



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research



Teen attitudes toward luxury fashion brands from a social identity perspective: A cross-cultural study of French and U.S. teenagers

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 August 2015

Received in revised form 1 February 2016

Accepted 1 April 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Adolescence

Luxury retailing

Cross-cultural consumer behavior

Fashion innovativeness

Need for uniqueness

Susceptibility to peer influence

ABSTRACT

The global teen market has significant spending power and is an important factor in the world economy. However, little is known about the social motivations underlying attitudes toward luxury fashion brands during adolescence. This research investigates the social mechanisms underlying teenage attitudes toward luxury fashion brands in a cross-cultural context. In a study of 570 French and American adolescents, this research shows that both need for uniqueness and susceptibility to influence relate positively to attitudes toward luxury brands, and that fashion innovativeness mediates these relations. This research also shows that culture moderates these relations. Specifically, the mediated relations between need for uniqueness and luxury brand attitudes are stronger for American adolescents than for French adolescents. In contrast, the mediated relations between susceptibility to influence and luxury brand attitudes are stronger for French adolescents than for American adolescents. The results have implications for strategies luxury retailers develop for appealing to adolescents in different cultures.

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1. Introduction

Teens are a very important market, both because of their current consumer spending power and their future spending as adults. U.S. teenagers alone earn over \$80 billion in income, spent over \$220 billion in 2012, and spend an average of \$100 per week on clothing, their biggest single expenditure (Parker, Hermans, & Schaefer, 2008). European teens generally spend less (e.g., \$60 per week on clothing in France), but still represent a sizable market (Moses, 2000). These findings may explain why companies design luxury fashion specifically for teens (e.g., Louboutin high tops for \$700; Burberry bags for \$300–400). Despite the apparent significance of this market, attitudes toward luxury fashion brands during adolescence remains under-represented in cross-cultural consumer research.

Given the emergence of a global teen market, it is important to understand adolescent attitudes toward luxury fashion brands from a cross-cultural perspective. Global teens are thought to be similar in terms of their consumption habits, in particular with respect to fashion (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006). This presumed uniformity of teens, however, may be inaccurate. Recent research suggests that adolescent

consumers adapt global consumption practices and meanings to fit local contexts (Gentina, Butori, Rose, & Bakir, 2014). Although the vast majority of research on attitudes toward luxury brands among young people has focused on the U.S. (Beaudoin, Lachance, & Robitaille, 2003), research in other cultures is emerging, including Brazil (Gil, Kwon, Good, & Johnson, 2012), Australia (Phau & Leng, 2008), and China (Zhan & He, 2012). Research has described the individual and social mechanisms underlying attitudes toward luxury brands (Zhan & He, 2012) but has not explored how these mechanisms combine in a cross-cultural context. Thus, much remains unknown about cultural differences in teenage attitudes toward luxury fashion brands and the motivations that underlie these differences. Insights into the motives that affect teens' attitudes toward luxury fashion brands can provide retailers with information they can use to reach this attractive segment more effectively.

The research presented here evaluates two social identity mechanisms underlying teenage attitudes toward luxury fashion brands in a cross-cultural context: the individual mechanism (through the need for uniqueness) and the social mechanism (through susceptibility to peer influence). More specifically, it examines the identity processes that determine teenage attitudes toward luxury fashion brands in two cultures with distinctive historical, cultural, and social settings: the U.S. and France. To specify and clarify the social identity motives underlying attitudes toward luxury brands, we focus on clothing, an area particularly relevant to teens. Because adolescence is a crucial period in the

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identity development process, clothing symbolizes teens' connections with their ideal peer groups, as well as the singularity and subjectivity of individual tastes (Muzinich, Pecotich, & Putrevu, 2003).

This research shows that cultural differences play a key role in shaping the way teenagers develop attitudes toward luxury brands. In particular, the research shows that both need for uniqueness and susceptibility to influence positively relate to attitudes toward luxury brands, and that fashion innovativeness mediates these relations. However, the research also shows that the nature of these relations differs by culture, such that the mediated relations between need for uniqueness and luxury brand attitudes are stronger for American than for French adolescents. In contrast, the mediated relations between susceptibility to influence are stronger for French than for American adolescents. These findings extend existing research on attitudes toward luxury brands during adolescence to include cultural differences, and provide guidelines for marketing strategies to appeal to teens.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. The development of teens' social and personal identities

Forming a strong, coherent sense of identity is the primary task associated with transitioning from adolescence to adulthood (Erikson, 1968). This search for identity evolves as teens break away from parental influence. Personal identity takes the form of independent thinking and actions that develop during adolescence. Personal identity is distinct from social identity, but also related individuation balances social affiliation as teens become adults, in part by becoming independent thinkers, and in part by meshing with peer groups (Brewer, 1991). To assess how social identity plays a role in the development of fashion innovativeness and in the adoption of attitudes toward luxury brands, we focus on teens, who due to the many changes in their lives, have emerging selves that are heavily influenced by peers. We also focus on luxury fashion brands because it is intimately tied to an individual's social and personal identity (Shrum et al., 2013; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004; Wilcox, Kim, & Sen, 2009).

One key feature of our model is that because some cultures focus more on interdependence and cooperation (e.g., France), whereas others focus more on independence and competition (e.g., the U.S.), susceptibility to peer influence should be greater in some cultures (the former), whereas need for uniqueness should be greater in others (the latter; Gentina et al., 2014). We expect susceptibility to peer influence to contribute more to the development of fashion innovativeness and positive attitudes toward luxury fashion brands in France, but need for uniqueness to contribute more to the development of fashion innovativeness and positive attitudes toward luxury fashion brands in the U.S.

2.2. Need for uniqueness, susceptibility to influence, and attitudes toward luxury fashion brands

We use consumer need for uniqueness to operationalize the need for individuation, which refers to the tendency to use consumption to convey an individual identity that distinguishes oneself from others (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). People high in need for uniqueness express their uniqueness publicly with observable behaviors that establish their differences (Workman & Kidd, 2000). Luxury goods accomplish this signaling objective because a luxury brand's scarcity enables people to express their uniqueness (Bian & Forsythe, 2012). The need to construct personal identity, separate from parents, is particularly important among teens, who use luxury fashion brands to establish a unique personal identity (Gil et al., 2012). Here, we are interested in the extent to which teen fashion innovativeness mediates the relation between need for uniqueness and attitudes toward luxury fashion brands.

Consumer behavior literature proposes several different conceptualizations of consumer innovativeness. Im, Bayus and Mason (2003, p. 62) define consumer innovativeness as "the predisposition to buy new and

different products and brands rather than remain with previous choices and consumption patterns." Rogers (1995, p. 22) defines innovativeness as "the degree to which an individual is relatively earlier in adopting new ideas than other members of his/her social system." According to Goldsmith and Hofacker (1991), consumer innovativeness does not reflect only buying behavior, but also the tendency to learn about and adopt innovations within specific domains of interest (Midgley & Dowling, 1978). We refer to Goldsmith and Hofacker's (1991) definition of innovativeness as domain-specific, which means that consumers tend to be innovators for a specific product or product category.

Fashion is particularly important in the diffusion of innovation, and the frequent introduction of new styles makes the fashion market a highly desirable area for diffusion studies focusing on innovativeness (Goldsmith, D'Hauteville, & Flynn, 1998; Jordaán & Simpson, 2006). Given the evidence that innovativeness is domain-specific, we focus on fashion as the domain of interest for this study. Because adolescence is a time when individuals are particularly concerned with their appearance (they need to incorporate the changes that their bodies undergo into their self-views; Piacentini, 2010), this research examines innovativeness in the context of fashion.

Research indicates that innovators have certain important characteristics. For example, innovators score higher on need for uniqueness than do imitators (Workman & Kidd, 2000). People with high need for uniqueness are predisposed to initiate new behaviors that are different from the norms of the group, and are more likely to adopt new products. Thus, we expect the willingness to publicly individuate oneself to be a critical trait of innovativeness during adolescence. By innovating, teens with high need for uniqueness signal a sense of their personal identity and are more likely to be admired. Innovative teens may place more importance on luxury brands which are perceived as rarer than non-luxury brands (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Thus, they should be more likely to develop positive attitudes toward luxury fashion brands.

Thus, the study here predicts and tests H1.

H1. Fashion innovativeness mediates the relation between need for uniqueness and attitudes toward luxury fashion brands.

Although teens seek to individuate, they are also motivated to comply with the expectations of their friends by behaving in ways that allow them to balance their needs for individuation and their needs for social affiliation (Gentina, Butori, & Heath, 2013). Susceptibility to influence has two dimensions: susceptibility to informative influence and susceptibility to normative influence. Susceptibility to informative influence is the tendency to observe peers and seek information from them (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989). In order to be credible, innovators must gain a certain level of expertise in their field of influence. Thus, they need to actively search for information (Clark & Goldsmith, 2006). Fashion innovators are high on information-seeking of developments in fashion apparel (Muzinich et al., 2003). Information can be gathered from different sources, but during adolescence, peers constitute an important influence, increasing with age as parental influence fades (Gentina et al., 2013). Because friends provide moral support for consumption decisions, a primary motivation of consumption with friends is the need for assistance. Friends also help reduce perceptions of risk and uncertainty by providing information that helps teens make wiser purchase decisions. Thus, we predict that teen fashion innovators are more likely to seek information from their friends, which in turn encourages them to develop positive attitudes toward luxury fashion brands in order to express their levels of expertise and credibility.

Thus, the study here predicts and tests H2a.

H2a. Fashion innovativeness mediates the relation between susceptibility to informative influence and attitudes toward luxury fashion brands.

Another type of influence is normative influence, which is the desire to conform to the expectations of others (Bearden et al., 1989). This tendency is contrary to the nature of consumer innovativeness, which is

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