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Constructing a typology of luxury brand consumption practices

Yuri Seo*, Margo Buchanan-Oliver

Department of Marketing, University of Auckland, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Luxury branding has received much attention from marketing and consumer research scholars. Yet, research into how consumers themselves shape luxury brand meanings is underdeveloped. Following the resurgence of the application of theories of social practices in consumer research, we offer a novel and comprehensive typology of luxury consumption practices. In doing so, we shed light on how personalized meanings of brand luxury are emerging in the private sphere of everyday life, as luxury consumers integrate various materials, meanings, and competencies within their practice performances. The findings provide important insights for both scholars and practitioners in developing a more holistic understanding of the multi-dimensionality and fluidity of luxury brand meanings in the context of contemporary consumer culture.

1. Introduction

The idea of luxury has been used to signify status and power, providing an “illuminating entrée into a basic political issue, namely, the nature of social order” (Berry, 1994, p. 6). However, the sociocultural shifts within contemporary luxury markets undermine this received view. Most notably, the activities of luxury brands – which diversify into new international markets, use divergent ideological and cultural imaginaries, and combine high perceived prestige with prices accessible to middle-class consumers – offer multiple possibilities as to how contemporary consumers can (re-)interpret the meaning of ‘luxury’. Consequently, what constitutes the nature of luxury branding today is disputed, subjective, and personalized. Much of the previous research on luxury brand consumption has been conducted under the product-centric assumption of a predetermined relationship between consumer perceptions and luxury brand meanings, where ‘luxury’ was conceived to be “a relatively stable, unproblematic and predictable concept” (Roper, Caruana, Medway, & Murphy, 2013, p. 375). However, there have been calls for alternative cultural and consumer-centric approaches to extend the product-centric perspectives of luxury branding (Roper et al., 2013; Tynan, McKechnie, & Chhuon, 2010).

This paper has two main purposes. First, we review previous theoretical perspectives on what constitutes luxury brands, and identify a gap in extant knowledge about how consumers construct personalized ‘luxury’ meanings. Second, informed by recent developments in practice-based inquiries (e.g., Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009), we offer a novel typology of luxury brand consumption practices. Specifically, we identify five distinct practices that offer new insights into the ways

personalized luxury meanings are emergent in the context of the mundane routines of daily life, as consumers *perform* luxury brand consumption. Importantly, our findings draw attention to the kaleidoscopic and paradoxical range of meanings that consumers construct about luxury brands, whereby these brands assume multiple roles within the diverse aspects of consumers' lives.

This paper offers several contributions to emerging discussions as to how consumers construct luxury brand meanings (Roper et al., 2013). First, by developing a succinct typology of luxury consumption practices, we draw attention to the complexity of luxury brand meanings and the creative role that consumers play in constructing these meanings. Second, we find that consumers are not restricted to performing only one particular practice. Instead, they tend to operate as skillful ‘agents’ (Reckwitz, 2002) who appropriate multiple luxury practice performances in order to satisfy different aspects of their life themes and situational influences. Finally, we offer a much needed emic (in depth descriptions based on participants' views) perspective (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993) on how luxury consumers themselves interpret their practice performances of luxury consumption. In doing so, we show that different dimensions of the luxury brand imaginary become more or less important, depending on the prevalence of practices performed by each consumer. Thus, our findings provide important insights for both scholars and practitioners in developing a more holistic understanding about the fluidity of luxury brand meanings in contemporary consumer culture.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Marketing, Business School, The University of Auckland, Owen G Glenn Building, 12 Grafton Road, Private Bag 92019 Auckland, New Zealand.

E-mail address: y.seo@auckland.ac.nz (Y. Seo).

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Table 1
Brand luxury conceptualizations.

Brand luxury perspective		Concepts, themes, and theoretical sources	Previous typologies
Product-centric luxury		Functional value (Berthon et al., 2009); utilitarian value (Tynan et al., 2010); old luxe (Miller & Mills, 2012); brand DNA; craftsmanship; heritage; quality; high price, etc. (Dubois, Laurent, & Czellar, 2001; Fionda & Moore, 2009; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Keller, 2009).	Berthon et al. (2009); Tynan et al. (2010); Miller and Mills (2012); Chandon, Laurent, and Valette-Florence (2016).
Consumer-centric luxury	<i>Social meanings</i>	Symbolic/expressive (Tynan et al., 2010); symbolic luxury (Berthon et al., 2009); social meaning (Miller & Mills, 2012); status symbol (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009); perfectionism effect and conspicuousness (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004); democratization of luxury (Truong, McColl, & Kitchen, 2009); social construction of luxury (Roper et al., 2013)	Vigneron and Johnson (2004); Berthon et al. (2009); Tynan et al. (2010); Miller and Mills (2012); Chandon et al. (2016).
	<i>Personalized meanings</i>	Experiential/hedonic (Tynan et al., 2010); experiential luxury (Berthon et al., 2009); individual meaning (Miller & Mills, 2012); luxury experiences; personal pleasures, 'my luxury' (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009); consumer centric and luxury brand value co-creation (Roper et al., 2013; Tynan et al., 2010)	Vigneron and Johnson (2004); Berthon et al. (2009); Tynan et al. (2010); Miller and Mills (2012); Chandon et al. (2016).

2. Conceptualizing brand luxury

Previous studies acknowledge that “the concept of luxury and the corollary of the luxury brand are contentious” (Berthon, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2009, p. 46). This contentiousness arises due to multiple and, at times, conflicting terminologies that have been used to define the dimensions of luxury as applied to brands, hereinafter referred to as ‘brand luxury’ (Miller & Mills, 2012; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Table 1 presents integrations and reclassifications of previous research and additions to theoretical sources, whereby we elicit two broad perspectives on how brand luxury can be conceptualized – a (1) product-centric and (2) a consumer-centric perspective. Within the product-centric perspective, brand luxury is assumed to reside within the product itself. Accordingly, this perspective is concerned with understanding the various attributes that imbue a product with brand luxury perceptions. In other words, the product-centric perspective is concerned with answering the question about ‘what’ constitutes brand luxury. Conversely, the consumer-centric perspective is a meaning-based approach. This perspective explores ‘how’ consumers actively interpret and internalize luxury brand meanings (Roper et al., 2013; Tynan et al., 2010), allowing the identification of two further types of brand luxury: social meanings – which denote what brand luxury signifies at the level of social structures and collectives; and personalized meanings – which deal with individualized interpretations of luxury brands and consumer agency.

2.1. Product-centric brand luxury

A product-centric perspective of brand luxury assumes that the target consumer possesses seemingly stable and predetermined perceptions about luxury brands (Roper et al., 2013). Miller and Mills (2012, p. 43) describe this consumer as “a connoisseur, a person of good taste, savvy and [one who] does not need to look at the label to recognize the brand or designer, and [who] is willing to be put on a waiting list to receive a limited edition, and purchases luxury for himself and/or to share with a selected few”. Within this perspective, a luxury consumer is assumed to be well-known and understood, and ‘crafting’ a luxury brand becomes a matter of identifying tangible and intangible attributes that convey brand luxury ‘correctly’ to this predetermined consumer. Prendergast and Wong (2003) suggest that brand luxury is communicated through good quality and design, while Fionda and Moore (2009) also include marketing communications, luxury environment, and culture as essential brand luxury ingredients. Dubois et al. (2001) provide a more integrative perspective by outlining six elements of brand luxury: (1) excellent quality, (2) high price, (3) scarcity and uniqueness, (4) aesthetics and polysensuality, (5) superfluousness, and (6) ancestral heritage and personal history. Lastly, Keller (2009) refines the dimensions that define luxury brands by incorporating brand symbols, secondary associations, brand architecture,

competition, and trademarks.

Underlying the product-centric perspective is, therefore, an assumption that brand luxury represents ‘stable and predetermined’ effects of brand identity or DNA, which should be crafted by brand managers (Roper et al., 2013). Indeed, even though many product-centric studies use consumer-based instruments, the underlying purpose behind these studies has been largely to evaluate the extent to which brand luxury perceptions (e.g., quality, high price) are accepted by consumers, rather than to query how consumers themselves can be empowered to construct and find relevance for such perceptions in the context of their own life themes and projects. However, this latter focus becomes particularly important in light of the challenges posed by dynamic sociocultural developments such as democratization, multiculturalism, and sustainability; and the rise of social media, online retailing and new fashion technologies that alter the ways in which brand luxury is consumed in the context of contemporary consumer culture (e.g., König, Wiedmann, Hennigs, & Haase, 2016; Maman Larrauffie & Kourdoughli, 2014; Park, Song, & Ko, 2011; Stanforth & Lee, 2011).

2.2. Towards consumer-centric brand luxury

Recent studies highlight that consumers' understandings about brand luxury are becoming increasingly subjective and personalized (Roper et al., 2013). Luxury consumers are influenced not only by what luxury brand managers communicate, but also by what other consumers say and do with the brands; discourses from popular culture, and influences from other stakeholders and institutions (Chandon et al., 2016). This research has prompted luxury brand scholars to focus on consumer meanings, recognizing that luxury brand meanings are consumer-centric. Vigneron and Johnson (2004) consider brand luxury to consist of personal (individual) and interpersonal (social) perceptions about a brand. Kapferer and Bastien (2009) recognize that brand luxury has two facets: indulging in personal pleasures (luxury for one's self) and demonstration of social success (luxury for others); whereas Berthon et al. (2009) note that, in addition to the product attributes conceived of by managers, brand luxury includes what a brand means to the individual (experiential value), and to the collective (symbolic value).

These studies, therefore, show that, despite different terminologies used to depict and classify brand luxury, there is a general consensus that luxury brand meanings can be studied at the social and personalized levels (Table 1). What remains less clear, however, is how these two distinct facets of brand luxury may be interconnected. In the remainder of this section, we provide further conceptual clarity to these two meaning-based dimensions of brand luxury, and identify a gap in our knowledge as to how consumers construct personalized meanings of brand luxury.

2.2.1. Social meanings

Social meanings reflect historically established notions about luxury in a given sociocultural locale (Berthon et al., 2009). These meanings convey social salience and identification (Berry, 1994), conceived of as shared beliefs about tastes, prominence, and role-positions within collectives (e.g., a marketplace). For instance, in many societies, luxury objects traditionally have been consumed as symbolic markers of prestige and affluence, with Veblen (1899) reporting that people used luxury products as ‘badges’ to reflect their status. Indeed, luxury brands foster a sense of relational connection among select groups of social-economic elites, arising as the result of common luxury consumption practices and subsequent juxtaposition of the elite and middle groups (Berg & Clifford, 1999).

Social meanings are, therefore, an important facet of brand luxury, because they denote the shared criteria and rules which consumers may commonly use in interpreting luxury brands. As such, they can inform our understanding of the ways luxury tastes change over time, and across different cultures (Seo, Buchanan-Oliver, & Cruz, 2015). Importantly, it is only when consumers internalize shared social meanings that they form meaningful groupings (e.g., market segments), and communicate with one another using a shared system of symbols and taken-for-granted-rules (Barker, 2007). For example, we often differentiate *nouveau riche* consumers by their desire to use luxury brands as creative and fluid devices for self-actualization and meaning, which makes them distinct from other groups of luxury consumers.

It is important to note, however, that the social meanings of luxury are not a monolithic system. Increasingly nowadays, brand luxury is subjected to multiple social debates (democratization vs. old luxury, Western and Eastern cultural values, sustainability and fashion, etc.) that offer contemporary consumers “a multitude of interpretive positions and endless opportunities for context-specific combinations, juxtapositions, and personalized transformations of established cultural meanings” (Thompson, 1997, p. 441). A recent dispute about the relationship between sustainability and luxury, in particular, highlights a myriad of paradoxes within the social meanings of brand luxury. On the one hand, as Beckham and Voyer (2014, p.245) note: “sustainability’s inherent ethically-grounded values of altruism, restraint, and moderation contrast with luxury’s inherent hedonism, aestheticism, rarity, affluence, superfluity, and its immoral socio-historical narrative”. On the other hand, when luxury brands are juxtaposed against their less affluent counterparts such as fast-fashion brands; luxury denotes authenticity and concomitant respect for artisans and the environment, which, in turn, may cultivate a greater appreciation for sustainability concerns and practices (Han, Seo, & Ko, 2017; Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang, & Chan, 2012). Thus, against the backdrop of this and other paradoxes within the social meanings of luxury brands, there are multiple ‘reading positions’ for consumers to legitimize divergent personalized meanings about what brand luxury conveys to them.

2.2.2. Personalized meanings

Whereas social meanings are understood at the collective level, personalized meanings draw attention to the ways brand luxury is interpreted and customized by individual consumers. Personalized meanings are an important aspect of brand luxury, because even when consumers share social meanings, they still experience these meanings differently – “through the different ways in which we make sense of our experiences and internalize and externalize social meanings” (Barker, 2007, p. 338). In marketing, Thompson (1997) calls this process ‘personalized cultural frames of reference’, highlighting that the consumption meanings described by an individual reflect the dialectic relationship between a broader cultural background of social meanings, that person’s individualized personal history, and contextual elements (e.g. Kim, Ko, Lee, Mattila, & Kim, 2014; Latter, Phau, & Marchegiani, 2010).

The importance of personalized luxury has been widely acknowledged, with Kapferer and Bastien (2009) noting that ‘luxury for one’s

self’ is an essential ingredient for crafting successful luxury brands, associated with personal imagery and hedonism. Similarly, Lacroix and Jolibert (2017, p. 1) have recently drawn attention towards personal legacy and agentic generativity – “a motivation that brings consumers to invest themselves in beneficial consumption activities for future generations by leaving a positive legacy of the self” – as an additional source of value for luxury brands. However, little attention has been paid to how consumers *construct* their personalized luxury meanings. Given that the focus of much previous research has been on the psychological perceptions of brand luxury – what consumers think about brand luxury – very little attention has been paid to how consumers perform their luxury brand consumption – what they actually do with the brands.

This gap is evident in Roper et al.’s (2013) call for an alternative sociocultural perspective, where the focus of research should be re-positioned from what luxury value is, towards understanding *how* it is constructed by consumers. In the same vein, Kim and Kwon (2017, p. 124) note the importance of personalized lived experiences of creative activities performed by consumers with luxury brands, which “[allow] consumers to feel a greater sense of beauty, achievement and success and thus [improve] their quality of life”. Thus, it is clear that research into personalized meanings of brand luxury is underdeveloped, and there are calls for a better understanding of the ways personal goals, life history, and consumers’ actions shape the meanings that they have previously formed about luxury, and how they construct new meanings (Kim & Kwon, 2017; Roper et al., 2013; Tynan et al., 2010). In this paper, we answer these calls by offering a new typology of luxury brand consumption practices in the everyday lives of consumers of luxury.

3. A practice-theory perspective on luxury brand consumption

To advance our understanding of personalized brand luxury, we conducted a situated investigation of how consumers use luxury brands within their consumption. We drew on social practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002), which postulates that peoples’ actions, experiences, and meanings can be analyzed as social practices, which represent linked and implicit ways of understanding, saying, and doing things (Schau et al., 2009). Reckwitz (2002, p. 250) formally defines practices as “routinized way(s) in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood”. Accordingly, within the practice-theory perspective, consumers are conceived as ‘agents’, who ‘carry out’ (i.e., perform) practices, enabling them to make sense of the world, themselves, and their consumption routines (Warde, 2005).

The focus of a practice-theory analysis is, therefore, the practice itself. According to a framework developed by Shove and Pantzar (2005), we can analyze practices as three interrelated components, which individual agents integrate within their performances – (1) materials, (2) meanings, and (3) competencies. Materials include the physical aspects of the performance of a practice, such as the tools, objects, people, and infrastructures involved. For instance, luxury stores, luxury advertising, sales assistants, and luxury products themselves may be considered as materials involved in the performance of luxury brand consumption practices. Meanings are social conventions, beliefs, and emotions that are considered to be relevant. In the context of luxury consumption, this includes the social meanings of brand luxury and their associated value as functional, symbolic, and experiential entities (Berthon et al., 2009). Finally, competencies refer to skills and knowledge that are required from agents to perform a practice successfully. For example, longer-standing luxury consumers often possess specialized knowledge of which brands are the most desirable among their reference groups; where the best luxury stores are located, and what appropriate rules and norms may regulate customer behaviors in such stores. Informed by these three components, the practice-theory analysis guides researchers to develop insights into the ways materials, meanings, and competencies are integrated within the personalized

performances of agents (e.g., consumers) who carry out a given practice (Shove & Pantzar, 2005).

There are two distinct features of a practice-theory approach that make this analysis particularly appropriate for the purposes of our study. First, social practice theory does not concern itself with the analysis of psychological perceptions per se. Rather, it focuses on how such perceptions are embedded within the performances of a practice. In doing so, it asserts that there is an important interconnectedness between mental and behavioral routines (Reckwitz, 2002). Consequently, rather than focusing on the consumers' perceptions of luxury brands per se, a practice-theory approach guides us to understand how such perceptions are integrated within the activities and behaviors of consumers of luxury. In other words, we are prompted to explore what these consumers actually say about and do with the brands, and how such 'doings and sayings' (Reckwitz, 2002) make brand luxury meaningful within their lives.

Second, in the same way that psychological perceptions are not the focal point of a practice-theory analysis, the meanings of material objects such as brands and products are considered largely in terms of their roles within the performance of a practice (Reckwitz, 2002). Accordingly, luxury brands become objects that consumers understand, talk about, and skillfully appropriate within their kaleidoscopic performances of consumption practices. Such an approach is, therefore, sensitive to the creative potential of the consumer (Murray, 2002) who derives personalized meanings of brand luxury. In turn, this focus becomes particularly important, if we are to understand how personalized meanings are constructed and sustained in the everyday lives of contemporary consumers. Thus, we posit that a practice-theory approach is both appropriate and useful in understanding the personalized meanings of brand luxury, by offering novel insights into what consumers actually do with these brands, and how they construct personalized meanings about brand luxury.

4. Methodology

For the purposes of our study, we adopted an interpretive approach, and explored luxury brand consumption practices in the fashion industry in New Zealand. Prior to commencing data collection, we conducted four pilot interviews with the managers of luxury brands in New Zealand, and these offered several justifications for using the New Zealand luxury fashion market as a suitable research site. First, the expert interviews revealed that New Zealand is a lucrative and rapidly emerging market for luxury brands. Second, as an emerging and dynamic market, we expected that New Zealand consumers would be less bound by traditional conventions of what constitutes brand luxury, and would display a greater degree of fluidity and creativity within their performances of luxury consumption. For these reasons, and consistent with our objectives, New Zealand provided a fruitful context for an exploration of the emerging practices of luxury brand consumption.

The study involved semi-structured phenomenological interviews with twenty-four participants who had consumed luxury brands for at least five years. All interviews were collected in Auckland, New Zealand and were conducted by the first author. Data collection took place from January 2010 to May 2012. Each participant participated in a three-hour, face-to-face interview at a nominated venue. Brief profiles of participants identified only by pseudonyms are provided in Table 2. Given that we aimed to develop a comprehensive typology of various consumption practices performed by contemporary luxury consumers – and recognizing that these consumers are now increasingly diverse in terms of their financial means due to the process of luxury democratization (Roper et al., 2013) – we purposively recruited a broad range of luxury consumers, in order to account for a more holistic range of luxury consumption practices. Accordingly, our purposive sample includes luxury consumers from different occupations and age groups. Further, because the product category that was chosen as the research context was fashion garments, the sample consisted of predominantly

Table 2
Brief profiles of participants.

Participant	Age	Occupation	Semi-structured interview	ZMET interview
Jean	48	Director	Yes	Yes
Emma	45	Senior Manager	Yes	Yes
Katherine-Anne	23	Librarian	Yes	Yes
Heather	27	Office Worker	Yes	Yes
Suzanne	38	Senior Manager	Yes	Yes
Charles	30	Consultant/ Graduate Student	Yes	No
Scott	28	Student	Yes	Yes
Rachel	28	Office Worker	Yes	No
Elizabeth	30	Graduate Student	Yes	Yes
Danielle	49	Manager	Yes	No
Ruth	40	Senior Manager	Yes	No
Alison	32	Nurse	Yes	No
Sarah	31	Lawyer	Yes	No
Cecilia	25	Fashion Buyer	Yes	No
Tessa	45	Business Owner	Yes	No
Jubilation	29	PR Manager	Yes	No
Miranda	28	Bank Consultant	Yes	Yes
Lilandra	45	Writer	Yes	No
Page	28	Make-up Artist	Yes	No
Lillian	65	Housewife	Yes	No
Megan	26	Housewife	Yes	Yes
Lorna	27	Museum Worker	Yes	No
Logan	32	Manager	Yes	Yes
Hope	50	Senior Researcher	Yes	No

women respondents.

A semi-structured protocol was developed to conduct interviews. This was composed of broad guidance questions to open and facilitate discussion, including: "What roles do luxury brands play in your daily life?", and "When/How/Why do you consume luxury brands?" Several components of the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (Coulter, 2006) were also employed during the interviews. One week prior to the interview we asked participants to collect six or seven images of what luxury brands meant for them, and used these images to probe issues related to each participant's luxury consumption. Participants were asked to relate how each image represented their thoughts and feelings about luxury brands (storytelling). They were also asked to widen the frames of the pictures they had selected, and describe what else might enter the pictures, or if any pictures were missing (metaphor probing/missing images). Finally, participants were asked to author an imaginary story involving their favorite luxury brands (vignette) (Coulter, 2006). All interviews were recorded and transcribed digitally.

NVivo software was used for coding and reorganizing the collected data prior to further abstraction. Data were coded by the first author and then analyzed jointly with the second author, who checked the initial coding. The coded data were then subjected to sorting according to the codes that had been assigned, and abstracted to the findings presented for each category of luxury consumption practices. To better understand emerging themes, we employed a hermeneutic analysis (Thompson, 1997). The hermeneutic framework perceives consumption stories derived from interviews as narratives that reflect the meanings ascribed by a consumer to particular objects (e.g., brands) or events (e.g., brand encounters) (Thompson, 1997). Further, while these meanings provide 'thick' descriptions of participants' views, they are also perceived to be contextualized within broader narratives of socio-cultural conventions (e.g., consumption practices) salient to the consumer (Thompson, 1997). Such an approach was deemed to be particularly useful for the purposes of our study. In particular, it enabled us to gain a deeper understanding of luxury brand consumption practices, and their components (materials, meanings, and competencies) (Shove & Pantzar, 2005), by querying the performances of luxury brand consumption that were evident within the consumer stories derived from interviews. The analysis involved a bottom-up

iterative process between the source texts and the emerging categories, whereby we developed provisional categories and conceptual connections which aided our subsequent induction of the broader underlying themes about luxury consumption practices.

5. Findings

Five distinct forms of luxury brand consumption practices emerged from our analysis: (1) investing in brand luxury, (2) escaping into/with luxury brands, (3) perpetuating an affluent lifestyle, (4) conveying social status, and (5) engaging in self-transformation. Some of these practices have been noted in previous studies on luxury consumption. For instance, Bauer, von Wallpach, and Hemetsberger (2011) focused only on escapism and self-transformations in their study of consumer-centered luxury experiences; while Han, Nunes, and Drèze (2010) explored luxury consumption in the context of status-conveying practice. On the other hand, the ways luxury brands can offer tools for investment practices; and what differentiates affluence from escapism, have received limited attention. Most importantly, however, no study to date has attempted to draw the threads together, and provide a holistic account of what contemporary consumers actually do with luxury brands in the mundane routines of their daily lives. Thus, our new typology of luxury practices offers a more comprehensive account of how consumers construct multiple and divergent personalized meanings about brand luxury in the context of contemporary consumer culture.

5.1. Investing in brand luxury

We found that consumers may practice luxury brand consumption as a form of 'long-term investment':

'It can be an investment, especially if you buy something that is like a classic model... See the Chanel brand that I have here [Fig. 1a], that's like actually really classic and it's no matter if you have it for years and years, it is always a valuable asset.'

Megan (26-year-old housewife)

'I think about spending money on luxury brands as an antiques road-show, because it could always be worth something in the future...when you buy designer labels, because you could always sell it to a vintage store... I guess I could treat it almost like an investment...'

Heather (27-year-old office-worker)

As our participants reveal above, when consumers perform investment practices, they consume luxury brands because they anticipate these brands will have more value in the future. Importantly, the value of brand luxury as an investment is contingent upon the brand's social worth. Specifically, Megan's belief that *Chanel* is a 'valuable asset' relies on her understanding that this brand is a socially-recognized classical model of luxury consumption. Likewise, Heather considers luxury brands to be an investment only because she believes that other consumers would want to purchase them in the future.

Interestingly, we found that the investment practices could be associated with consumers' attempts to justify paying higher prices for luxury products. In particular, Elizabeth (30-year-old graduate-student) notes that "you spend more [on luxury brands], but those things last for years. To me that's ... value-wise, pretty good". This excerpt shows that, when consumers invest in brand luxury, they may psychologically perceive that they are, in fact, saving money by paying a premium for luxury brands. Thus, in order to perform investment practices successfully, consumers must possess specialized competencies and knowledge about the social and financial value of current luxury products, and how such value may change over time. The consumers' goals within these practices are to predict which brands are likely to be in demand by others in the future and, therefore, represent an investment opportunity. Accordingly, brand luxury within investment practices resides at the nexus of the materiality of luxury products, their social

and financial worth, and the pragmatic objectives of the 'investing' luxury consumers.

5.2. Escaping into/with luxury brands

Previous literature notes that luxury brands convey experiential and hedonic value, such as sensory pleasure, aesthetic beauty, and excitement (Berthon et al., 2009). We found that consumers refer to a 'temporal escape' in describing their performances of consumption practices associated with the hedonic meanings of brand luxury. In particular, Cecilia (25-year-old office-worker) visualizes luxury brands as a 'princess-like world'; Heather referred to 'the stories about royal families of Europe'; and Katherine-Anne (23-year-old librarian) compares her luxury brand consumption to an escapist journey:

'I think with luxury brands the escape is pretty much the whole experience. For me, it starts in the magazine, you know, it's a different kind of escape obviously. It's like packing your bags to go on a trip. So from that to deciding to go to the store, to shopping, to trying on the clothes, and then deciding if you want to buy it, and that's when the journey ends...'

In this excerpt, Katherine-Anne describes luxury brands as a metaphorical journey, which starts with reading fashion magazines, and continues throughout the purchase. Other participants, however, noted that the escapism associated with luxury brands does not end with the purchase and may continue to include post-purchase experiences as well. This suggests that when consumers escape into brand luxury, they perform such practices throughout different stages of consumption process.

In another interview, Jean (48-year-old director) describes her luxury brand escapism as going on adventurous experiences:

'Safari to me is the pinnacle of luxury because it offers you excitement within a luxurious surrounding... and that's what luxury brands offer; escapism from your normal life...Luxury is an experience and the bags and things are; they're add-on to that luxury or, necessities, because you can't go and stay at Aman [luxury resort] with a Mimco bag [not a luxury brand], can you? I mean, you'd have to have enough money for the bag!'

For Jean, going on safari is 'the pinnacle of luxury', because luxury signifies an escape from her ordinary life. Luxury brands, such as bags and clothes, are consumed as integral materials that are necessary to perform this escapist journey successfully, conveyed by the comments that "you can't go and stay at Aman with a Mimco bag". In other words, Jean says that her performance of the escapist journey would be incomplete if she did not use luxury brands in constructing this imaginary escape. This connection is further reinforced by the photo that Jean used to depict her escape, taken from the 2010 *Louis Vuitton* travel advertising campaign (Fig. 1b).

Our findings, therefore, illustrate that when consumers use luxury brands to escape from their ordinary lives, brand luxury is conveyed through both the symbolic meanings that juxtapose fantasy and ordinary life, and material objects that are used to construct such juxtapositions. In the first instance, luxury brands could be the focal point of an escape, as consumers internalize brand stories and the brand imaginary to perform their escape from daily routines. In the second instance, luxury consumers may use branded products such as bags as materials which are integral in the accomplishing of escapism.

5.3. Perpetuating an affluent lifestyle

While escaping offers consumers a temporal and self-directed pleasure, consumers may also practice luxury brand consumption to perpetuate an 'affluent lifestyle'. Similar to escaping, this practice conveys the consumers' performances of gratifying their hedonistic goals (Michman & Mazze, 2006). However, the term 'lifestyle' signifies a socially-constituted meaning in reference to a distinctive style of life



A



B

Fig. 1. Participants' images. A: brought by Megan (26-year-old housewife); B: brought by Jean (48-year-old director); C: brought by Suzanne (38-year-old senior-manager); D: brought by Katherine-Anne (23-year-old librarian).



C



D

of specific groups. Therefore, not only do such practices convey hedonism, but they also reflect a shared socio-cultural identification. In particular, Danielle (49-year-old manager) notes that one's personalized meanings about what connotes an affluent lifestyle is heavily influenced by popular media – an important cultural code for developing competencies, meanings, and materials, that luxury consumers integrate within their performances of affluent lifestyle consumption practices:

The media and the marketing play an important role here too. I've got a Dior lipstick in my bag right now, I'll say, "Can you see the diamond gloss on my lips?" It is called Diamond Gloss! I'll say it and it makes me feel good...I think luxury brands make people feel good, because it makes them think that they're able to enjoy what other people have, the people who are celebrities, and elite in the world.

Moreover, further distinction between escaping and perpetuating an affluent lifestyle is reinforced by the latter being a long-term commitment to a particular way of living, rather than just a temporary release from the ordinary:

'I enjoy it [luxury brands]. It becomes something that you expect, once you have a taste of things, like you don't want to go back, do you? To be treated like a princess and have somebody coming and saying, "Madam, would you like more Dom Perignon?" "Yes please, and some more beluga caviar." (laughter). That's luxury.

In the excerpt above, Tessa (45-year-old business-owner) conveys that she enjoys consuming luxury brands. However, since her

performances of luxury brand consumption have become an integral part of her life, Tessa's consumption cannot be considered as merely temporal. Instead, it conveys her social identification with affluent consumers.

5.4. Conveying social status

Conveying social status is associated with the traditional notion of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899). Not surprisingly, we found that this 'original' function of luxury has maintained its relevance:

'It's not putting people down but luxury brands differentiate people from their backgrounds and their financial earnings... Reaching a certain status is important, I think, because it actually gives you the drive to work for that. So you say, "Okay, I want to buy that bag but what am I going to do to get it?" So it gives you that drive to say, "Now I'm going to work hard"... Also if you want to be seen in certain social networks you have to show that you're worth it or that you can be accepted into it.'

Suzanne (38-year-old senior-manager)

The excerpt from an interview with Suzanne illustrates that post-modern consumers integrate a range of related symbolic meanings, competencies, and materials within their performances of conveying social status. She notes that by displaying her status and role position through luxury brand consumption, she can get affiliation with and recognition from high-status social networks, which are important for her career potential. This view of brand luxury as a conveyor of status

and success is corroborated by the images chosen by Suzanne, which portray high-status individuals (Fig. 1c). Thus, in the context of performing social status practices, the rarity and high price of luxury brand offerings represent particularly important meanings and materials of brand luxury. This is because, by consuming luxury brands that possess such qualities, status practices enable consumers to assert their position within the small elites who can afford to possess these items.

5.5. Engaging in self-transformation

The concept of ‘extended self’ posits that our possessions are ‘a major contributor to and reflection of our identities’ (Belk, 1988, p. 139), and luxury brand scholars have largely theorized that consumers integrate luxury brand meanings in order “to enhance their self-concept and replicate stereotypes of affluence [and status] by consuming similar luxury items’ (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004, p. 490). However, we found that the luxury consumption practices transcend merely social identification, and reflect more personalized goals, such as the need for self-transformation and uniqueness (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001).

The two striking cases where luxury brand consumption was performed to engage in self-transformation are Jubilation (29-year-old manager) and Katherine-Anne (23-year-old librarian). First, Jubilation describes a strong and long-lasting relationship with one particular luxury brand:

‘I bought my first ever piece when I was fourteen, and I still have it because I will never throw anything from Zambesi away or sell it; I’ve kept every single piece that I’ve ever bought ... so I’d gone to visit Zambesi and saw this dress that I just loved...[but] I knew I couldn’t afford it... and then the daughter of the designer she was like: ‘Oh my God let’s take a photo of you in it ... and say this is my birthday present’ [...] I really loved it, so they were going out of their way to see how they could help me! [...] I want someone to realize that I am me, that I’m uniquely me, and that I’m different to everyone else, cool in my own style, so Zambesi I guess for me talks that.’

Jubilation’s comments about *Zambesi* express a deep relationship that has been formed with the brand. Jubilation notes that *Zambesi* is not just another brand; it has become an integral part of her, and that it is the essence of what brand luxury means to her. Furthermore, Jubilation’s story suggests that not only has she formed a strong bond with *Zambesi*, but the unique brand image has, over time, allowed her to develop a new identity, allowing Jubilation to be ‘cool in her own style’.

Whereas Jubilation exemplifies a strong relationship with one particular luxury brand, Katherine-Anne uses a range of luxury brands to construct her desired identity. These brands conform to a particular style that Katherine-Anne perceives makes her individual:

‘For me, luxurious brand means something that I’d put on and it makes me feel being unique, this is very important for me; I like having my own individual style... I like standing out; I like being different, which is probably why I make an effort in the morning and dress up and wear nice clothes, and I’ll wear high heels all the time, even though I’m behind a counter and no one can see my feet.’

Katherine-Anne suggests that she uses luxury brands to construct and express her individuality, thereby fulfilling her need for uniqueness. Furthermore, her comment ‘I’ll wear high heels all the time, even though I’m behind a counter and no one can see my feet’ suggests that the need for uniqueness is not so much driven by how she is perceived by others, but rather by her perception of herself. This repeating theme of wanting to be unique and individualistic defines the way that Katherine-Anne perceives her luxury brand consumption (Fig. 1d).

Our findings, therefore, illustrate that consumers perform self-transformation practices with luxury brands in order to satisfy their need for a new and transformed identity and uniqueness (Tian et al., 2001). Some of our participants actively forged strong bonds with specific luxury brands, whereas others consumed multiple brands to

construct their own unique styles, redeveloping and expressing certain aspects of their perceived or desired self. Thus, in order to perform self-transformation practices successfully, consumers are required to develop knowledge about luxury brand personalities, and to attain the necessary skills, which enable them to integrate these personalities into their own perceptions of self-identity.

6. Discussion

6.1. Theoretical implications

Our findings offer several theoretical contributions for studying personalized meanings of brand luxury. First, we draw attention to the creative role that consumers play in constructing multiple meanings of brand luxury, and offer a comprehensive typology of luxury consumption practices, which has been absent heretofore. Through this process, we illustrate that brand luxury can be appropriated and personalized by consumers in many different ways, beyond merely escapism (Bauer et al., 2011) and status consumption (Han et al., 2010). Luxury consumption practices range from being considered as a form of financial investment to facilitating an imaginary escape; from being perceived as markers of an affluent lifestyle and conveyers of social status to emerging as resources for aspirational personalities that assist consumers in their self-transformations. Thus, there is a broad and, at times, paradoxical range of personalized meanings that contemporary consumers are able to construct about brand luxury.

We also found that consumers are not restricted to performing only one particular luxury practice. They can, and often do engage in different practices of luxury consumption, where each practice addresses different needs salient to the context of their life themes and situational influences. Accordingly, the associated integration of materials, meanings, and competencies at the level of individual consumers’ performances depends on the prevalence of practices that these consumers appropriate at the time of consumption. This also means that luxury consumers have learned to perform as exceptionally skilled ‘agents’ (Reckwitz, 2002), who are not afraid to switch between their luxury practice performances, in order to satisfy different aspects of their life themes and situational influences.

Finally, given that our analysis of practices was derived from emic (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993) accounts of luxury brand consumers, we offer insights into how these consumers themselves, interpret their performances of practices. We found that different dimensions of the luxury brand imaginary can become more or less important, depending on which practices consumers are choosing to perform. For instance, the hedonic imaginary associated with luxury brands is particularly important when consumers are attempting to escape from their daily routines or to enact an affluent lifestyle. When people consume luxury brands to convey social status, however, they tend to endorse the high price of luxury products, historicity, and the rarity principle. If consumers’ goals are to engage in self-transformations, then they would be attracted to the unique personalities conveyed by luxury brands. Finally, if luxury brands are purchased for investment purposes, then these consumers’ perceptions would be more influenced by what other consumers think about these brands, as social legitimacy is also linked to the financial worth of luxury products.

Overall, we concur with Roper et al. (2013, p. 393) that “there is no singular, uncontested or essential version of a luxury brand”, as consumers can use different interpretive strategies to organize their perceptions about brand luxury. We extend this position by highlighting that these interpretive strategies are salient to the consumers’ performances of luxury brand practices.

6.2. Managerial implications

The study also offers several managerial implications. First, the focus on consumption practices provides managers with additional

tools to navigate the complex realities of contemporary luxury markets. Beyond traditional demographics and lifestyle considerations, we uncover alternative perspectives on what contemporary consumers do with luxury brands, and how such brands become desirable for them in the context of their daily lives. These insights offer managers a broader range of brand positioning and engagement strategies that they can use within contemporary luxury markets. For instance, a lack of authenticity and historicity has been cited as one of the major shortcomings of emerging brands within the luxury market. However, our findings show that while this might be a problem when luxury consumers perform status or investment practices – which rely on the social recognition and legitimacy of a brand – such considerations are less prevalent when consumers search for escapism or engage in self-transformational practices – which depend more on the relational and hedonic aspects of luxury consumption. Thus, luxury managers can strategically align their brands with the selective practices of luxury consumption.

Further, our findings show that luxury consumers typically engage in multiple practices of luxury consumption that may change with different situational influences. This means that managers should consider possible pathways for recruiting consumers to perform and shape practices in accordance with their desired strategies and brand positioning. In particular, might it be possible to shape luxury consumption practices in a way that are most beneficial for a given brand? For instance, some studies report that there is a mismatch between luxury and sustainable development within consumer considerations of luxury purchases (Beckham & Voyer, 2014), while others note that luxury brands – with their emphasis on authenticity and respect for artisans – can unite the ideals of fashion with those of environmental sustainability (Joy et al., 2012). In light of such opposing views on luxury, the brands that stake their reputations on sustainable practices (e.g., Stella McCartney, Patagonia) would do well by routinizing consumption practices that bridge the concepts of luxury and sustainability. Indeed, Han et al. (2017) illustrate that such purposes can be achieved by designing and staging memorable luxury experiences for sustainable fashion consumption. Thus, in light of the active and creative role that consumers play in determining the meaning of contemporary brand luxury, managers can engage with consumers proactively to foster mutually beneficial luxury consumption practices.

To conclude; despite an increasing interest in luxury branding from a consumer-centric perspective, there are gaps in the extant literature as to the ways consumers personalize brand luxury. We suggest that our study, with its emphasis on social practices as an alternative perspective for investigating the nature of personalized luxury brand meanings, offers new insights for both researchers and practitioners with a strong interest in understanding the consumer-centric perspective of luxury brands.

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Yuri Seo is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing at the University of Auckland Business School, University of Auckland. His research interests include: digital technology and consumption, cultural branding, and multicultural marketplaces. His recent research appeared in *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Marketing Letters* and *International Marketing Review* among others.

Margo Buchanan-Oliver is Professor and Head of the Department of Marketing, and a Director of the Centre of Digital Enterprise [CODE] at The University of Auckland. Her current research focuses on socio-cultural perceptions of digital technologies, the politics of the body, and the semiotics of representation. She has published in leading marketing journals and is a frequent peer reviewer.