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Values associated with luxury brand consumption and the role of gender

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ABSTRACT

We investigate the role of gender in the perceptions of and motives for luxury brand consumption. Based on the social structural theory of gender, we propose that differences in men's and women's luxury values result from asymmetries in social status. We conduct three studies with samples of frequent luxury brand buyers. Study 1 ($N = 512$) generates main values associated with luxury brand consumption. Study 2 ($N = 640$) identifies a four-factor model of luxury brand values, including refinement, heritage, exclusivity, and elitism, and shows that women give more importance to refinement, while men give more importance to exclusivity and elitism. Study 3 ($N = 1024$) demonstrates that public self-consciousness has a stronger positive influence on refinement for women rather than men. In contrast, consumer need for uniqueness and status consumption exert respectively a stronger positive influence on exclusivity and elitism for men rather than women.

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1. Introduction

The worldwide personal luxury goods market has experienced strong and steady growth over the past two decades, from €77 billion in 1995 to €253 billion in 2015.¹ Interestingly, Bain and Company (2012) reports that the growth of men's personal consumption of luxury goods (+14%) now outperforms the growth of women's consumption (+8%). Thus, although women's luxury consumption is still higher (60% of the worldwide luxury market value), the traditional gender gap is now decreasing. This trend questions the origins and motives of gender differences in luxury consumption. Indeed, there is a large body of literature on the various effects of demographics on luxury consumption, such as social class (e.g. Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010) or age (e.g. Schade, Hegner, Hortsman, & Brinkmann, 2016), yet little is known about the effects of gender. Recently, Meyers-Levy and Loken (2015) point out that, in spite of the overwhelming public interest in gender differences in consumer behavior, much research is needed to grasp the impact of gender. This need becomes more apparent in the case of luxury consumption (Stokburger-Sauer & Teichmann, 2013). We focus on whether men and women differ or are similar in the values they associate with luxury brand consumption. *What are the meaningful gender differences in luxury values associated with luxury consumption? To what extent do luxury consumption drivers vary across gender? What are the reasons for this?*

To shed light on such issues, we first present the social structural theory (SST) of gender (Eagly & Wood, 1999) and review the literature on luxury brand values. On this basis, we introduce a set of hypotheses about: (i) the influence of gender on interpersonal luxury values, i.e. elitism, exclusivity, and refinement, and (ii) the moderating effects of gender on three drivers of luxury consumption: conspicuous and status consumption, consumers' need for uniqueness, and personal self-consciousness. Next, we present three studies carried out on samples of Western luxury brand buyers. Study 1 identifies values that consumers associate with luxury consumption. Study 2 reveals the influence of gender on such values. Study 3 shows the moderating effects of gender on luxury value drivers. We then discuss theoretical and managerial implications.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social structural theory of gender (SST)

Ridgeway (2011) reports the persistence of gender inequality in modern societies, despite societal changes leading to the movement of women into occupations perceived as male-typed. In 2012, the gender wage gap (i.e. the ratio between men's to women's average incomes) was 21% in the U.S. and 16% in the EU.² Given that paid labor is a major means to access resources, status, and power, such asymmetries exhibit men's enduring dominant position. Furthermore, gender inequality involves cultural beliefs and stereotypes that shape everyday life interactions and legitimate sex differences (Ridgeway & Correll,

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¹ Retrieved from www.statista.com/statistics/266503/value-of-the-personal-luxury-goods-market-worldwide/.² Data reported by the U.S. Institute for Women's Policy Research (2013) and Eurostats (2013).

2004). Gender provides an easily available category to classify people (Brewer & Lui, 1989), priming expectations and norms related to sex-typed attributes and roles (Deaux, 1985). Thus, West and Zimmerman (1987) state that gender is not an individual trait, but an accomplishment: people *do* gender by enacting gender beliefs, to claim their identity. In contrast, sex refers to biological differences.

Accordingly, SST (Eagly & Wood, 1999) views gender as socially elaborated through interactions that involve beliefs resulting from the asymmetric status of men and women in labor division. This socialization process leads to internalization of gender beliefs consistent with other people's expectations and social norms (Risman, 2004; Risman & Davis, 2013). Such beliefs associate agentic and instrumental traits and roles (e.g. dominant, self-assertive, independent) with men vs. communal and affect-related traits and roles (e.g. carrying, supportive, emotional) with women (Eagly, 1987). Gender beliefs bias the evaluation of oneself and others in a gender-consistent direction, thus favoring accommodation to stereotypes (Ridgeway & Corell, 2004). This is particularly noticeable in the ways each gender is regarded and is expected to be (Prentice & Carranza, 2002): individuals expect high-status occupations to require masculine agentic and instrumental traits (e.g. self-assertiveness). Therefore, SST posits that gender beliefs enable one to legitimate asymmetries in men's and women's status (Eagly & Wood, 1999).

From this perspective, SST offers a framework to connect differences in gender identity with social status. Indeed, individuals perceive more homogeneity in both female (vs. male) and low-status (vs. high-status) groups, and men and members of high status groups are less inclined to self-stereotyping for the benefit of self-differentiation (Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2006). Accordingly, men's and women's self-concepts differ (Cross & Madson, 1997): men tend to separate the representation of others from the self (independent self), while women tend to include others as part of the self (interdependent self). Women are thus more sensitive to the opinions of others (Deaux & Major, 1987), and rely on self-appearance to make a good impression on others (Buss, 1989; Wang & Waller, 2006; Workman & Lee, 2011). Consequently, gender beliefs guide the construction of self-identity in a way that is consistent with each gender's status. These findings are congruent with Bourdieu's (2001) principle of *masculine domination*, which points out the homology between gender beliefs and men's and women's status in the social structure. We then review the literature on luxury values and discuss how gender may influence such values.

2.2. Luxury values

In economics, luxury goods are regarded as expensive and rare goods with strong positive income elasticity of demand, in opposition to necessity goods: an increase in income causes a larger increase in the demand for luxury goods (e.g. Deaton & Muellbauer, 1980). Beyond price consideration, one may wonder what drives luxury consumption? Some reasons are the desire and pleasure that luxury goods elicit (Berry, 1994; Kemp, 1998). Prestige-seeking also plays a key role in luxury consumption, in which luxury brands are the extreme-end along a prestige continuum (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). Despite little consensus on the definition of *luxury*, academics agree that it is a subjective and multidimensional construct that covers a wide variety of consumer perceptions (Wiedmann, Hennigs, & Siebels, 2007). In the case of luxury brands, these perceptions encompass values associated with and motives for luxury brand consumption (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). On the one hand, values are beliefs that refer to desired attributes of luxury brands and serve as standards in guiding consumer behavior (Woodruff, 1997). On the other hand, motives are incentives that drive consumers toward desirable goals and related values (McClelland, 1988). From this perspective, luxury brand values and motives constitute two related, but distinct facets of the consumer-brand relationship: values are brand-oriented since they focus on luxury brand attributes, whereas motives are consumer-oriented since they concern drivers that lead consumers

to favor certain values. According to Vigneron and Johnson (1999), luxury perceptions integrate both interpersonal and personal values and related motives.

Interpersonal values involve benefits resulting from public display to significant others (Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991), notably the reference group (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). Interpersonal values encompass three dimensions: conspicuousness, social value (especially, conformity), and uniqueness (Amaldoss & Jain, 2008, 2005). Owing to high prices, luxury conveys elitist values, which are symbols of wealth (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999) that are likely to confer status to buyers (Goldsmith & Clark, 2012). Therefore, one can use luxury goods conspicuously, i.e., can ostentatiously displaying possessions to signal status (Veblen, 1899). In this sense, conspicuous consumption, which seeks to enhance one's self-concept (Dubois & Duquesne, 1993), takes two distinct forms. First, bandwagon appeal consists in purchasing the same goods as people one wants to be assimilated with. Second, snob appeal consists in buying goods to differentiate oneself from significant others (Leibenstein, 1950). Thus, conspicuous consumption concerns affiliation to an aspirational group for bandwagon followers vs. dissociation from the mainstream for snob consumers (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014). Conformity resulting from consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Lascu & Zinkhan, 1999) drives bandwagon consumption (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012, 2014). In contrast, consumers' need for uniqueness (i.e. non-conformity to mainstream preferences) drives snob consumption (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014), consistent with the principles of rarity (Phau & Prendergast, 2000) and exclusivity (Groth & McDaniel, 1993), which luxury brands can elicit.

Luxury brands also convey two personal values derived from private and self-directed benefits: hedonism related to emotional responses and perfectionism based on perceived quality. First, luxury consumption gives consumer more than functional utility, since it offers intrinsic pleasure and affective gratification resulting from the acquisition, possession, and use of luxury goods (Wiedmann et al., 2007). Thus, luxury brands have an inherent hedonic potential that goes beyond consumer satisfaction, since it involves a promise of pleasure and an ability to delight, which foster brand attractiveness and consumption re-experience (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2009). Second, high quality is regarded as a necessary attribute of luxury brands (Lipovetsky & Roux, 2003). As consumers tend to use price as a cue to infer quality (Rao & Monroe, 1989), expensive luxury brands (compared to ordinary brands) are considered signals of quality that can elicit reassurance about superior performance, authenticity, or tradition (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). In this sense, seeking high quality is a personal motive to attain perfection.

On this basis, De Barnier, Falcy, and Valette-Florence (2012) compare the internal structures of the three luxury value scales proposed by Kapferer (1998), Vigneron and Johnson (2004), and Dubois, Czellar, and Laurent (2005). Using a French sample, De Barnier et al. (2012) run exploratory factor analysis on each of these three scales to identify their specific dimensions (Table 1): elitism, creativity and renown for Kapferer's scale; elitism, uniqueness, refinement, quality, and power for Vigneron and Johnson's scale; and elitism, distinction, and hedonism for Dubois et al.'s scale. Elitism, which is defined as perceived expensiveness and limited dissemination of luxury brands, is a common dimension across the three scales. Semantic analysis suggests that uniqueness, distinction, and creativity all relate to exclusivity, since these dimensions refer to differentiation from mainstream brands or significant others (e.g. unique, rare, differentiation from others, respectively). Hedonism and refinement both concern two aspects of luxury: elegance (e.g. exquisite, good taste) and emotions (e.g. stunning, pleasure). Quality and renown encompass the idea of excellence (e.g. superior, crafted) and thus mainly refer to a brand's intrinsic value. Finally, power reflects brand performance in the marketplace (Na, Marshall, & Keller, 1999), which is consumer-based brand equity rather than values derived from luxury consumption. Interestingly, De Barnier et al. (2012) find that elitism, refinement, and exclusivity-related dimensions offer

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