



Emotional experiences behind the pursuit of inconspicuous luxury

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ABSTRACT

Today we are witnessing a trend towards subtler hints of luxury, reflecting the rise of inconspicuousness. We seek to address the contradictions of paying a premium for luxury with subtle logos that provide less effective brand signaling to others by exploring two research questions: What emotions do consumers experience in relation to their inconspicuous luxury consumption? How do emotions associated with symbolic meanings of inconspicuous luxury consumption play a role in self-identity communication? Using the luxury fashion goods context, in-depth interviews and naturalistic observational data of 10 luxury consumers with inconspicuous preferences in Dubai reveal three main themes contributing to inconspicuousness: emotional self-defense, self-enhancement, and social-defense. Inconspicuousness symbolizes self-protection and association with tasteful luxury and dissociation from luxury faux pas.

1. Introduction

For decades, many luxury brands relied on loud logos and iconic designs including Louis Vuitton's monograms, Versace's Medusa Head and the Burberry plaid. Today we are witnessing a trend towards subtler hints of luxury. For example, Tiffany's recent collection of jewelry features the letter 'T' as a quiet signifier instead of its full overt brand to help boost sales. Similarly, sales at Gucci accelerated after their recent move toward more subtle indulgence downplaying its trademark 'G emblem'. Additionally, recent news headlines such as *'The new subtle ways the rich signal their wealth'*, *'China's wealthy switch to Nike and Adidas for inconspicuous consumption'*, and *'Super-Rich: Who, Us? The world's wealthy are becoming more discrete in their consumption'* were featured in BBC news, Bloomberg, and The Wall Street Journal, respectively (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Einhorn, 2016; Evans, 2012) reflecting consumer desire to display their social currency in a more discreet manner. In the United States, the top 1% of high income earners now spend more inconspicuously on services, education, retirement and health over purely material possessions (Currid-Halkett, 2017). Intriguingly, luxury consumers in China who typically favor loud material goods are now gravitating towards much more tacit signifiers of their social status (Wu et al., 2017). Academically, Berger and Ward (2010) examined the application of subtle signals in facilitating communication amongst the classes and their findings revealed the value of less explicit signal. This work marks the beginning of an academic interest in inconspicuousness.

In agreement with Eckhardt et al. (2015), we define inconspicuous

consumption as the use of subtle signals, which are unidentifiable by the mainstream but instantly observable to those that possess the needed connoisseurship to decode its meanings. This perspective differs from the concept of conspicuousness that involves consumption activities which provide symbolic and functional values to satisfy needs for signaling one's wealth, status and power (Mundela et al., 2017). The recent developments towards subtler luxuries has disrupted the classical view that luxury consumption equates to status consumption (Eckhardt et al., 2015), and has certainly shattered the conventional wisdom around building conspicuous luxury brands. Therefore, it is important to understand the emerging luxury consumer dynamics so that effective strategies that reinvent the luxury experience for today's luxury consumer can be developed (Makkar and Yap, in press). This gap between the academic focus on conspicuous consumption and the emerging luxury retail practices that gear towards inconspicuousness suggests an intriguing research direction.

Attempts to understand the motivational antecedents of luxury brand consumption have contributed immensely to luxury literature (Phau and Prendergast, 2000). However, the tangible aspects of luxury goods remain the focus in luxury literature, ignoring the primacy of the luxury experience (Hemetsberger et al., 2012). Han et al. (2010) support the view that "luxury goods are traditionally defined as goods such that the mere use or display of a particular branded product brings the owner prestige apart from any functional utility" (p.16). Moreover, luxury research has generally paid less empirical attention to a basic psychological force behind luxury consumption: the emotion. While there is a consensus regarding the important role of emotion and

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emotional responses in marketing (Gaur et al., 2014; Ladhari et al., 2017), its applications in luxury contexts are limited (Kim et al., 2016). Emotions can be a strong driver influencing human perceptions and judgements and motivate behaviors towards luxury (Pham, 2007). Particularly, which emotions are involved in luxury experiences and how do they influence inconspicuousness remain unknown.

Most luxury research has its roots in the well-established concept of conspicuous consumption (Truong and McColl, 2011). However, apart from scant research on preferences for subtle design to facilitate the construction and display of one's self among Chinese consumers (Wu et al., 2017), its application in identity communication (Berger and Ward, 2010; Han et al., 2010), status signaling (Han et al., 2010), the meanings consumers associate with their inconspicuous luxury (Makkar and Yap, *in press*) as well as Eckhardt et al.'s (2015) recent review of the rise of inconspicuousness, little is known about inconspicuous luxury experiences (Economist, 2005). A recent review of the luxury landscape demonstrates the scant but growing academic interest into inconspicuousness (Gurzi and Woisetschlager, 2016). This study picks up this thread and focuses on what emotions might underlie consumer choices towards inconspicuousness.

Based on in-depth interviews and unstructured naturalistic observations of 10 luxury consumers with inconspicuous preferences in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE), two research questions are addressed: *What emotions do consumers experience in relation to their inconspicuous luxury consumption? How do emotions associated with symbolic meanings of inconspicuous luxury consumption play a role in self-identity communication?* The general aim is to better understand the role of emotion in choosing to consume inconspicuous luxury rather than conspicuous ones. By understanding the role of emotion in luxury decision-making, retail brand managers can tailor their communication to their target audience using emotional appeal and language they can relate to. To achieve this goal, this paper is organized in the following manner. First, relevant literature around conspicuous versus inconspicuous luxury is presented along with a presentation on the role of emotion in consumption. Through this discussion, gaps in the literature are presented and the methodology is investigated. This exploratory research revealed interesting findings and led to concluding remarks on the study's contributions in terms of luxury consumption, identity, emotion and brand symbolism as well as exploratory insights into the lives of inconspicuous luxury consumers. The findings also have potential to yield important managerial implications for luxury branding and retail management. Lastly, limitations and future directions are discussed.

2. Literature review

2.1. Luxury, (in)conspicuousness and the self

Luxury is a notion routinely used to describe products, services or lifestyles in daily life (Wiedmann and Hennigs, 2013) and it exists in various forms of consumption practices (Dubois et al., 2005). Despite the tremendous interest in luxury research, the definition of luxury remains debatable and as yet, no single definition has emerged as dominant in the luxury literature (Amatulli et al., 2016; Vigneron and Johnson, 2017). The problem concerning the conceptualization of luxury is partly attributed to its subjective and personal nature that is dependent on its social, economic and cultural evolution (Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Roper et al., 2013). Despite its conceptual ambiguity, a common thread running through the various definitions of luxury relates to two main theoretical explanations for patronizing luxury goods; social values that bring esteem to luxury consumers and personally-oriented motivations (Godey et al., 2013; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). In this research, luxury is conceptualized based on how consumers comprehend its meaning and how they choose to consume it given Wiedmann and Hennigs' (2013) argument that luxury definitions built on consumer perception makes more theoretical sense.

Consumer motivations have a strong stance in luxury consumption research. Since Veblen's theorizing of conspicuous consumption, pecuniary emulation i.e. an individual's attempt to portray an image to others (Phau and Prendergast, 2000) and invidious comparison where individuals endeavor to distinguish themselves from others in lower classes (Veblen, 1899) remain as two main motives for luxury consumption. Conspicuous behaviors are often instigated by those that perceive themselves to have higher resources or success than those that do not (Mandel et al., 2006). However, social comparison theory suggests that those who are least well-off may consume conspicuously in an attempt to 'keep up with the Joneses' and reduce the gap between them and those slightly above them (Ordabayeva and Chandon, 2011). Poorer consumers in transitional economies may defy the well-known hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954) and choose luxury at the expense of necessities, also known as 'leaping luxuries' (Belk, 1999). These consumers are more prone to purchasing luxury brand look-alikes (i.e. counterfeits).

Intuitively, scholars tend to speculate that qualities of inconspicuous consumers would convey opposing characteristics to conspicuousness but this view is over-simplistic. Although empirical examinations of inconspicuous luxury experiences are scant (Wu et al., 2017), several studies pave the way by exploring areas of the phenomenon. In their recent conceptual review, Eckhardt et al. (2015) highlighted the dilution of traditional luxury brands and increased consumer needs for subtle designs and uniqueness. Berger and Ward (2010) studied preferences for inconspicuousness and found an inverted U relationship between price and brand identification; i.e. the higher the price of a luxury product, the more inconspicuous its signaling abilities and brand prominence. Wu et al. (2017) focused on motives that drive Chinese luxury consumers to consume inconspicuously. Though not entirely focused on inconspicuousness, Han et al. (2010) proposed a taxonomy that classified consumers into four segments based on their wealth and need for status, and demonstrated how brand prominence relates to consumer desires to associate or dissociate with others. Makkar and Yap (*in press*) extended this study and demonstrated a typology for inconspicuous consumers based on their identity signaling needs and their fashion knowledge. Thus, we can assume that consumers make inconspicuous luxury decisions based on their identity projects.

Inconspicuous consumers that can afford highly priced luxury, whom Berger and Ward (2010) called 'insiders', have hard-to-imitate tastes and preferences that distinguish them from the mainstream. This group of consumers believe they can claim status without brand prominence (Berger and Ward, 2010) as they have realized luxury's dilution in the market (Bruce and Kratz, 2007). They have concerns for socially responsible consumption (Klein, 2000) or may reject authentic and counterfeit luxuries demonstrating their claims for status without patronizing luxuries (Geiger-Oneto et al., 2013). Besides, Ledbury Research identified connoisseurship and early adoption of luxuries as key motivators for inconspicuousness (Economist, 2005). Researchers have reasoned that signaling intentions and identity-related motives are strongly associated with conspicuous or inconspicuous luxury consumption.

Signaling status is not necessarily achieved through the acquisition and consumption of material purchases. For instance, experiential purchases such as holidays are closely related to the self yet are less conspicuous and less obvious than possessions (Carter and Gilovich, 2012). Generally, the experiential element of luxury consumption demonstrates that luxury is sometimes purchased for one's self which reveals hedonic needs of self-indulgence mainly to achieve self-gratification and self-reward, reflecting the intrinsic goals consumers are attempting to pursue (Miller and Mills, 2012). This view is echoed by van Boven and Gilovich (2003) interpretations that experiences make people feel more satisfied and are a more meaningful part of one's identity compared to material possessions. So why do consumers still value possessions over experiences? We believe more complex identity projects take place during luxury consumption.

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