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Luxury Simulacra and Consumer Culture in Urban Consumption Spaces in Jayapura Indonesia

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Research Article

Keywords: luxury simulacra, consumer culture, hyperreality, shopping malls, Jayapura, Papua

Posted Date: November 24th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11396160/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

This article examines how shopping malls, cafés, and digital representations reshape the meanings of luxury and modernity in Jayapura, Papua. Drawing on qualitative interviews with interview participants including Indigenous and non-Indigenous visitors, young Papuan consumers, mall employees, business managers, and customary leaders, it analyzes the relationship between commercial space, consumer culture, and uneven economic circumstances. The findings identify three interconnected processes. First, carefully designed retail environments convey metropolitan sophistication even when visitors come primarily to socialize, browse, or spend time with family. Second, photographs and social media posts transform modest consumption experiences into images that may suggest a more affluent lifestyle than the purchase itself warrants. Third, the accessibility of luxury imagery contrasts with unequal purchasing power, encouraging selective participation, restraint, and negotiation of household priorities. Interpreted through Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and sign value, alongside consumer culture theory and scholarship on urban consumption spaces, these processes show that luxury is neither simply purchased nor uniformly imposed. Its meanings emerge through interactions among commercial staging, social relationships, digital circulation, and local judgments about economic responsibility. The study contributes a situated account of globalization in an Indigenous urban context, where the visible symbols of prosperity circulate more widely than the material capacity to acquire them. Rather than treating hyperreality as the disappearance of lived experience, the article argues that it is produced within everyday practices and inequalities that remain consequential for residents of Jayapura, including how families balance belonging, aspiration, affordability, and responsibility toward their local communities.

Introduction

The development of Jayapura in recent years has seen the rise of modern retail spaces that are gradually transforming the city's landscape while introducing new social experiences for the people of Papua. The emergence of shopping centers such as Jayapura Mall, followed by the growth of cafes, restaurants, and various entertainment venues, not only expands the public's options for meeting daily needs but also provides spaces to showcase personal tastes, build social connections, and express lifestyles associated with modernity. Shopping at malls, spending time at cafes, or visiting entertainment venues have now become activities worth examining, as the value attached to these experiences can extend beyond the goods and services consumed—especially when the ambiance of the venue, the brands, and the imagery on display all play a role in shaping a person's choices. This phenomenon raises questions about how luxury is imagined and displayed in everyday life, especially as social media allows consumption experiences to be documented and shared as part of self-representation in the presence of others. In Jayapura, these changes are unfolding within an urban space marked by a long history of indigenous communities' ties to the land, kinship networks, and local economic practices; thus, the influx of global consumer culture cannot be viewed as a process separate from the social and cultural dynamics of the local community. It is this intersection between the expansion of commercial spaces and the lives of indigenous communities that makes Jayapura a significant case study—not merely as a

city experiencing growth in consumer activity, but as an arena where the meanings of need, luxury, identity, and social prestige have the potential to shift.

Recent studies on consumer culture indicate that shopping malls have evolved beyond their commercial function to become social spaces that produce experiences, identities, and imaginations of modern life, as demonstrated by Lallas and Drosos (2022) in their research on the construction of consumer experiences through mall promotions in Athens. This shift in function is also evident in the research by Pettersen et al. (2023), who found that shopping malls have become places for interaction and recreation even when visitors do not intend to make a purchase, while Junaid et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of service design in shaping visitors' experiences and their desire to return. On the other hand, the rise of digital consumption culture reveals that the shopping experience is increasingly linked to enjoyment, social interaction, and self-representation, as discussed by Gu et al. (2023) regarding shopping experiences through live streams and by Lyu et al. (2023) regarding the use of smartphones in consumption activities. The relationship between consumption and the formation of social identity is further evident in the research by Valsesia and Diehl (2022) on the representation of purchases via social media, Wang et al. (2024) on perceptions of luxury consumption posts, and Sun et al. (2024), who examined the relationship between self-objectification and the consumption of luxury goods. Although these studies have elucidated the relationship between commercial spaces, consumption experiences, and identity representations, a more contextual understanding is still needed regarding how global symbols of luxury are received and interpreted in the lives of urban communities with historical ties to customary lands, including in Jayapura, Papua. Addressing this gap, this study employs the perspectives of simulacra and hyperreality to examine how shopping malls, cafes, and entertainment spaces serve as arenas for the formation of consumer culture, while also exploring how people negotiate images of luxury, aspirations of modernity, and social identity in their daily lives.

Based on this issue, this paper seeks to understand how the emergence of consumer culture in Jayapura is linked to the growth of modern shopping centers and entertainment venues that offer not only goods and services but also experiences, an image of luxury, and opportunities to gain social recognition through consumption. The primary focus is on the process by which activities such as shopping, enjoying entertainment, choosing places to gather, or consuming specific brands acquire broader meanings in people's lives—particularly in relation to the formation of tastes, aspirations of modernity, and the ways in which individuals present themselves in public spaces. To explore these issues, this study employs Jean Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and hyperreality as analytical tools to examine the relationship between representations of luxury and consumption experiences, without overlooking the fact that consumer choices are also influenced by economic capacity, social relationships, and the conditions of daily life. In Jayapura, cafes, restaurants, and entertainment venues serve as the primary contexts for observing how commercial spaces are designed, promoted, used, and interpreted by visitors —including the possibility that a place's appeal is determined more by the image and social experience it offers than by the practical utility of the products available. At the same time, attention to visitors' social backgrounds and their relationship to local values is necessary to understand whether modern consumer culture is accepted as part of urban life, reinterpreted in accordance with community interests,

or, conversely, creates tension with pre-existing social practices. Therefore, this paper aims not only to describe the growth of consumer spaces in Jayapura but also to explain how communities shape, experience, and negotiate consumer culture at the intersection of globalization, urban life, and the social context of Papuan indigenous communities.

The argument developed in this paper stems from the view that the emergence of consumer culture in Jayapura cannot be adequately explained by the growth of shopping centers or increased access to modern goods and services, as more fundamental changes may be taking place in the way people assign value and meaning to the act of consumption itself. From Baudrillard's (1998) perspective, consumption is tied to a system of signs that allows goods and experiences to acquire social value beyond their material functions; thus, luxury is not always determined by a product's utility or price, but also by the image, status differentiation, and recognition associated with the act of consuming it. This line of thought helps explain the possibility that shopping malls, cafes, and entertainment venues in Jayapura function as sites for the production of simulacra of luxury, where images of modern life are shaped through spatial design, commercial promotions, brands, and digital representations—which then serve as references in shaping lifestyle aspirations. For example, a person might choose to visit a particular place not merely to obtain food, drinks, or necessary goods, but because the atmosphere and image of that place allow them to experience or project an affinity with a lifestyle considered modern, prestigious, and socially desirable. Nevertheless, the relationship between representations of luxury and consumption behavior cannot be assumed to apply uniformly, given that differences in economic capacity, generational experiences, social status, and attachment to local cultural values can result in diverse ways of accepting, utilizing, or questioning symbols of global consumption. On this basis, this paper argues that globalization in Jayapura operates, in part, through the formation of desires and representations of consumption that have the potential to produce experiences of hyperreality, while the lives of indigenous communities serve as a crucial context for understanding how these symbols of luxury gain legitimacy, undergo adaptation, or encounter social boundaries in everyday practice.

Research Methods

This study was designed using a qualitative approach with urban ethnography as its method to understand how consumer culture is formed, practiced, and given meaning in the lives of the people of Jayapura, Papua—particularly through the presence of modern shopping centers, cafes, restaurants, and entertainment venues that represent an urban lifestyle. This methodological choice is based on the consideration that consumerism cannot be fully understood through the amount spent or the frequency of purchases alone, but must be explored through social experiences, aspirations, tastes, and individuals' interpretations of the goods and consumption spaces they use in their daily lives. Ethnography allows researchers to observe social practices within the context where they occur, while also examining the relationships between actions, conversations, symbols, and social structures—aspects that are often not fully revealed through formal interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This approach also aligns with the perspective of Pink et al. (2016) that contemporary social experiences unfold through the interconnection between physical spaces and digital environments, so consumption activities in

shopping malls must be understood alongside their representations on social media. Conceptually, this study draws on Baudrillard's (1994, 1998) theories of simulacra, hyperreality, and the value of signs to analyze how images of luxury are produced and consumed, while the Consumer Culture Theory framework proposed by Arnould and Thompson (2005) helps situate these practices within the interplay of consumer identity, market structures, and the ideology of consumption. Within this framework, the study does not aim to establish from the outset that all modern consumption activities constitute a form of hyperreality, but rather to explore the social and symbolic conditions that enable representations of luxury to influence people's choices, experiences, and interpretations.

The research was centered in Jayapura City, focusing on Jayapura Mall as one of the prominent modern consumption spaces in the urban landscape, as well as a number of cafes, restaurants, and entertainment venues selected based on the characteristics of their visitors, the nature of the services provided, representations of luxury, and the intensity of social interactions taking place within them. The selection of these categories of consumption spaces was intended to capture the variety of people's experiences, given that consumer culture is not always shaped solely by the purchase of goods, but also through activities such as relaxing, socializing, enjoying the atmosphere, and sharing experiences with others. Informants were selected using purposive sampling to reach individuals with direct experience of these spaces, and this approach was expanded through snowball sampling as needed to identify informants with different consumption experiences or social positions (Palinkas et al., 2015). Relevant informant groups include visitors from among the indigenous Papuan population and non-Papuan residents, young people and adults, business managers, commercial space workers, and traditional community leaders who can provide insights into changes in urban social and economic life. The diversity of informants' backgrounds is a key consideration to ensure that the research not only documents the experiences of groups with high consumption capacity but also understands how luxury is perceived by communities with diverse economic access, consumption habits, and cultural ties. The number of informants was determined based on the adequacy of the information and the depth of the data obtained, taking into account the principle of information, such that the quality of the explanations takes precedence over meeting a specific number of respondents (Malterud et al., 2016). The informant codes and participant categories used in the findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Informant codes and categories used in the interview excerpts.

Informant code	Informant category	Research participant group
P1 –P5	Indigenous Papuan mall visitor	Visitor; Indigenous Papuan community
P6-P8	Non-Papuan mall visitor	Visitor; non-Papuan resident
P9-P14	Young Indigenous Papuan visitor	Youth; Indigenous Papuan community
P15-P18	Shopping mall employee	Commercial-space worker
P19-P20	Business or café manager	Business manager
P21-P22	Customary community leader	Customary community representative

Data collection was designed through participatory observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, visual documentation, and an exploration of digital representations related to modern consumption spaces in Jayapura. Participatory observation aimed to understand how visitors use commercial spaces, choose gathering places, interact with products and brands, document their experiences, and exhibit behaviors that may be related to the formation of taste and social status—while distinguishing between actions that were actually observed and the meanings informants attributed to those actions. In-depth interviews were used to explore the reasons for choosing places to shop or relax, perceptions of luxury, the influence of social media, economic considerations, and changes in consumption habits experienced by informants, following the principles of qualitative interviewing that emphasize openness to participants' experiences and interpretations (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Visual documentation includes spatial arrangements, brand displays, promotional materials, and commercial aesthetic elements that can be observed ethically, while digital exploration focuses on public content representing shopping experiences, socializing activities, and images of modern lifestyles associated with these places. The combination of physical observation and digital exploration follows the digital ethnography approach of Pink et al. (2016), while the principles of visual ethnography developed by Pink (2021) help us understand how images, atmospheres, and sensory experiences play a role in the formation of social meaning. Data collection activities were conducted with due regard for participant consent, identity confidentiality, recording permissions, and restrictions on the use of digital materials—particularly when publicly available information still has the potential to reveal a person's identity or personal experiences.

Data analysis was conducted in stages beginning during the data collection process by reviewing field notes, interview transcripts, visual documentation, and digital materials as complementary sources to understand the relationship between consumption practices and the construction of the meaning of luxury. The initial stage of analysis employed ethnographic reading to identify categories emerging from informants' experiences—such as reasons for visiting shopping centers, perceptions of places considered prestigious, experiences of enjoying commercial spaces, and the use of consumption as a means of self-representation—drawing on the principles of domain analysis and cultural categories (Spradley, 1979). Subsequently, the data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis as developed by

Braun and Clarke (2022), through a process of familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, examination of inter-thematic relationships, and the formulation of interpretations that take into account the researcher's position in the construction of knowledge. These empirical themes were then interpreted through Baudrillard's (1994, 1998) concepts of the value of the sign, simulacra, and hyperreality, specifically to examine whether representations of luxury merely accompany consumption activities or have become a key reference in shaping visitors' desires, choice of location, and social experiences. In the interpretive process, attention is also given to findings that do not align with initial assumptions—such as visitors who go to the mall solely for practical reasons, individuals who reject prestigious consumption, or communities that perceive commercial spaces primarily as places to strengthen social bonds. This analytical approach was intended to yield explanations that go beyond merely categorizing consumer behavior; rather, it aims to demonstrate how symbols of luxury are produced, accepted, questioned, and negotiated within the context of globalization and the lives of urban communities in Papua.

The validity and depth of the interpretation were ensured through cross-checking among data sources, reflective note-taking during the research, and re-examining the relationships between informants' statements, observed behaviors, and the social context in which consumption experiences took place. The use of interviews, observation, and documentation is intended to enrich the explanation of the same phenomenon from different perspectives, rather than merely seeking uniformity in responses, as differences in experience among informants can actually reveal how consumer culture is formed unevenly within society. The researcher's reflexivity is a crucial part of this process, particularly when interpreting symbols of luxury and the identities of indigenous communities, ensuring that assessments of consumerism are not based on the moral assumption that modern consumption practices are always at odds with local cultural values. In reporting the results, the study employed sufficiently detailed contextual descriptions to illustrate the relationships between space, action, and social meaning, in line with the principles of qualitative research transparency discussed by Tracy (2010) and the guidelines for qualitative research reporting by Levitt et al. (2018). Ethical considerations also include protecting informants' identities, managing visual documentation, respecting local knowledge, and exercising caution when linking individual experiences to social categories such as indigenous communities, economic class, or generation. Through these strategies, the research was intended to yield an ethnographic understanding rooted in the experiences of the people of Jayapura while also making a conceptual contribution to the study of consumer culture, urban anthropology, and globalization within the context of indigenous communities.

Results

1. Shopping Malls as Spaces for the Production of Luxury Simulacra

Shopping malls are often discussed as spaces designed to stimulate purchasing, yet that account leaves much of their everyday life unexplained. In Jayapura, the mall also offers a setting in which visitors can stroll, meet relatives, linger in air-conditioned surroundings, or simply look at displays. These uses matter

because the appeal of a commercial space cannot be reduced to the products sold within it. Pettersen et al. (2023) document the social and recreational value of visits that do not involve shopping, while Zukin (1998) shows how urban consumption spaces participate in the organization of public culture. The mall therefore provides both a practical destination and a visual language through which an idea of urban modernity becomes recognizable. At the same time, recent research on mall avoidance reminds us that attractive commercial settings are not experienced positively by everyone.

For the Indigenous Papuan visitor identified as P1, the mall represents a change not simply in where goods are purchased but in how a shopping environment is perceived. The participant contrasts ordinary shops and markets with the mall's clean and modern appearance. This distinction is especially relevant because the participant explicitly mentions visiting without an intention to buy. The account therefore identifies the atmosphere itself as a reason for entering and remaining in the space. Pettersen et al. (2023) similarly discuss non-shopping motivations for visits to shopping centres, although their findings should not be treated as direct evidence about Jayapura. P1 describes this contrast in the following words:

"In the past, when we wanted to buy something, we usually went to the market or an ordinary shop. Now many people prefer to go to the mall, even though the item they are looking for may be available elsewhere. In my view, the atmosphere is different because the place is attractive, clean, and looks modern. Sometimes people come not to shop, but just to walk around, sit, or look. Once inside the mall, it feels like being in a big city." (P1, Indigenous Papuan mall visitor)

This statement provides the starting point for interpreting the mall as a sign of modernity rather than merely a retail destination. P1's account draws attention to an ordinary but revealing distinction: buying an item and entering a place that feels modern are not necessarily the same activity. The participant does not describe luxury in terms of a specific expensive product; cleanliness, orderly surroundings, and the atmosphere of a large city are equally important. Such descriptions suggest that a mall can carry a promise of urban sophistication even when the visitor spends little or nothing. This resonates with Baudrillard's (1998) account of sign value, although the participant's own words concern a lived sense of place rather than a fully formed theoretical category. The distinction also echoes work on shopping experience and place attachment, which treats the encounter with a setting as meaningful in its own right (Yudhistira et al., 2024). Here, the image of modernity is encountered through space before it is attached to any particular purchase.

The non-Papuan visitor identified as P6 offers a related but distinct account of the mall as a setting for family activities. Rather than describing a search for prestigious products, P2 emphasizes eating together, comfort, and the experience of being in an orderly environment. The reference to higher prices is important because it is not presented as the only explanation for a visit. Instead, the participant distinguishes the experience of being there from the act of purchasing a specific item. This observation is consistent with the importance of experiential service design discussed by Junaid et al. (2024). The following statement captures the distinction between goods and the broader experience of the venue:

“Going to the mall does not necessarily mean buying something. I often come with my family to eat or simply enjoy the atmosphere. A place like this makes people feel comfortable because everything is organized and there are many choices. Some items are indeed more expensive, but people still come because the atmosphere is different from an ordinary market. So what people seek is not only the goods, but also the experience of being there.” (P6, Non-Papuan mall visitor)

The emphasis on family time and atmosphere helps explain why a visit may be meaningful without a substantial purchase. What P6 values is not simply a range of shops but the possibility of spending time together in a setting that feels comfortable and well arranged. A meal with family becomes part of the reason for visiting, even when some merchandise is considered expensive. Research on the design of customer experience in large malls similarly highlights the importance of services and the wider environment (Junaid et al., 2024). Yet the interview also cautions against reading every non-shopping visit as an attempt to display status. The mall can provide an appealing image of urban leisure while remaining a practical place for family interaction. This overlap between social use and commercial staging is precisely what makes its symbolic role difficult to separate from everyday life.

The shopping mall employee identified as P15 provides a perspective on how visual presentation attracts attention within commercial space. The participant notes that visitors walk around, inspect displays, and take photographs even when they do not buy anything. Decorations and promotional events are described as moments when the number of visitors taking pictures appears to increase. This account is particularly relevant to the production of luxury simulacra because it connects commercial display to practices of looking and documenting. However, it should not be read as quantitative evidence of increased visitor traffic without corresponding records. P4 explains the role of shop displays and promotional decoration as follows:

“If you pay attention, not everyone who comes to the mall is shopping. Many just walk around, look at displays, or take photographs in places they find attractive. Usually, when there are new decorations or promotional events, there are more visitors and many take pictures. Shop displays are deliberately made attractive so people want to enter and look at the products. So the atmosphere of the place is also important in attracting visitors.” (P15, Shopping mall employee)

The employee’s account connects visual display with visitors’ practices of looking and photographing. P15's observations locate the making of a desirable commercial image in tangible practices: changing decorations, arranging shop windows, and organizing promotions. The employee notices that these visual interventions draw visitors who may photograph the setting without buying anything. Lallas and Drosos (2022) likewise show how promotional discourse can shape the consumer experience rather than merely announce goods for sale. The relationship is not automatic, however; attention to a display does not prove that a purchase will follow. Studies of mall detachment have found that some consumers avoid these environments because of social or atmospheric irritants, a useful counterpoint to the assumption of universal attraction. The storefront, then, can be read as a carefully composed scene whose audience includes spectators as well as customers.

An account from the business or café manager identified as P19 extends the analysis from shopping malls to adjacent spaces of contemporary urban consumption. The manager explains that customers assess interior design, lighting, and whether a venue is suitable for gathering or taking photographs. This description shows how the business seeks to offer a setting that is visually attractive as well as functional. Social media appears in the account as one way prospective customers learn about a place. These details help identify how a commercial atmosphere can be intentionally designed for both physical visitors and digital visibility. P19 summarizes the importance of the setting and customer experience in the following statement:

“People now come to cafés not only for coffee or food. They also consider the place, its atmosphere, and whether it is suitable for gathering or taking photographs. That is why we need to pay attention to interior design, lighting, and how food is presented. Some visitors choose a place because they have seen it on social media. So selling food alone is not enough; the experience customers have is also an important part of the business.”

(P19, Business manager)

The manager’s explanation shows how spatial aesthetics and online visibility are incorporated into the service experience. P19 describes the café as an experience assembled through lighting, interior design, presentation, and the prospect of appearing in a visitor's social-media feed. Food and drink remain central, but the manager's account makes clear that their setting is part of what is offered. This emphasis is consistent with research on consumption experiences in urban spaces, where amenities and atmosphere are linked to consumer emotions (Tan & Li, 2024). The growing importance of digital visibility also connects the café to broader forms of self-presentation, although such connections should not be mistaken for evidence that every visitor seeks prestige. Lu et al. (2024), for example, find a relationship between social-media self-presentation, social comparison, and conspicuous-consumption tendencies in a Chinese sample. In Jayapura, the interview points more specifically to a commercial response to visitors' desire for settings worth remembering and sharing.

The young Indigenous Papuan visitor identified as P9 describes a further stage in the circulation of commercial imagery. The participant associates visits to malls and cafés with attractive places to sit, take photographs, and create social-media content. Importantly, the account also distinguishes an ordinary gathering with friends from the impression of luxury that a photograph might convey. This distinction provides a concrete basis for examining how an image can acquire meanings that differ from the circumstances in which it was made. Valsesia and Diehl (2022) explore how sharing consumption experiences affects social perceptions, making their work relevant to the representational dimension of this account. P9 describes the relationship between the visit and its online image in the following terms:

“When we go to a mall or café, we usually look for a nice place to sit and take pictures. Many places now have attractive designs, so people like to come because they want to make content for Instagram or TikTok. Sometimes we only buy a drink, but we can sit for a long time chatting and taking photographs. If the photo

looks good, people who see it might think we are enjoying a luxurious life. In fact, we are just hanging out with friends." (P9, Young Indigenous Papuan visitor)

The participant's distinction between an ordinary gathering and its polished image highlights the representational dimension of consumption. P9 makes an especially useful distinction between the event and its photograph: an ordinary gathering over a drink may appear more luxurious once a carefully selected image circulates online. The participant is not claiming that the gathering did not happen; rather, the public impression can exceed the scale of the actual purchase. Valsesia and Diehl (2022) demonstrate that sharing experiences and material purchases can generate different judgments about a person's authenticity, while Wang et al. (2024) examine how viewers interpret displays of luxury consumption. A more recent qualitative study of Korean young consumers also identifies social-media imagery and peer interactions as influences on luxury-related aspirations (Park & Chun, 2025). These studies offer points of comparison, not evidence that the same mechanisms operate identically in Jayapura. The interview is therefore most persuasive when read as an account of how an attractive commercial setting makes selective self-representation possible.

"*Jayapura has changed a great deal. In the past, people gathered more often in family homes, neighbourhoods, or places commonly used together. Now young people also have places to gather in malls, cafés, and entertainment venues. That is part of the city's development, but we also need to consider how these changes affect people's habits. People should not feel that they have to follow a particular lifestyle simply to be considered modern or not left behind.*" (P21, Customary community leader)

This perspective situates the new commercial gathering places alongside existing community settings and cautions against treating modernity as a single lifestyle expectation.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that the appeal of shopping malls and cafés in Jayapura rests not only on what visitors can purchase but also on what these spaces allow them to experience, imagine, and communicate about themselves. The orderly interiors, curated displays, comfortable meeting places, and photographable settings described by participants give commercial environments a symbolic presence that extends beyond the immediate exchange of goods. Yet the interviews also reveal different ways of engaging with that presence: some visitors value family time or an accessible place to gather, while others are attentive to the images that circulate through social media. In this sense, Baudrillard's (1994, 1998) concepts of simulacra and sign value help illuminate how representations of luxury may acquire social force without requiring every visit to involve expensive consumption. The customary leader's reflections further show that these spaces are entering an urban social landscape in which family, neighbourhood, and customary forms of association remain meaningful rather than simply disappearing. Luxury simulacra in Jayapura are therefore best understood as an uneven and negotiated process, produced through the interaction of commercial design, visitors' everyday practices, digital visibility, and locally situated ideas of modern life.

2. Consumer Culture and the Blurring of the Real and the Image among Local Communities

The growing significance of malls and cafés in Jayapura cannot be understood through the physical settings alone. Their images travel beyond the premises, entering conversations about clothing, social belonging, and the places people are expected to know. What appears as a simple choice of where to shop may therefore carry a question of how one wishes to be seen. Consumer culture theory offers a useful way to approach these choices as socially situated practices rather than isolated preferences (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In the interviews, the movement between material consumption and public recognition was especially visible in the accounts of Indigenous Papuan visitors. Their descriptions do not establish a uniform consumer identity; instead, they show how familiar social relationships are being negotiated through newer signs of urban life. P2, an Indigenous Papuan mall visitor, connected the appeal of branded goods with the possibility of being recognized by friends and avoiding the impression of falling behind.

"Nowadays, when people go to the mall, it is not only because they want to buy something. Some also go because they want to follow other people's lifestyles. Sometimes the things they buy are not really needed, but because the brand is well known, they feel more confident wearing them. Especially when meeting friends, people usually notice what we wear and where we bought it. So sometimes people feel they have to keep up with developments so they are not seen as outdated." (P2, Indigenous Papuan mall visitor).

This account moves the analysis from the commodity itself to the social situation in which its meaning is evaluated. For P2, the brand does not simply identify a manufacturer; it also supplies a vocabulary of confidence and social acceptance. The reference to friends is significant because it places consumer decisions within relationships of observation and comparison. Baudrillard (1998) describes how goods acquire sign value, while Featherstone (2007) locates the display of lifestyle within wider cultural hierarchies. Neither perspective requires assuming that every purchase is motivated by vanity or that the participant has abandoned practical needs. Rather, P1 reveals an uneasy overlap between usefulness, aspiration, and the desire not to appear socially out of step. Recent work on self-presentation and conspicuous consumption likewise suggests that digital and interpersonal comparison can reinforce one another, although its findings from China cannot be transferred uncritically to Papua (Lu et al., 2024). Research on conspicuousness as a form of status production offers a useful parallel: Bainotti (2024) shows that online displays can make consumption itself a resource for constructing public standing, although her study concerns Instagram micro-influencers rather than mall visitors in Papua.

A different emphasis emerged in the account of a non-Papuan visitor, who associated fashionable meeting places with the satisfaction of having been somewhere recognizable. In this telling, a café becomes socially valuable partly because other people already know its name. The choice of venue is consequently not explained by food quality alone. Its popularity offers a ready-made story that can be repeated through photographs and conversation. Such accounts complicate a narrow distinction between consuming a service and consuming the public reputation attached to it. They also suggest that a single visit may acquire a much longer social life once represented online. P7 described how an occasional visit to a popular café could create an impression of a more consistently expensive lifestyle.

“These days, when people want to get together, they usually look for a café or restaurant that is popular. Sometimes it is not because the food tastes the best, but because the place is well known. People feel happier if they have been there, especially if they can upload a photo. From the outside, it looks as though they often enjoy expensive places, even though they may only visit occasionally. In my view, social media makes people want to appear to follow a lifestyle that is currently popular.” (P7, non-Papuan mall visitor).

P7’s observation clarifies why the distinction between a visit and its public image matters for understanding consumption. A photograph can truthfully record presence at a café while leaving the frequency and cost of such visits unknown. The ambiguity is not necessarily deception; it arises because social media presents selected moments rather than the full rhythms of everyday expenditure. Valsesia and Diehl (2022) demonstrate that audiences draw different inferences from posts about experiences and material possessions, and Wang et al. (2024) show that shared luxury consumption can prompt judgments about the poster’s motives. These studies help explain why a seemingly ordinary image may become socially consequential. P2’s statement, however, also introduces restraint into the analysis: the participant explicitly recognizes that visible leisure may be occasional. The problem is therefore less that images are false than that they can be mistaken for a complete account of someone’s circumstances. The distinction is consistent with Pangarkar et al. (2023), who identify status needs and normative influence as drivers of social-media engagement among luxury consumers; their findings illuminate a possible mechanism without establishing its prevalence in Jayapura.

For younger Indigenous Papuan consumers, the relationship between images and aspiration appears particularly immediate. The digital feed supplies examples of where friends go, how they pose, and which backgrounds make a gathering look desirable. The desire to reproduce an image may precede any strong interest in the food or drink offered at the venue. This process is consistent with research on youth luxury socialization through social media, although the cultural and economic settings examined elsewhere differ from Jayapura (Park & Chun, 2025). The important ethnographic point is that young people do not merely receive these images; they also select and circulate their own. P10 described this process in terms that sharply distinguish a modest purchase from the appearance of costly leisure. The younger Indigenous Papuan participant explained how selecting a photograph can obscure what was actually purchased.

“When I look at Instagram or TikTok, many friends upload photos from nice cafés, restaurants, or entertainment places. Sometimes we want to go there too so we can have photos like theirs. After taking pictures, we usually choose the best ones to upload. People who see them might think we often hang out in expensive places, even though that is not necessarily the case. I sometimes order only a cheap drink, but if the photo looks good, people do not know what I actually bought.” (P10, young Indigenous Papuan consumer)

P10’s account offers a particularly clear example of the gap between a visible scene and the material circumstances that produced it. The image does not erase the actual visit; instead, it reorganizes what the visit communicates to an audience. A relatively inexpensive drink, a well-designed interior, and a

carefully chosen frame can together suggest a level of affluence that the photograph cannot verify. This is where Baudrillard's (1994) account of simulation becomes analytically suggestive, though the interview should not be stretched into proof that all distinctions between reality and representation have disappeared. The material act and its mediated appearance remain identifiable in P3's own explanation. What becomes unstable is the viewer's inference about wealth, frequency of consumption, and social position. Sun et al. (2024) provide a related perspective on self-display and luxury consumption, while the interview shows how these issues can arise without the purchase of a luxury product. Importantly, luxury imagery does not elicit only admiration: Cruz-Ros et al. (2024) show that materialism and brand traditions enter into the complex relationship between social-media users and luxury brands, suggesting that visual signals acquire meaning through existing dispositions.

The circulation of consumer images also affects what visitors seek once they enter a shop. P4, a mall worker, described customers asking for products because they had seen celebrities or other public figures using them online. Such inquiries suggest that product recognition may arrive before direct knowledge of quality or suitability. A display item can consequently become attractive as a familiar image, even when the shopper has not decided to buy it. The worker also noticed visitors trying on goods or taking photographs without completing a transaction. This observation complicates the assumption that an expressed interest in fashionable merchandise reliably indicates purchasing power.

The mall worker described the way social-media trends shape inquiries and encounters with products.

"When an item or brand is trending on social media, visitors usually start looking for that product. Some come and ask about it straight away because they have seen a celebrity or famous person wearing it. Sometimes they do not yet know the quality of the item, but they are already interested because it is popular. There are also visitors who just try things on and take photos, then decide not to buy. This shows that people do not always come to shop; they also want to follow trends." — P16, shopping mall employee.

The distinction P16 draws between attention and purchase is central to the interpretation of the mall as a visual marketplace. Interest can be produced through repeated exposure to an image, while the eventual transaction remains uncertain. The employee's account points to a form of participation in consumer culture that includes asking, trying, photographing, and watching. Such practices should not be treated as deficient versions of shopping; they are ways people engage with commercial signs under different circumstances. Lallas and Drosos (2022) show how promotional practices configure consumer experience, and Junaid et al. (2024) emphasize the role of designed environments in shaping encounters within large malls. In Jayapura, the mall worker's description suggests that digital visibility and in-store presentation reinforce each other. Their interaction helps circulate the meaning of fashionable consumption beyond those who actually purchase the products. Aldhamiri et al. (2024) distinguish active from passive engagement with luxury brands online and identify motivations ranging from aesthetics to social status, a distinction that helps explain why attention to a brand need not culminate in buying it.

The same circulation is visible from the perspective of businesses that organize the spaces in which photographs are taken. For a café manager, the appearance of the room and the presentation of food are not merely decorative concerns. They influence whether customers consider a visit worth sharing and whether others discover the establishment through that post. This suggests a reciprocal relationship between commercial design and consumer self-presentation, rather than a one-way process in which businesses simply impose images on passive visitors. The manager's comments also locate digital visibility within the ordinary decisions of running a business. A photograph taken by a customer may become informal promotion for the venue.

P20, a business manager, explained how customer photography informs decisions about interiors and presentation.

"Customers now often ask whether there is a good place to take photos. That is why we pay attention to interior design, lighting, and food presentation so that everything looks attractive. Sometimes customers order food not only to eat it, but also to photograph it first. When our place appears frequently on Instagram, new visitors usually come because they have seen other people's posts. So social media really does influence how we arrange the place and attract customers." (P5, business manager).

P20's account makes visible the commercial labor that supports the seemingly spontaneous images shared by visitors. The image of effortless leisure is partly enabled by deliberate decisions about lighting, layout, and presentation. In this sense, the café offers both refreshments and a setting for producing a publicly recognizable experience. Gu et al. (2023) examine how mediated shopping environments shape participation and memorable experiences, providing a useful comparison with the movement between physical cafés and digital audiences. Yet the interview does not show that all customers are primarily concerned with online attention; it identifies a demand that the manager has learned to accommodate. The significance of the finding lies in the mutual adjustment of business practices and consumer habits. What is shared online feeds back into how the physical venue is arranged.

These changes are not viewed only through the expectations of customers and business operators. P6, a customary community leader, raised questions about the social consequences of comparing oneself with images of expensive clothing, dining, and leisure. The concern was not that urban development or visits to cafés were inherently wrong. It was that visible lifestyles might become standards against which people judge themselves despite differences in household resources. This distinction matters in an Indigenous urban context, where consumer aspirations coexist with family obligations and other understandings of social responsibility. The leader's perspective therefore introduces a moral and economic dimension that cannot be captured by theories of visual display alone. The customary leader expressed concern about the pressure to imitate lifestyles seen on mobile phones.

"Many young people now see other people's lives on their phones. They see nice clothes, expensive places to eat, or people who are always travelling, and then they want to follow that lifestyle. Yet every family's economic circumstances are different. Some can afford it, but others push themselves so they can look like

their friends. In my view, urban development is a good thing, but people should not place appearances above their living needs." (P22, customary community leader).

P22's intervention shifts attention from the circulation of images to the unequal conditions under which those images are interpreted. The leader does not reject modern spaces; instead, the warning concerns the possibility that appearance may displace practical priorities. This observation complicates any interpretation that treats luxury imagery as either wholly liberating or uniformly harmful. It also makes clear why consumer culture in Jayapura must be examined through local social relationships rather than assumed to reproduce the same patterns found in other cities. Arnould and Thompson (2005) emphasize the cultural embeddedness of consumption, and Featherstone (2007) draws attention to the social distinctions carried by lifestyle practices. Here, the interviews point to an unresolved negotiation between enjoyment, recognition, and responsibility. Those tensions become particularly visible when the cost of maintaining an image is considered alongside the needs of a household. The existence of quieter forms of status signaling further complicates a simple opposition between visible luxury and economic restraint: Cho and Cho (2025) document inconspicuous luxury consumption among high-spending consumers, a substantially different population whose practices nevertheless demonstrate that status need not always be publicly displayed.

based on the statements of all the informants, the blurring of the real and the image emerges less as a complete disappearance of reality than as a recurring uncertainty about what visible consumption signifies. A photograph confirms that someone visited a place, but it cannot reveal how often they go there, how much they spent, or what compromises made the visit possible. Brands, fashionable interiors, and social-media posts acquire meaning through the expectations of peers, the design choices of businesses, and the judgments of community members. The interviews also show that participants themselves recognize these differences; they are not simply deceived by commercial imagery. Read alongside Baudrillard (1994, 1998), the findings suggest that the simulacrum of luxury operates through selective visibility rather than through the absence of material constraints. This interpretation leads to the next question: how far the promise of a luxurious urban lifestyle can be reconciled with the uneven economic circumstances of local residents.

3. The Gap between Consumption Imagery and Local Economic Reality

The visual economy of Jayapura's malls and cafés makes expensive-looking lifestyles unusually accessible to the eye, but not necessarily to the household budget. Displays, promotional images, and carefully framed photographs invite viewers to imagine consumption without establishing whether they can afford it. This distinction is important in reading the interviews: the participants speak not only about desire but also about the work of deciding what must come first. Their accounts locate the apparent abundance of the city within everyday constraints on income, family expenditure, and discretionary spending. Baudrillard's (1998) concept of sign value helps explain why an object may remain attractive even when its practical acquisition is deferred, whereas Faturohman et al. (2024) show, in an Indonesian study, that financial well-being is closely tied to financial behavior and literacy. The interview material

therefore invites attention to how images of prosperity are interpreted by people who must still make concrete spending choices.

For P3, the contrast between a desirable display and the available household budget becomes visible at the moment of considering a purchase. The Indigenous Papuan mall visitor spoke about attractive products, the cost of branded goods, and the priority of needs at home. Rather than describing shopping as a simple choice between wanting and not wanting, the account presents a sequence of competing obligations. The participant's words place household provision alongside the wish to participate in a recognizable urban style. This perspective also cautions against treating mall attendance as evidence of high purchasing power. P3 explained the tension in the following terms:

"When I enter a mall, there are many attractive things I would actually like to buy, but their prices do not always match the money I have. Sometimes I just look around because there are still many needs at home. These days people often see friends wearing branded items or eating in expensive places, so there is a desire to do the same. But not everyone has the same income. As for me, it is better to buy what is really needed than to force myself just to appear well-off." (P3, Indigenous Papuan mall visitor).

The final sentence is particularly revealing because it frames restraint as a deliberate judgment rather than a failure to consume. P3 recognizes the appeal of brands while refusing to let the appearance of affluence override domestic needs. A useful comparison comes from Son et al. (2025), whose study connects social-network use, perceived inequality, and attitudes toward luxury, while also showing that mental accounting can modify these relationships. That research does not establish the same psychological process in Jayapura; it helps clarify why the presence of luxury imagery and the decision to spend should be analytically separated. Here, the participant articulates a boundary between aspiration and expenditure in explicitly familial terms. The mall is therefore simultaneously a place of imagined participation and a setting in which financial limits are acknowledged.

P8 approached the discrepancy from the other side of the image, describing how a photograph can make occasional leisure look like a regular habit. The non-Papuan visitor distinguished between what followers see online and the budgeting that precedes or follows a visit. Such selective visibility is not necessarily deceptive; an uploaded photograph may faithfully depict a pleasant outing while omitting its rarity. The distinction matters because audiences often encounter a collection of highlights rather than the ordinary rhythms of spending. Wang et al. (2024) demonstrate that viewers infer motives from luxury-related social-media posts, illustrating how public impressions can diverge from the poster's intentions. P8 described this gap between the image and the household economy as follows:

"When you look at social media, it seems as though everyone in Jayapura can hang out at expensive cafés or shop at malls every week. But the reality is not like that, because many people have to manage their income for family needs. I sometimes go to nice places too, but that does not mean I can spend a lot of money every day. The photos people upload usually show only the enjoyable parts. Other people do not know how we manage our money before or after going to those places." (P8, non-Papuan mall visitor).

What becomes visible here is an asymmetry between the circulation of images and the private management of resources. A social-media post can be shared repeatedly, whereas the cost of the visit remains attached to a particular budget and moment. Casais et al. (2026) find that social-media activity and anticipated social returns are associated with conspicuous luxury consumption in Portuguese samples, but the present interview draws attention to the unpictured financial calculations behind a seemingly luxurious scene. The comparison does not imply that P2 purchased luxury goods or sought conspicuous status. It suggests instead that the image of effortless leisure can circulate independently of the economic effort required to produce the outing. In Jayapura, this separation allows a limited experience of comfort to be read by others as a sustained lifestyle.

The young Indigenous Papuan participant, P11, brought peer relations directly into the account of affordability. Invitations to popular venues were described as occasions for belonging, with spending shaped by the wish not to be seen as socially out of step. The resulting tension is not merely between an individual and an advertisement; it is experienced within friendship groups where shared outings and photographs matter. Research elsewhere has connected influencer exposure, comparison, and fear of missing out with conspicuous consumption (Dinh & Lee, 2024), while Azhar et al. (2026) identify relationships among social comparison, buying tendencies, and financial stress among Malaysian young adults. These studies offer comparative insights rather than a measure of pressure among young people in Jayapura. P3 expressed the social and economic dimensions of these outings in the following account:

“Sometimes when friends invite us to hang out at a place that is currently popular, we want to go along too. But if we do that too often, the money runs out quickly because the food and drinks are not cheap. Some friends still join even when they do not really have much money, because they do not want to be seen as uncool. Once we are there, we usually take pictures together and upload them to Instagram. People who see the photos may think we have a lot of money, even though sometimes we have to save up just to hang out.” (P11, young Indigenous Papuan consumer).

The reference to saving before a social outing complicates any reading of the photograph as straightforward proof of disposable income. For P11, participation in an apparently glamorous scene may require preparation and sacrifice that remain invisible to online viewers. Liu et al. (2024) show that social comparison orientation shapes the relationship between shared consumption imagery and purchase intentions, but this interview highlights a more grounded issue: the cost of remaining included in a peer group. There is no basis here for claiming that all young Papuans face the same pressure or respond in the same way. Rather, P11 identifies a situation in which sociability, image-making, and financial caution must be negotiated together. The resulting photograph captures collective enjoyment while concealing the different economic routes through which friends arrived there.

The worker’s account provides a different vantage point, from inside the retail environment where desire may or may not become a transaction. P4 described visitors who admire branded items, ask about prices, wait for discounts, or leave without buying. These observations reveal that attention is not the

same as market conversion and that looking can itself be part of a mall visit. They also suggest why sales displays should not be read as reliable indicators of the wealth of those who gather around them. Cheung et al. (2025) examine how social-media engagement and materialistic values relate to luxury purchase intentions, yet the employee's description reminds us that intentions, interests, and actual purchases are separate events. P17 put the distinction plainly:

"Many visitors are interested in the items on display, especially when the designs are attractive or the brands are well known. But after asking the price, not all of them decide to buy. Some wait for discounts, while others only try things on or look around. In my view, coming to a mall does not mean that everyone has money to spend a lot on shopping. Sometimes they just want to enjoy the atmosphere or see items that are trending." (P17, shopping mall employee).

This account points to an important limit of the luxury simulacrum: its visual appeal does not remove the material threshold of a price tag. Looking, trying on, and waiting for a discount are forms of engagement that coexist with economic restraint. The possibility of participating as a spectator may help sustain the mall's social appeal even when sales are uneven. The employee does not provide transaction records, so the evidence cannot establish the frequency or economic magnitude of non-purchasing visits. Nevertheless, the distinction between display and purchase is directly supported by the interview and resonates with Pettersen et al. (2023), who examine the positive experiences associated with non-shopping visits to shopping centres. A mall can thus be socially accessible to visitors whose financial capacity limits their participation as buyers.

P19, a business manager, described how operators respond to this diversity of spending capacity rather than simply excluding those who cannot afford a premium meal. The business seeks an attractive atmosphere while offering menu options at different prices. The manager's account is significant because it separates the appearance of exclusivity from a uniformly expensive product range. In practice, a visually polished café may accommodate customers who purchase only a drink as well as those who order a full meal. This strategy gives the commercial image a broader audience without making customers' economic positions identical. P5 explained the approach in these terms:

"We try to make the place look attractive and comfortable so that customers are interested in coming. But we also know that visitors have different economic capacities. Some come for a full meal, while others only order a drink and sit with friends. That is why menu choices and prices need to be adjusted so that more people can come. Sometimes a place looks luxurious in photographs, but in fact we also provide affordable options." (P19, business manager).

The manager's remarks challenge a simple equation between a luxurious image and an exclusively affluent clientele. A carefully designed space can circulate as a marker of status while being used through relatively modest purchases. The social meaning of the setting therefore cannot be inferred from the price of a single drink or the appearance of an online photograph. At the same time, the presence of affordable options does not mean that all customers experience those prices as equally accessible. Ozimek et al. (2024) find links between materialistic social-media practices, comparison,

stress, and lower life satisfaction in their sample, offering a reminder that the emotional consequences of consumer imagery can extend beyond the act of buying. P5's account shows the commercial accommodation of unequal spending capacities, not the disappearance of inequality itself.

The customary leader, P22, shifted the discussion beyond individual choice to the obligations that connect spending decisions to families and communities. The interview contrasts the expansion of malls and entertainment venues with the persistence of uneven household resources. The concern is not that modern leisure is inherently wrong, but that an appearance of modernity might displace more urgent responsibilities. This perspective introduces an ethical dimension that is less visible in consumer-oriented accounts of aspiration and self-presentation. It also situates the consequences of commercial imagery within local relationships, where the effects of expenditure may be felt by people other than the person posting a photograph. The leader offered the following assessment:

"Jayapura is now increasingly busy with malls, cafés, and entertainment venues, but people's economic lives are not all the same. Some families have sufficient income, while others are still struggling to meet their daily needs. Young people see attractive lifestyles on social media and want to follow them, even though their parents' circumstances are different. I am not saying that going to malls or cafés is wrong, but people must understand their financial capacity. Do not let the desire to look modern cause more important family needs to be neglected." (P22, customary community leader).

The leader's position makes the local economic context indispensable to the interpretation of luxury imagery. Whereas a photograph isolates a moment of enjoyment, family obligations extend across time and are often absent from the frame. Faturohman et al. (2024) underscore the importance of financial behavior for well-being in Indonesia, but P6's argument goes further by locating prudent consumption within responsibilities to others. The statement should not be read as a universal description of Indigenous Papuan values; it is one customary leader's interpretation of urban change. It nonetheless introduces a perspective that conventional accounts of consumer desire can overlook: the cost of appearing modern may be assessed through its consequences for collective welfare. The image is not rejected outright, but its authority to define a successful life is questioned.

Read together, these interviews reveal a recurring discrepancy between the ease with which luxury can be represented and the uneven means through which it can be purchased or experienced. The mall visitor who postpones a purchase, the young person who saves for an outing, and the café manager who offers affordable choices all describe different ways of negotiating the same visual environment. Their accounts do not demonstrate that social media uniformly produces debt, nor do they establish a measurable relationship between commercial development and household inequality. They do show that representations of abundance are continually interpreted against the realities of price, income, family priorities, and peer belonging. In Baudrillard's (1994) terms, signs of affluence may circulate with a force that exceeds the transactions supporting them, yet the Jayapura material makes clear that economic limits remain present in the lives of those who produce and encounter these signs. The gap between consumption imagery and local economic reality is therefore not simply an opposition between illusion

and truth; it is a field of everyday negotiation in which social visibility and material responsibility are held in uneasy relation.

Discussion

The three sets of findings suggest that the commercial transformation of Jayapura is not adequately described as the simple arrival of affluent consumption in a peripheral city. What emerges instead is a social process in which the appearance of prosperity becomes available to people whose economic circumstances and reasons for visiting commercial venues differ substantially. Baudrillard's (1994) account of simulacra is useful here because the image of luxury can circulate independently of a corresponding purchase: a carefully staged photograph, a polished shopfront, or a visit to an attractive café may signify a level of consumption that never occurred. Yet Baudrillard should not be used to dissolve the material city into images. The accounts of participants continually return to transport, prices, family obligations, meeting places, and the practical pleasures of spending time together. The analytical challenge is therefore to explain how visual representations acquire force while remaining embedded in unequal and distinctly local social relations (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Featherstone, 2007).

The mall's symbolic power begins with spatial design. Clean interiors, coordinated lighting, recognizable storefronts, and an atmosphere associated with metropolitan life create a contrast with other urban settings without necessarily displacing them. Zukin's (1998) analysis of standardized consumption spaces clarifies how this visual order communicates a particular model of urban modernity, while Lallas and Drosos (2022) show that promotional environments actively configure the experience of visitors. Research on Jakarta's malls likewise interprets their controlled environments as forms of privatized urban comfort (Grzegorzewski, 2025). The Jayapura interviews add a different emphasis: visitors can appropriate these environments for inexpensive leisure, observation, and companionship rather than merely accepting the commercial script. The luxury simulacrum is thus produced through an encounter between designed space and the diverse practices of those who use it, not through architecture alone.

Such encounters also complicate the tendency to treat shopping malls as socially hollow environments. The non-shopping visits described by informants make sense alongside Pettersen et al.'s (2023) account of the wellbeing associated with shopping-centre visits and their later evidence that malls can function as third places for different social groups (Pettersen et al., 2024). An ethnographic study of a Beijing mall similarly demonstrates forms of sociability that extend beyond transactions (Xu, 2026). Closer to the Indonesian context, Paramitha and Susanti (2025) examine the role of malls as gathering spaces for younger people in Bali. These studies do not establish that malls in Jayapura are inclusive public spaces, but they challenge a binary choice between genuine community life and supposedly artificial commercial life. A space may be commercially managed and still host meaningful relationships; the critical question is who can participate, on what terms, and with what alternatives. Lee et al. (2025) likewise link the third-place characteristics of complex malls to consumer quality of life, while leaving open the question of how those benefits vary by place.

The movement from physical setting to digital image is particularly consequential for younger visitors. Informant's description of posting an attractive café photograph after buying only a modest drink illustrates how the camera selects one aspect of an encounter and allows it to stand for a broader lifestyle. Baudrillard's (1998) distinction between use value and sign value helps explain why the visible setting can become more socially consequential than the commodity consumed. Valsesia and Diehl (2022) show that viewers respond differently to posts about experiences and possessions, while Wang et al. (2024) demonstrate that luxury posts can generate skeptical judgments about a poster's motives. Research on consumer-generated images in luxury hospitality also identifies social comparison and envy as possible responses to visual displays (Park & Lee, 2025). The Jayapura material therefore supports a claim about selective representation, not a claim that all digital images are deceptive or that audiences necessarily admire them.

The desire to participate in these visual conventions should be understood as a socially learned practice rather than an individual weakness. Park and Chun (2025) document how luxury imagery, peer interactions, and online communication contribute to consumer socialization among Korean youth. Petrescu et al. (2025) find that conformity and escapism can shape luxury-related attitudes across different cultural settings, and Caliskan et al. (2024) map the wider significance of social comparison for consumer behavior. In the interviews, the desire to visit a fashionable café appears alongside the wish to belong to a peer group, make memories, and share a photograph. None of these motives automatically entails an intention to buy expensive goods. The distinction matters because interpreting all aspirational participation as conspicuous consumption would erase the ordinary relational purposes of young people's activities in Jayapura.

Commercial actors are not passive observers of these practices. informant's shoping mall employee comments on displays and promotions and informant's Business manager attention to lighting, presentation, and photogenic interiors show that businesses actively anticipate how visitors will see and circulate their environments. This corresponds to Junaid et al.'s (2024) account of service design in malls and to the work of Lallas and Drosos (2022) on the discursive organization of consumer experience. Studies of Instagram-oriented luxury marketing demonstrate that digital engagement can be sustained through status cues and social comparison (Zhechev & Sekulova, 2024). Yalçın and Koçer (2025) also examine how perceptions of influencers relate to conspicuous consumption among university students. These external findings illuminate possible feedback loops between commercial staging and audience participation, but the interviews here establish only that local businesses recognize the promotional importance of visual appeal. Stronger claims about sales conversion or the size of these effects would require different data. Recent evidence that visually indulgent content is shared differently depending on brand positioning adds a further caution against assuming that aesthetic appeal operates uniformly across commercial settings (Adam & Feng, 2026).

The findings also reveal why the concept of hyperreality must be used carefully. An image of an expensive-looking café visit may circulate without revealing the price paid, but that does not make the underlying visit unreal. Rather, the image detaches a socially meaningful fragment from the practical

circumstances in which it occurred. Lu et al. (2024) associate social-media self-presentation with social comparison and conspicuous-consumption tendencies, while Bainotti (2024) describes the productive role of conspicuousness in online status-making. Yusainy et al. (2025), using an Indonesian sample, examine the effects of exposure to conspicuous posts on materialistic aspirations. These studies help explain why a photograph can become a resource for social interpretation; they do not justify assuming that the participants in Jayapura share identical motivations. Hyperreality is most useful here as a way to interrogate the distance between the displayed scene and the economic and relational context left outside its frame.

The distance becomes sharper when aspiration encounters limited purchasing power. P1 and P4 distinguish looking at desirable goods from buying them, and business manager's describes efforts to offer affordable options in an environment designed to appear exclusive. This suggests that luxury imagery can be relatively accessible even when luxury commodities are not. Yang et al. (2025) connect passive social-network use to conspicuous-consumption tendencies through relative deprivation, while Tuna et al. (2025) examine the roles of fear of missing out and status anxiety. Djaruma et al. (2024) identify relationships among luxury symbolism, social-media use, and conspicuous online consumption in an Indonesian sample. While their research findings cannot be directly applied to the situation in Jayapura, they do clarify why the gap between outward appearance and financial capacity warrants attention as a social phenomenon, rather than merely an issue of individual budgeting. Crucially, the interviews also show restraint and selective participation, not only pressure to spend. Findings that the need for uniqueness and fear of missing out can interact in luxury purchase intentions further underline why aspiration should not be equated with actual purchasing (Abdrabbo et al., 2025).

A further complication is that conspicuous images can elicit ambivalent responses. Miao et al. (2025) distinguish different reactions to envy-inducing luxury posts, including forms of positive engagement and withdrawal. Wang et al. (2024) likewise show that viewers may infer self-promotional motives and judge posters as less authentic. This literature unsettles any assumption that a luxurious image reliably produces prestige. For the young visitors described in the interviews, the same photograph might communicate friendship to one audience, aspiration to another, and pretension to a third. The evidence available here does not identify those audience responses directly, since the study reports participants' experiences rather than systematic observations of their followers. The interpretive contribution is to locate uncertainty and contested meaning at the center of the local circulation of luxury images.

The social and cultural significance of these changes is especially evident in P6's reflections on gathering places and household responsibilities. The customary leader does not reject malls and cafés outright; the concern is that visible standards of modernity may become pressures that obscure differences in economic capacity and social obligation. This is consistent with the view of consumer culture as a field in which meanings are negotiated through existing relationships rather than imposed uniformly by global brands (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Research on mall sociability (Xu, 2026) and on malls as differentiated third places (Pettersen et al., 2024) further indicates that commercial environments can coexist with other forms of social infrastructure. In Jayapura, however, that

coexistence occurs on Indigenous land and within histories of uneven urban development, making questions of access and recognition especially salient. The present interviews illuminate perceptions of change; they do not, by themselves, establish displacement of customary institutions or a causal decline in communal practices.

Theoretical synthesis therefore requires more than labeling the mall a simulacrum. Baudrillard (1994, 1998) clarifies how signs of luxury become partly autonomous from the purchasing acts they appear to represent, whereas Featherstone (2007) situates those signs within broader processes of aestheticized everyday life. Zukin (1998) adds the spatial politics of standardized consumption environments, and consumer culture theory directs attention to how people reinterpret commercial meanings in specific social settings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The interviews suggest three linked but nonidentical processes: commercial actors stage modernity, visitors selectively use and reproduce its imagery, and households negotiate the costs of participating in the resulting social expectations. Research on social comparison (Caliskan et al., 2024; Petrescu et al., 2025) helps connect the latter two processes without reducing them to a universal psychology. The distinctive contribution of the Jayapura case lies in showing that the image of luxury can become socially mobile even when access to luxury consumption remains economically uneven.

This interpretation has limits and implications for subsequent inquiry. Six categories of informants, occupying various positions, provide a useful cross-sectoral overview of visitor experiences, commercial practices, and observations rooted in local customs; however, they cannot represent the entire population—whether indigenous or non-indigenous—nor can they determine the distribution of consumer behavior across the Jayapura region. The interviews also do not measure income, household expenditure, algorithmic exposure, or long-term changes in customary social life. Future ethnography could follow particular households and peer groups across markets, malls, cafés, and digital platforms, while documenting prices, mobility, and the conditions under which images are produced and received. Such work would distinguish the attraction of a visually modern environment from financial overextension, and it would clarify whether social-media displays generate recognition, skepticism, or indifference in different audiences. For now, the evidence supports a bounded but significant conclusion: the hyperreality of globalization in Jayapura is not an escape from material inequality but a mode through which that inequality is encountered, represented, and sometimes temporarily concealed.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that shopping malls and cafés in Jayapura are not merely sites where global commodities enter a local market. They are also settings in which the appearance of modernity is assembled, encountered, and interpreted through architecture, displays, service environments, and everyday social activity. Visitors may participate in these spaces without making expensive purchases, finding opportunities for family leisure, companionship, and observation alongside the commercial invitation to consume. In this sense, the production of luxury simulacra does not depend solely on ownership of prestigious goods. It also depends on the capacity of commercial environments to make

an image of metropolitan prosperity available as an experience. The case therefore extends an understanding of consumer culture beyond transactions to the symbolic and relational uses of urban space.

The second finding concerns the circulation of those experiences beyond the mall itself. Photographs taken in cafés or other carefully staged settings can communicate a lifestyle that exceeds the cost or scale of the actual visit, yet the interview accounts do not warrant treating these representations as simply false. They show how participants select and share moments of leisure while audiences may interpret the resulting images in different ways. Read through Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and sign value, this separation between consumption and its visible representation helps explain why the appearance of luxury may acquire social significance without corresponding expenditure. At the same time, the perspectives of younger visitors, workers, and business operators reveal an active relationship between consumer practices and commercial design. Digital images do not replace local experience; they reshape how particular fragments of that experience become visible and socially meaningful.

The third finding places the symbolic appeal of luxury within the uneven economic conditions of Jayapura. Informants describe the attraction of branded goods and visually appealing venues alongside the need to consider prices, household responsibilities, and differences in purchasing power. Their accounts also reveal forms of agency: browsing without buying, choosing affordable menu items, visiting selectively, and questioning the pressure to appear prosperous. The customary leader's perspective is especially important because it connects changing leisure practices to concerns about social expectations and family priorities without rejecting urban development outright. Taken together, these findings suggest that globalization in Jayapura is experienced through both the expanded circulation of aspirational images and the continuing constraints of material life. The article's central contribution is to show that luxury hyperreality on Indigenous land is not detached from inequality; it takes shape through the everyday negotiations that inequality makes necessary.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations due to its small sample size—22 informants across 6 categories, selected purposively for their distinct characteristics—and its reliance on interview accounts rather than systematic measurements of income, expenditure, digital engagement, or long-term shifts in social practices. Consequently, these findings should be understood as an interpretive account of specific experiences in Jayapura, rather than a representative portrait of the entire population—whether indigenous or non-indigenous—or as evidence of a causal link between social media and expenditure. Future research could combine long-term ethnography with the tracking of household expenditures, observations of how public venues and cafés are used, and an analysis of how audiences interpret posts related to consumption. Comparative studies encompassing diverse residential environments, generations, and indigenous communities would further clarify how mobility, access, customary obligations, and economic disparities shape participation in commercial spaces. Such research would help distinguish between the social pleasure derived from being in modern settings and the financially

draining pursuit of status, while also assessing whether the symbolic visibility of affluence can alter everyday relationships over time.

Declarations

Acknowledgments

The authors sincerely thank all informants who generously shared their time, experiences, and perspectives during this research, including community members, visitors, commercial-space workers, business managers, and customary leaders in Jayapura. The authors also acknowledge the use of Grammarly and DeepL solely to assist with language refinement, grammar, punctuation, translation, and readability. All substantive interpretations, analyses, and conclusions remain the responsibility of the authors.

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement in the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures taken to protect their identities and confidentiality.

Funding

This research received no external funding and was conducted without financial support from any public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding agency.

Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethical declaration:

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Cenderawasih University (Approval No. 0069A/UN20.1.3/DT/2025). The approval was granted and signed by the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee, Marlina Flassy, Ph.D. All research procedures complied with the ethical standards for social science research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and confidentiality, anonymity, and cultural sensitivity were maintained throughout the study.

Consent to Publish

The authors confirm that participants consented to the use of their anonymized interview material for scholarly publication. No directly identifying personal information is included in this article.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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