



# How consumers' need for uniqueness, self-monitoring, and social identity affect their choices when luxury brands visually shout versus whisper



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## ABSTRACT

This study theorizes and tests the effects of consumers' personality and social traits on preferences for brand prominence, and it explores the mediating effects of gender and culture. It focuses on how consumers' need for uniqueness and self-monitoring affects their choices between luxury brands that shout (are loud) versus those that whisper (are discreet), that is, the degree of brand prominence. This study uses a quantitative methodology to study 215 young consumers from Finland, Italy, and France. The findings show that most consumers in the sample were connoisseur consumers who prefer luxury brands that whisper. Social norms affect luxury brand choices; the Finns were found to prefer discreet visible markings on products more than the French and the Italians did. Finally, more men than women were found to link luxury brands to self-expression and self-presentation; this has marketing implications in terms of segmentation and brand management.

## 1. Introduction

Although the growth in the global luxury market has started to decline, consumers' appetite for luxury goods continues (Kapferer, 2012; Li, Li, & Kambele, 2012). This is owing to online stores and mobile applications (e.g., Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Kluge & Fassnacht, 2015); increasing wealth in emerging markets like China and India (Liu, Perry, Moore, & Warnaby, 2016); and brand accessibility due to the luxury industry's investments in productivity (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003).

The appetite for luxury goods is attributable to the inherent characteristics of luxury brands and the beneficial values (Roux, Tafani, & Vigneron, 2017) gained by having, owning, and using them (Cristini, Kauppinen-Räsänen, Barthod-Prothade, & Woodside, 2017). Luxury offerings provide outstanding quality (e.g., Choo, Moon, Kim, & Yoon, 2012) and have a more appealing appearance than non-luxury products. Luxury products are also attractive owing to features like quality materials, connoisseurship, and the core competencies of creativity, craftsmanship, and innovation that go into their making. These features make such offerings exclusive, rare, and unique, and therefore, they are sold at a premium price point (Kapferer & Laurent, 2016), or at least at higher prices than most other offerings in the same category. These features also suggest that luxuries are unreachable by and inaccessible

to most (e.g., Roper, Caruana, Medway, & Murphy, 2013). Consequently, luxury goods intrinsically reflect the status of their owners and users; they are something that most people would like to possess, but only a privileged few can obtain. Luxury is a marker of one's status, and through visible brand marks, it is perceived to enhance such symbolic benefits in everyday social interactions, which feeds many new luxury consumers' appetites (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012).

Luxury has become an important field of research (Stokburger-Sauer & Teichmann, 2013). Although many aspects of the luxury sector have been covered, some issues remain unclear. One such issue is what triggers the desire for luxury brands, beyond the product's characteristics and the benefits gained from using it. Seemingly, a shift in contemporary luxury consumption occurs, where the new luxury is no longer too exclusive or rare and neither is it unreachable nor inaccessible (Kapferer & Laurent, 2016). Luxury thus requires courting new consumers who are characterized more by their personality, values, attitudes, interests, and lifestyles than by their income levels. Therefore, more research is needed to understand behavior related to various types of luxury. This includes popular to high-end luxury and designer brands (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014), the specific traits of luxury consumers themselves, such as their demographic background (e.g. nationality, gender), motivations, and attitudes (Chan, To, & Chu, 2015; Chandon, Laurent, & Valette-Florence, 2016; Cheach, Phau,

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Chong, & Shimul, 2015; Kauppinen-Räsänen, Koskull, Gummerus, & Cristini, 2018; Roux et al., 2017; Shukla & Purani, 2012).

To fill this gap in literature, this study focuses on high-end luxury brands and examines how personality and social traits are linked to consumers' behaviors for such brands. Research has found that self-awareness and personality traits such as the need for uniqueness (NFU) and self-monitoring (SM) are personal triggers for behaviors in the context of luxury brands (Bian & Forsythe, 2012). The need for uniqueness is related to self-expression (SE). Consumers with high need for uniqueness are found to place a higher emphasis on expressing oneself, establishing an independent identity, and using distinguishing brands (Shavitt, 1989). Self-monitoring is closely linked to self-presentation (SP) (Shavitt, 1989). A high level of self-monitoring leads consumers to adapt their behavior to the social context.

Instead of focusing on status consumption or conspicuous consumption, this study contributes to luxury research by examining brand prominence, which is the extent of a brand's visual conspicuousness, and the fact that status can be private or public (Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010). Specifically, this study examines the relationship between personality traits (need for uniqueness and self-monitoring) and social traits (self-expression and self-presentation) and how it determines a consumer's preferred degree of brand prominence (i.e., consumer's "luxury trait"). While studies focusing on cultural and personal factors are also called for, this study contributes by investigating the mediating influences of gender and culture across three countries (e.g. Bian & Forsythe, 2012; Roux et al., 2017).

## 2. Theoretical framework

Visibility is essential to status consumption and has therefore been used interchangeably with conspicuous consumption (O'Cass & Frost, 2002), which is defined as "the social and public visibility surrounding the consumption of a product" (Piron, 2000, p. 309). This means that consumers strive for status through visible markers of luxury brands, such as the brand's logo. However, some researchers have argued for a distinction between the two concepts (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004; Truong, Simmons, McColl, & Kitchen, 2008). This is because the desire for status can be public, as expressed through conspicuous consumption, or "the tendency for individuals to enhance their image through the overt consumption of possessions, which communicates their status to others" (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004, p. 34). Alternatively, it can be private as per the definition of status consumption, or "the behavioral tendency to value status and acquire and consume products that provide status to the individual" (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004, p. 34). Therefore, brand prominence, or "the extent to which a product has visible markings that help ensure observers recognize the brand" (Han et al., 2010, p.15), implies that the preferred degree of conspicuousness may vary but is always based on the need for status. A product with high brand prominence is conspicuous, opulent, pretentious, gaudy, and logo-oriented, whereas a product with low brand prominence is modest, unobtrusive, discreet, purist, and minimalistic (Heine, 2009). Interestingly, low brand prominence does not imply that the consumer desires a low level of status, as the need may relate to private status instead of public (Han et al., 2010).

Fig. 1 shows need for uniqueness and self-monitoring. Self-expression and self-presentation are two dimensions that together comprise the function of social identity (SI) (Shavitt, 1989). Owing to the preference for brand prominence, they are believed to reveal consumers' luxury trait. The basic assumption is that the need for uniqueness and self-expression lead to a preference for low brand prominence (connoisseur consumption), whereas self-monitoring and self-presentation lead to a preference for high brand prominence (fashion consumption).

### 2.1. Personality traits of need for uniqueness and self-monitoring

Solomon (2011, p. 240) defined personality as "...a person's unique

psychological makeup and how it consistently influences the way a person responds to her environment." Accordingly, the need for uniqueness and self-monitoring are perceived within the realm of marketing as personality traits serving social needs (Lynn & Harris, 1997).

The need for uniqueness indicates consumers' need to differentiate themselves from others and to be seen as one of a kind (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). This need is related to self-expression, and it suggests that consumers with high need for uniqueness emphasize the independent self, seek differentiating brands, and are more prone to adopt new products (e.g. Snyder, 1992). Because material possessions are regarded as an extension of the self (Belk, 1988), material goods are used to express one's identity. Thus, exclusive, rare, and unique brands like luxury brands are used as a means of accomplishing the need for uniqueness (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). Past studies have shown that the need for uniqueness is triggered by status consumption and that it influences purchase intentions (Chan et al., 2015; Park, Rabolt, & Jeon, 2008). Tian et al. (2001) further developed the concept of need for uniqueness and found that it is a three-dimensional construct reflecting consumers' need for differentiation while highlighting different degrees of social divergence. "Creative choice counter conformity" (NFUCC) means that the consumer seeks social dissimilarity, but in a safe and socially approved manner. Consumers thus seek out dissimilar brands to fulfill their need for uniqueness without being perceived as too abnormal in social settings (Snyder, 1992). "Unpopular choice counter conformity" (NFUUC) means that the consumer seeks dissimilarity or uniqueness and is willing to accept social disapproval. "Avoidance of similarity" (NFUAS) suggests that dissimilarity from social norms (SN) is an end in itself and that the consumer does not sustain interest in conventional possessions.

Self-monitoring is related to self-presentation (Snyder, 1974). As opposed to wanting to be unique compared to others, the consumer has a need to be socially appropriate and to not diverge from the group by conforming to others' attitudes. Therefore, self-monitoring is closely related to the need for conformity (NFC). Consumers with high need for conformity want what other consumers have (Amaldoss & Jain, 2005). Self-monitoring consumers monitor the environment and modify and adapt their behavior and self-presentation accordingly (Graeff, 1996; O'Cass, 2000) as they are sensitive to social norms (Bian & Forsythe, 2012). For example, Chinese consumers show high self-monitoring, and they use luxury goods to conform in terms of their social identity (e.g. Zhan & He, 2012). However, these consumers are also confident in this conformity and in how they present themselves, even though this is contradictory to their personality. Consumers who show low self-monitoring are less sensitive and less responsive, and they prefer consistency in their behavior (e.g., Dubois, Czellar, & Laurent, 2005; O'Cass, 2000; Snyder, 1974). They are also more focused on staying true to themselves and in living by their personal values and private realities (O'Cass, 2000). Furthermore, they judge products based on their performance and not the conveyed image (DeBono, 2006).

### 2.2. Social traits of self-expression and self-presentation

In this study, the need for uniqueness and self-monitoring are treated as motivational aspects of the attitudinal behaviors of self-expression and self-presentation and are believed to contribute as a function of social identity.

An attitude is defined as "a more enduring state of mind" (Argyriou & Melewar, 2011, p. 444) or "a learned predisposition to behave in a consistently favorable or unfavorable way with respect to a given object" (Schiffman, Kanuk, & Hansen, 2008, p. 248). The functional theory of attitudes (Katz, 1960; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956) examines the motivations behind attitudes; it emphasizes that attitudes occur as they are perceived to be useful and to serve a function (e.g., DeBono, 1987; Grewal, Mehta, & Kardes, 2004; Shavitt, 1989).

Attitudes serve various functions. Attitudes that have a communicative or a value-expressive function help consumers communicate

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