

GREEN LUXURY: NEW DIVIDE IN POSITIONING STRATEGIES NEEDED?

Farhad ALIYEV

University of Kassel
Möncheberg St., 34125 Kassel, DE
aliyev@wirtschaft.uni-kassel.de

Ralf WAGNER

University of Kassel
Möncheberg St., 34125 Kassel, DE
rwagner@wirtschaft.uni-kassel.de

Abstract. *A basic and commonly shared implicit definition of luxury is “something superfluous.” Consuming such products and services contradicts the modern paradigm of sustainable consumption. However, luxury vendors are frequently introducing new technologies and better working conditions on a large scale, including natural colors and fair treatment of labor in the fashion industry, as well as fully electric-fueled cars, which Tesla has been producing. Previous research suggests that luxury and sustainability are incompatible. The values underlying sustainability are altruism, restraint, and moderation, whereas the main components of luxury are hedonism, aestheticism, uniqueness, affluence, and surplus. The motives of luxury consumers are likely to vary with their cultural framing. Compared with individualists, members of collectivistic cultures have been known to behave more prosocially. However, they are also more prone to buying luxury goods to enhance their status. This study examines whether the motives of dominance or prestige status encourage individuals from collectivistic societies to choose more luxurious or sustainable products, respectively. This study provides evidence from more than 200 experiments with collectivists and individualists, and it introduces distinctiveness between dominance- and prestige-seeking behaviors via underlying status motives in prosocial or luxury-product choices that previous research has not differentiated. Our results underline the association of status motives with individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Previous research shows that ethical issues are not considered in luxury-buying decisions, even though many luxury companies have developed corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs and offer new sustainable luxury products. Additionally, they increasingly inform the public about their prosocial activities. This is most likely the result of the positioning of conspicuousness that negatively influences purchase intentions of sustainable luxury products. Therefore, avoiding conspicuous strategies in marketing is one of the managerial implications of this study.*

Keywords: *dominance status; experiments; luxury products; prestige status; sustainable products.*

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.” - Lord Acton, 1887

Introduction

Both the promotion and consumption of luxury products have been criticized for creating social differences (Davies, Lee & Ahonkhai, 2012) and for directing a lot of resources to satisfy the desires of only a few consumers, encouraging worldwide social inequality (Kapferer, 2010). In response, some luxury producers have aimed to sponsor CSR activities. However, consumers may view such activities by luxury companies as inappropriate in some cases (Torelli, Monga & Kaikati, 2012). Moreover, some researchers (Beckham & Voyer, 2014; Davies et al., 2012; Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2014) have even claimed that sustainability and luxury are incompatible. They have argued that consumers who use luxury products, such as luxury cars with high carbon emissions, care less about the environment. In this sense, luxury, because of its conspicuousness, is often associated with less-prosocial purchases (Kapferer, 2010).

According to Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, and Keltner (2012) and Piff, Krauss, Côté, Cheng, and Keltner (2010), individuals with high status were less involved in lavish activities compared with individuals with low status. In addition, compared with low-status individuals, high-status individuals tend to perform less prosocial behavior, which is “costly, directing resources away from the self toward others” (Piff et al., 2010, p.773). Lab experiments have shown that individuals who gain status through contributions are more entrusted (Barclay, 2006), are chosen more often as interaction partners (Barclay & Willer, 2007) and leaders (Milinski, Semmann & Krambeck, 2002), are considered more often for long-term relationships (Barclay, 2010b), and have greater social status (Van Vugt & Hardy, 2010). Giskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh (2010) found that a desire to gain higher status can lead to more altruistic behavior. In this respect, individuals can gain status by conducting prosocial activities or through obtaining the resources or social capital necessary for status competition (Barclay, 2010a). These different schools of thought have provided contradictory results, opening new opportunities for further investigation.

Following the definitions of Henrich and Gil-White (2001), we distinguish two types of status: prestige and dominance. In the first case, individuals increase status by gaining respect and distributing benefits to others. Meanwhile, in the case of dominance, status is obtained by using force and imposing costs on others. While altruism, restraint, and moderation are sustainability values, conversely, the components of luxury often include hedonism, aestheticism, uniqueness, affluence, and surplus (Carrier & Luetchford, 2012). Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau (2014) found that conspicuous consumption increases the contradictions between luxury and sustainability. Notably, previous research has not differentiated the underlying status motives for seeking dominance or prestige status by choosing luxury or prosocial products.

This distinction between seeking dominance or prestige during conspicuous consumption likely relates to consumers’ cultural framing. Collectivistic individuals are more concerned with the perceptions of others and with maintaining their own status (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). Fitting into these societies, with an emphasis on the implications of one’s behavior toward others, luxury brands would be well-advised to build their brand essence around prestige status (Leung & Bond, 1984; McCarty & Shrum, 2001). Conversely, in individualist societies, luxury brands should emphasize dominance when positioning products (Oswald, 2010). Giskevicius et al. (2010) argue

“going green” can be a “costly signal” associated with status, inducing consumers to purchase pro-environmental products, rather than non-green products. This may be one reason why collectivists are more inclined toward prosocial activities. However, although somewhat counterintuitive, collectivist consumers also have been shown to believe that one’s place in society is largely defined by economic advancement or displays of wealth (Miller & Volker, 1985). Therefore, they tend to seek luxury products that convey status and prestige (Phau & Lau, 2001). As stated by Kafashan, Sparks, Griskevicius, and Barclay (2014, p.15), “The costs and benefits of prosociality may also be different for status based on prestige vs. dominance”. Based on the above discussion, greater evidence is required to explain the motives behind dominance or prestige, especially those that encourage collectivistic people to choose prosocial or luxury products. Thus, the current research objective is to examine whether seeking dominance status elicits a preference for luxury goods or, in contrast, whether the prestige motivation encourages the purchase of green products.

In Section 2, we discuss previous literature, providing a basis for our research propositions. In Sections 3 and 4, the methodology and the results of the study are described. Finally, we conclude the article with a discussion, including theoretical and managerial implications.

Definitions and hypotheses

According to Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, and Henrich (2013), group contributions are more correlated with the prestige type of status rather than with dominance. Prestige status is perceived to be associated with more public and prosocial behavior compared with dominance (von Rueden, Gurven, & Kaplan, 2008). Moreover, prestige is positively correlated with prosocial activities such as altruism, cooperativeness, helpfulness, and ethics. However, such behavior is negatively associated with dominance (Maner & Mead, 2010; Mead & Maner, 2012). Because people from collectivistic societies, compared with members of individualistic cultures, tend to be more status-oriented (e.g., Wong & Ahuvia, 1998), they are accordingly more prosocial than members of individualistic societies (e.g., McCarty & Shrum, 2001). Collectivism implies altruistic motivations to benefit a group (Dawes, Van De Kragt & Orbell, 1988). Behavior, in the case of collectivists, is mainly driven by social norms, and people from these cultures often show a willingness to share scarce resources (Sinha & Verma, 1987). In a similar vein, Ng and Burke (2010) found that collectivism is positively associated with attitudes that favor sustainability. Recently, Vitell et al. (2016) found that collectivism fostered an inclination toward an ethical predisposition among individuals. On this basis, the following proposition has been formulated:

Proposition 1: Seeking prestige status leads individuals from collectivistic cultures to choose green products more often than individuals from individualistic cultures.

Like Griskevicius et al. (2010), we aim to compare people from individualistic and collectivistic societies with respect to their preferences for sustainable products, even if they are more expensive than non-sustainable luxury products.

Proposition 1a: Seeking prestige status leads individuals from collectivistic cultures to choose green products more often than individuals from individualistic cultures, even if green products are more expensive than non-green products.

Dominance status relates to an egocentric neglect of group well-being. Dominant leaders are more concerned about prioritizing their own interests over those of group members' when having to choose between personal gains or collective well-being (Maner & Mead, 2010; Mead & Maner, 2012). Because people with high status are more independent, they are less attentive to the needs of others. Consequently, these individuals' behaviors tend to help others less often (Kafashan et al., 2014). In complementary studies, Piff et al. (2010) and Piff et al. (2012) suggested that individuals from upper classes are less likely to make charitable donations and more likely to endorse unethical behavior compared with people from lower classes or with less status.

Luxury consumption is a communicative act that signals status, wealth, class, and, consequently, social and economic power. Power is defined as the ability to affect others and simultaneously confront external impositions of influence (Hogg & Vaughan, 1995). In this sense, consumers buy luxury goods and services to increase status and power in the eyes of others, which leads to the breaking of sustainability-related social norms (Beckham & Voyer, 2014), thereby putting luxury and sustainability motives at odds with each other (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2014). Moreover, conspicuous consumption plays a more important role in collectivistic societies compared with individualistic ones (e.g., Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). Hence, we propose the following proposition:

Proposition 2: Seeking dominance status leads individuals from collectivistic cultures to choose luxury products more often than those from individualistic cultures.

Methodology

Our experimental research design covers more than 200 experiments. After the elimination, due to missing values and implausibility checks, we gathered evidence from 86 participants embedded in collectivist societies and 109 embedded in individualist societies. Most participants (70.3%) hold bachelor's or master's degrees, and level of education is a good indicator and a positive antecedent for prosocial purchases (Tilikidou & Delistavrou, 2005). The gender distribution of the participants was 52.3% male and 47.7% female.

We randomly assigned the 195 participants to six groups, according to their culture. Two control groups were formed for the collectivistic (27 participants) and individualistic (33 participants) cultures (see Fig. 1). Two experimental groups, which were labeled "individualist + status (37 participants)" and "collectivist + status (28 participants)," evaluated a luxury product and its sustainable alternative at an equal price. The remaining two experimental groups, which were labelled "individualist + status + price (39 participants)" and "collectivist + status + price (31 participants)," evaluated a luxury product and its sustainable alternative at an unequal price. For the latter group, the stated prices of the green products were 10% higher than the luxury products' prices.

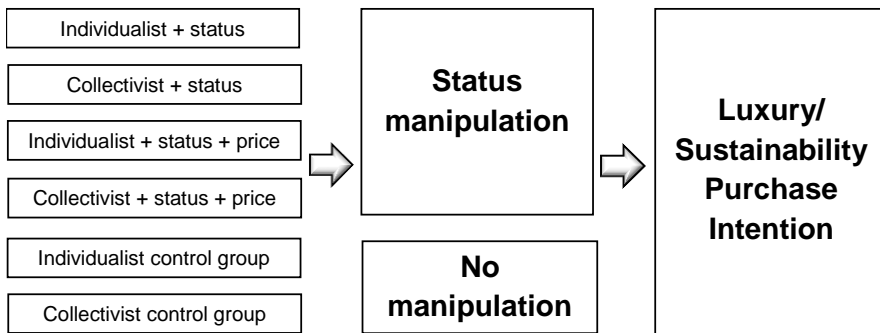


Figure 1. *The structure of the study*

As a manipulation, the participants read a short story of roughly 700 words that successfully elicited motives on status. A previous study (Griskevicius et al., 2009), through extensive pilot testing, demonstrated that, compared with control groups, this manipulation elicited the desire for status, i.e., “showed that relative to the control story, the status story elicits a ‘desire for social status’... and a ‘desire for prestige’” (Griskevicius et al., 2010, p. 395). In the current study, participants in the control groups read a story of similar length that does not elicit status motives. After the reading session, participants filled out a short survey regarding their preferences for luxury products or sustainable alternatives. The participants then were placed in a shopping situation in which they had to choose among branded luxury products and their alternatives. In total, the participants rated eight luxury brands and their green alternatives (i.e., two brands of cars, two brands of bags, two brands of shoes, a brand of eyewear, and a brand of wallet). Mercedes, Porsche, Louis Vuitton, Mulberry, and several brands of the Kering Group (e.g., Gucci) were used in the questionnaire. To provide a realistic scenario, product images, as well as product details and prices, were provided.

Results

A descriptive analysis of the collectivistic and individualistic treatment groups is presented in Table 1. Notably, collectivists preferred luxury products more often than individualists. According to a t-test, collectivists ($\bar{x}=3.18$) significantly preferred ($p=0.005$) luxury products, following the dominance-status manipulation, compared with individualists ($\bar{x}=2.57$). However, the difference in preferences for sustainable products between collectivists ($\bar{x}=3.57$) and individualists ($\bar{x}=3.64$) was not significant ($p=0.360$). Moreover, the analysis was conducted within the same cultural group (i.e., collectivists). The combined results for collectivists from the treatment group and control group, considering all luxury and sustainable products, showed that they had a significant preference ($p=0.006$) for luxury products. In contrast, the control group ($\bar{x}=3.80$) preferred more-sustainable products compared with the treatment group ($\bar{x}=3.57$), although the difference was not significant ($p=0.128$). Additionally, no significant differences were found between the individualistic treatment group and the control group. This and the aforementioned analyses support the contention that dominance status promotes luxury preferences. In summary, the data support

Proposition 2, which asserts that seeking dominance leads to the purchase of luxury products, but do not support Proposition 1, which asserts that seeking prestige status leads to the purchase of sustainable products.

Table 1. Mean differences in preferences for luxury and sustainable products

	Groups Experimental	N	Mean	t test
Luxury product	Collectivistic+Status	28	3.18	0.005
	Individualistic+Status	37	2.57	
Green luxury	Collectivistic+Status	28	3.58	0.360
	Individualistic+Status	37	3.64	
Luxury product	Collectivistic+Status	28	3.18	0.005
	Collectivistic+Control	27	2.61	
Green luxury	Collectivistic+Status	28	3.18	0.128
	Collectivistic+Control	27	2.61	
Luxury product	Individualistic+Status	37	2.57	0.263
	Individualistic+Control	33	2.43	
Green luxury	Individualistic+Status	37	3.64	0.453
	Individualistic+Control	33	3.62	
Luxury product	Collectivistic+Status+Price	31	2.74	0.322
	Individualistic+Status+Price	39	2.82	
Green luxury	Collectivistic+Status+Price	31	3.85	0.329
	Individualistic+Status+Price	39	3.77	

The next step is reviewing the results of the experiments, in which luxury products were cheaper than their prosocial alternatives. The aggregated results show that sustainable products were preferred more often by collectivists ($\bar{x}=3.85$) than individualists ($\bar{x}=3.77$) when sustainable products were 10% more expensive, while luxury products were preferred by individualists ($\bar{x}=2.82$ vs. $\bar{x}=2.74$). However, in both cases, the differences are not significant ($p=0.329$ for sustainable products; $p=0.322$ for luxury products). Notably, in this experiment, collectivists preferred more prosocial products compared with previous experiments for treatments in which product prices were equal. Furthermore, there were no significant differences ($p=0.397$ for sustainable products; $p=0.251$ for luxury products) between the treatment collectivistic group, in cases when sustainable products are 10% more expensive, and the collectivistic control group.

Additionally, the ANOVA results for collectivists indicated a significant difference ($p=0.022$) between groups in luxury preference. Furthermore, the Bonferroni correction demonstrated a significant difference in preference for luxury products between the treatment group that evaluated the equal-price condition and the control group ($p=0.026$). According to the results, individualistic members showed an almost equal level of preference for both types of products. Only the experimental group under the unequal price condition demonstrated a significant difference ($p=0.014$) in

luxury-product choice compared with the control group ($\bar{x}=2.82$ vs. $\bar{x}=2.43$). Additionally, the ANOVA results did not reveal any significant differences in preferences for luxury ($p=0.127$) or sustainable products ($p=0.615$). This tendency signifies that status motives, especially those of dominance, mainly impacted the individuals from collectivistic societies.

As a final step in the analysis, the significance of mean differences between product preferences was examined considering the context of the cultural groups. In all cases, sustainable products were preferable, and the mean differences are significant. After applying an ANOVA with a Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons, a significant difference ($p=0.44$) for the equal-price condition was detected between the collectivist + status group ($\bar{x}=3.18$) and the individualistic + status group ($\bar{x}=2.57$), supporting Proposition 2. Additionally, based on the MANOVA analysis, the interaction between collectivism/individualism and treatment/control groups was significant ($p=0.048$). This indicates that, in the case of collectivists, for the treated groups, the luxury preference was higher compared with the control groups. This also held true for comparisons between the individualist treatment and control groups.

Discussion and implications

This study aimed to fill the gap left by previous luxury research that did not differentiate among underlying status motives in conspicuous consumption. We can conclude that dominance status plays a more important role among collectivists than individualists in the case of conspicuous consumption. We assume that because of a lack of knowledge on sustainability among collectivists, the results of the study did not support P1. For an external validation of our experimental results, we reviewed the top 10 hybrid and electric car markets in 2016 in terms of sales. Only two collectivistic countries were ranked on the list: China (No. 1) and Japan (No. 8). Other markets from the list represented individualistic societies, such as the U.S. (No. 2), Norway (No. 3), the Netherlands (No. 7), and Sweden (No. 9) (Cobb, 2016). Although China holds first place in terms of sales, with more than 351,000 cars sold in 2016 (Cobb, 2016; Pontes, 2016), most of those sold cars were locally manufactured by non-luxury brands such as Geely, Chery, or BYD.

The literature on luxury marketing suggests that consumers have different motivations for purchasing luxury products, and they differ in terms of their luxury-value perceptions (Tynan, McKechnie, & Chhuon, 2010). For a long time, luxury-brand positioning has been linked to motivations, such as the signaling of social status and prestige (Belk, 1988; Han, Nunes, & Dreeze, 2010), hedonism (Dubois, Czellar, & Laurent, 2005), and the need for social conformity (Batra, Homer, & Kahle, 2001). Nowadays, luxury consumers are prone to ethical consumption, not only because of the effect of luxury purchases on their own lives, regarding their social groups, but also the effect on the planet (Davies et al., 2012). Therefore, extended self has a positive effect on intentions to buy sustainable products. Accordingly, brand managers may yield negative results when applying conspicuous branding strategies for sustainable luxury products, as conspicuousness helps achieve self-enhancement goals. Furthermore, consumers who perceive their self-identities as being extravagant do not associate conspicuous brands with their self-identities (Janssen, Vanhamme, &

Leblanc, 2017). Therefore, it is recommended that marketers not use conspicuous branding strategies in promoting luxury brands with a sustainable orientation.

Future research could conduct similar experiments on luxury and sustainable services rather than products. Moreover, the influence of dominance and prestige status on luxury and sustainable purchase behavior among a wider range of different cultures could be investigated. Additionally, the similar studies could be examined among high status and low status individuals.

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