of luxury brand consumption in China does not necessarily reflect the taste regimes of the upper class. Whereas luxury brands in Europe and the United States draw from the codes of art and high culture associated with the upper social class of Western societies, we find that our Chinese respondents draw from the ever-shifting trends of online culture. Luxury references in China include cultural heritage, online culture and global entertainment. These markings signal popular accessibility rather than inaccessibility.

I like it because, it is just like, for example, Hello Kitty. It's a people's favorite back to when they're in child, you know. So, I think it's a really good combination of, like, a child's favorite image with those luxury brands. (Ian, interview)

By trendiness we mean that luxury works through a paradox in which increasing the public relatedness of the offering also increases its perceived rarity. Previously, the literature on luxury distanced luxury brands from popular culture (Veblen, 2009). Yet our respondents observed how luxury brands draw inspiration from and embed themselves with, popular online culture to make their offerings relatable. One strategy seems to be to appeal to childhood. One example is Gucci's collaboration with Disney, which received multiple mentions.

Disney, for example, I have memories with them. I've been to Disneyland with my parents, and my mom and I are fans of Donald Duck. So, obviously, I have a Donald Duck charm on my [Pandora] bracelet. And that's what I think, it's really cute. (Paula, interview)

The importance of trendiness of brand collaborations remains unclear. It is possible that the constant flow of unpredictable partners may be detrimental to a luxury brand's carefully curated image. For example, Maddie reflected upon how a collaboration with a video game with a "toxic" community may create a negative image for the brand. However, she refers only to the specific collaboration; otherwise, she speaks positively of Louis Vuitton.

Sometimes, some collaborations have bad connotations. The reason I would not buy a Louis Vuitton League of Legends bag is . . . I support the business and play the game, but it is because the community is not very good, it is very toxic, like, you don't want to be holding something like that. (Maddie, interview)

The lack of fit between odd partners may be a challenge, as popular franchises may reduce the aspirational aura of luxury brands. In her interview, Caitlyn explains that unconventional collaborations risk dispelling a luxury brand's aura of inaccessibility.

It does look, erm . . . out of my taste. I don't think it's working well together. [...] To be honest, you know . . . those characters, those Disney and Hello Kitty kind of characters, like companies give me a direct *laughs* perception of feeling, like . . . is this high luxury? You destroy the feeling. I'm just

going to be honest with you, it does look cheap. *laughs* [...] The company is trying to set up an image of high-end, you know, not approachable, um . . . very . . . you know, luxurious. And now they just . . . because they wanted to expand the consumer population, they do all those collaborations. I feel like that's kind of damaging their brand image. (Caitlyn, interview)

4.4 Playful vs. traditional

Unconventional luxury brand collaborations are rebellious, youthful, colorful and loud. These collaborations are unlike conventional luxury offerings emphasizing quiet refinement and tradition. One example of the contrast between playfulness and tradition is South Korean rapper PSY's "Gangnam Style," which mixes sleek and colorful esthetics with luxury brands in his record-breaking viral song that topped music charts. It offers social commentary on gentrification, by superimposing banality with traditional working-class activities. The new rich kids form a microcosm of desire, showboating and envy. The song discusses the divergences between the 'new money' social group and the traditional values of merit, hard work and sacrifice.

For unconventional luxury collaborations, a playful tone flirts with a sort of rebelliousness that sometimes irks or outrages older audiences for whom cultured, refined taste signals tradition. The juxtaposition between playfulness and tradition may create something unique, but it also conjures the risk of alienating conservative consumers of luxury because the design does not maintain its value over time. Harry acknowledges that unconventional luxury collaborations may be too childish for audiences for whom luxury equals tradition and class.

People probably see you as children instead of adults. [...] Most of my clothing [is bright, fresh, and colorful], except for the suits and the shirts. For those more formal ones, I would buy them from either Armani or Valentino or Gucci. And for the rest, just like normal style ones; [I] buy those ones with fresher designs and more like, I don't know how to describe, but like street style. [...] What I think is, like LV, Chanel, or Gucci, or maybe Givenchy. Yeah, of course, they must have their own classical styles, because that's where their things get started, and they have to keep that trend. Because that was classical. So, I mean it is like the CD, I mean Christian Dior, people nowadays still remember the New Look of that suit, so that's the milestone of the whole fashion design story. [...] They want to have something new to break through like old-fashioned limits. (Harry, interview)

For some young consumers, new bolder designs mark milestones of design history that break apart from old conventions. When luxury brands choose design collaboration partners correctly, the result blends elements of timelessness with the uniqueness of a one-time outcome that should not return. In her interview, Maddie reflects upon this juxtaposition, explaining that her mum buys luxury she describes as "cute," but she also describes how a playful collaboration may be "tacky, childish, wrong, and even embarrassing."

I find it a little bit tacky. [...] Honey, think about it. I'll give you an example. You buy that Doraemon Gucci sneaker; will you be wearing this at 28 [years old]? Maybe, maybe, it could be a small chance, but at 33? There is pretty much no chance unless you're a real hipster mum. [...] My mum loves [this] cartoon stuff and she's 50. She [my mum] got something like a cartoon from LV (Louis Vuitton), I don't know what it was, but I was just like 'wow' that is so childish. You be you, mum, you be happy. Like the recent cartoon LV, she went to my dad, and [she] said: 'I may be a bit too old for this, should I return it?' That is what she said, and I said: Yes, she should [return it], but she kept it. [...] She feels pretty proud, but I think a lot of them were very wrong. . . . Do what you want, do what makes you happy. Who cares about other people at the end of the day? It is yourself that you should love. Maybe I should be like my mum. I don't know, it's so embarrassing. (Maddie, interview)

5. Discussion

This study conceptualizes the emergence of a new form of luxury consumption characterized by short-lived, ephemeral collaborations between luxury brands and odd or unusual partners. This section conceptualizes unconventional luxury brand collaborations, starting

with a definition. Luxury brand collaborations are partnerships between luxury brands in which their images, legacies and values intertwine. Luxury brand collaborations are *unconventional* when luxury brands partner with non-luxury brands or designers seemingly on the opposite spectrum in terms of design, esthetics, positioning and values. Today’s unprecedented collaborations include luxury fashion houses partnering with streetwear brands, high-end designers collaborating with celebrity pop stars, artisan analog brands with digital games and global brands working together with local designers. Indeed, it appears that in luxury branding, opposites attract.

Previous research presented an overview of new forms of luxury consumption (Christodoulides *et al.*, 2021). This paper extends this research by conceptualizing unconventional luxury brand collaborations through the following three dimensions: *ephemeral*, *trendy* and *playful* (Table 5).

Ephemerality is a characteristic of being transitory, existing only briefly (Diaz Ruiz *et al.*, 2020; Holmqvist *et al.*, 2020a). Unconventional luxury brand collaborations play with ephemerality by releasing unexpected and limited collections to keep consumers surprised and in a constant state of expectation. Luxury brands use collaborations to project a sense of

Conventional luxury		Example	Unconventional luxury		Example
Concept	Definition		Concept	Definition	
<i>Timeless</i>	The permanence of materials, social codes, and esthetics confer the impression of permanence, resisting the whims of fashion and the passage of time	Luxury watches capture long-lasting design features that defy the passage of time and the whims of fads	<i>Ephemeral</i>	The characteristic of being transitory, existing only briefly. Collaborations are special and rare when they exist for a limited time and will not be repeated	Limited-edition accouterments that capture a passing context, such as Gucci’s celebration of Mickey Mouse’s 90th anniversary
<i>Inaccessible</i>	The operationalization of exclusivity through taste regimes creates social distinctions and barriers	Fondazione Prada in Milan and Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris intertwine appreciation of art with luxurious taste	<i>Trendy</i>	The ability to navigate the ebbs and flows of social media to capture novelty and remain popular in the prevailing styles and preferences	Luxury brand FENDI collaborates with shapewear brand SKIMS to create a body-positive collection with larger sizes
<i>Tradition</i>	The solidification of codes, practices, and rituals as they pass down through time. The present is an outcome of the past	Country clubs limit the accessibility to outsiders, creating cliques of “old money” in which membership equals tradition	<i>Playful</i>	The opportunity to connect with a youthful audience by not being too serious and break apart from old conventions	“999” is a Chinese cold and flu remedy. To rejuvenate its image and attract young consumers, the brand created a line of fashion-ready wearables meant to be shared on social media

Source(s): The authors

Table 5.
Conventional and
unconventional
meanings in luxury

uniqueness by promising that each collection is rare because it will not be repeated. This notion challenges Hoffman and Coste-Maniere (2012), who assert that luxury products should be timeless and instead supports Bardhi *et al.* (2020), who conceptualize luxury as “liquid,” or in a continuous state of flow. Moreover, ephemeral luxury consumption has been conceptualized before, but from the consumer perspective as a hedonic escapist moment (Holmqvist *et al.*, 2020a). Extending Holmqvist *et al.* (2020a), this paper conceptualizes ephemerality as a luxury branding strategy. In contrast with previous research asserting that planned obsolescence is the antithesis of luxury (Hoffman and Coste-Maniere, 2012; Kapferer and Bastien, 2012), unconventional luxury brand collaborations demonstrate that short-lived initiatives are possible.

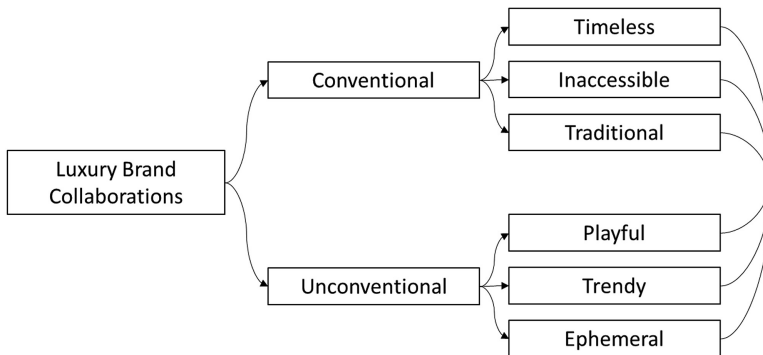
Trendiness is the ability of luxury brands to navigate the constantly shifting social dynamics and preferences of social media to capture novelty and remain popular in the prevailing styles and fashion, especially online. Unconventional luxury brand collaborations allow luxury houses to complement their images of tradition and wealth with the allure of passing fads without compromising their own brand image. Extending Holmqvist *et al.* (2021), this paper conceptualizes how unconventional partnerships may open alternative paths to navigate between luxury innovation and tradition in digital environments. Moreover, this paper adds new dimensionality to unconventional luxury (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2021; Thomsen *et al.*, 2020) by demonstrating that luxury brands must choose partners wisely to ensure that the collaboration is trendy *and* reinforces luxury’s aura of exclusivity. Suitable partners for luxury brands have high street credibility and capture the defining spirit or mood of current times. One example is the collaboration between Fendi and the American shapewear brand Skims, focusing on body positivity and inclusive sizes (Fendi × Skims). The collaboration responds to growing frustration with body sizes in luxury brands (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013). Fendi can tap into the body-positive market with the collaboration while maintaining an aura of exclusivity in their regular collection.

Playfulness opens an opportunity for luxury brands to explore new boundaries (Diaz Ruiz and Makkar, 2021). Unconventional luxury brand collaborations enable luxury brands to use design choices to connect with youthful audiences who have various interests. For instance, through eSports, video games, anime and pop culture, luxury brands delve into a new playground. The notion of playfulness extends previous research on unconventional luxury (Thomsen *et al.*, 2020) because it provides alternatives to appeal high-net-worth individuals through their hobbies.

Unconventional luxury brand collaborations do not *replace* conventional luxury; instead, they *complexify* luxury. Figure 1 shows the interplay of conventional and unconventional elements in luxury brand collaborations. Ephemerality, trendiness and playfulness are tools that luxury managers can use to enhance the conventional repertoire of luxury strategies. The unconventional elements in this paper complement conventional elements of luxury, like tradition, exclusivity and timelessness. Both sets of tools complement each other to raise the expectation of the rarity and unexpectedness of limited collections. Luxury brand managers must design collaborations to convey a sense of novelty, uniqueness and exclusivity.

5.1 Implications for luxury branding in China

The literature on luxury in China is developing into a distinctive research stream because of China’s commercial importance for the luxury industry (McKinsey, 2019). This study finds evidence of the re-stratification of Chinese society, as the post-1990s generation navigates a heavily digitalized online culture. Young adult consumers are using luxury in ways that their parents did not, like using luxury to *stand out* from their elders while simultaneously *fitting in* with an always-online group characterized by catching up through an endless stream of newness and fleeting fame on social media. By playing with unconventional luxury offerings, Chinese luxury consumers assemble contrasts that create even more nuances in the luxury status game, becoming *tastemakers* that luxury brands cannot afford to ignore.



Source(s): The authors

Figure 1. Interplay of conventional and unconventional elements in luxury brand collaborations

To connect with younger consumers, luxury brands cannot take themselves too seriously and become a little bit playful in their offerings. Luxury brand collaborations offer an opportunity to create a dialog with consumers that value fun, without alienating more traditional consumers. The resulting offering creates uniqueness by balancing the cultural accessibility of icons of popular culture with the aura of exclusivity of luxury brands. Moreover, luxury strategists can use brand collaborations to create legitimacy in the Chinese market by choosing partners wisely and restricting these collaborations to one-off appearances. For instance, collaborations with local designers and influencers can help to build cultural legitimacy for foreign brands.

Brand strategists interested in the Chinese market may be aware of cultural differences, such as face-saving, gift-giving and collectivism (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). For the younger generation, luxury consumption involves navigating the ebbs and flows of social media, internet fame and passing fads. To connect with the Chinese post-1990s generation, luxury brands must balance ephemerality and playfulness to create exciting offerings by emphasizing the uniqueness and irreplaceability of limited collaborations.

5.2 Future research agenda

Unconventional luxury brand collaborations should open exciting research opportunities for the luxury, branding and international marketing fields. This study contributes primarily to unconventional luxury (Thomsen *et al.*, 2020) and new forms of luxury consumption (Christodoulides *et al.*, 2021). However, the qualitative nature of this study and our emphasis on China prevents us from generalizing to the whole luxury industry. Further research needs to build on and validate its effects on the global luxury market. For example, unconventional collaborations may be strategies that non-luxury brands can use. Brand researchers may wish to investigate successful brand collaborations with odd or unusual partners, which seemingly lack fit. In fact, unconventional brand collaborations may challenge the orthodoxy of *brand fit* (van der Lans *et al.*, 2014), which tends to focus on brand similarities, not complementarities. Table 6 introduces opportunities for further research.

Whereas China's importance to the luxury industry is evident, most reports refer to its purchasing power and appetite for shopping luxury goods (D'Arpizio *et al.*, 2021; IPSOS, 2020). China's importance today is as a shopper, not as a producer or tastemaker. However, China's role can change. By imposing unique preferences and taste, Chinese consumers can influence the development of trends and offerings. Future research can study whether Chinese consumers establish new consumer trends, potentially influencing taste globally.

Table 6.
Future research
agenda

Research Areas	Examples of Research Questions
Research Area 1: <i>Unconventional Brand Collaborations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Are unconventional brand collaborations specific to luxury brands? ➤ What are the antecedents and consequences of successful brand collaborations? ➤ Is the “brand fit” notion relevant to unconventional brand collaborations? ➤ Are there any boundaries to the collaborations? For example, how long can an unconventional brand collaboration exist without triggering backlash? ➤ Can the phenomenon of unconventional brand collaborations generalize beyond China?
Research Area 2 <i>The effects of unconventional collaborations on luxury brands</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ To what extent unconventional brand collaborations can apply to digital possessions? ➤ What are the effects of unconventional collaborations for luxury brands? ➤ To what extent do unconventional collaborations diminish perceptions of exclusivity for luxury brands?
Research Area 3 <i>A nuanced approach to luxury research in China</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What nuances of luxury consumption in China exist? ➤ Can Chinese luxury consumption be conceptualized through subcultures, communities, or tribes? ➤ Are Chinese consumers shifting from buyers to tastemakers? ➤ Is Chinese luxury consumption influencing how global luxury brands operate? ➤ What new forms of luxury consumption emerge in China?
Source(s): The authors	

As China’s economic prowess grows, researchers are addressing the particularities of luxury consumption in the Chinese way (Rovai, 2016). In turn, we call for future researchers to approach Chinese consumption as nuanced rather than monolithic. More research is needed to understand consumer segmentation that emerges organically (Diaz Ruiz and Kjellberg, 2020). In other words, the study of consumer culture in China requires nuance. A socio-historic approach to Chinese luxury consumption can open avenues to understanding it better. For example, we know little about China-specific subcultures, brand communities and consumer tribes.

6. Conclusion

As the Chinese market for luxury consumer goods grows, generational dynamics affect luxury meanings. The younger generation of digitally connected Chinese consumers is shaping new forms of luxury consumption. Their demand for *unconventional luxury brand collaborations* recasts luxury meanings from *timeless*, *inaccessible* and *traditional* into *ephemeral*, *trendy* and *playful*. For example, luxury brands join seemingly odd partners at the opposite of the spectrum to build exciting but limited initiatives that build a sense of novelty and rarity because they will not be repeated. Unconventional brand partnerships can potentially rejuvenate luxury’s consumer base.

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