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## **Fertility and Women'S Desire For Luxury Products**

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What factors influence women's desire for luxury goods? Drawing the ovulatory competition hypothesis, we examined whether women's desire for luxury products is linked to fluctuations in the hormones that regulate fertility. Fertility had positive effects on women's luxury spending and materialism. Additional studies showed a specific boundary condition for this effect.

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# Fertility and Women's Desire for Luxury Products

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Billions of dollars are spent each year on lavish goods such as handbags and jewelry, with women accounting for more than half (55%) of this luxury spending (D'Arpizio 2011; Mintel Report 2011). What factors influence women's desire for luxury goods? Drawing on research showing that fertility influences women's competitive motives (Durante, Griskevicius, Cantú, and Simpson 2014), we examined whether women's desire for luxury products may be linked to fluctuations in the hormones that regulate fertility.

As an initial investigation into our research question, we conducted a correlational study using real-world data. We predicted that, controlling for fluctuations in the economic climate, increases in the proportion of fertile women in the population (women aged 18-35) would be positively related to luxury consumption, leading to growth of luxury brands compared to non-luxury brands. We first calculated operational fertility (proportion of fertile, adult women in the US population) from 2000 to 2013. We obtained measures of brand equity from Interbrand for the top 10 Luxury (e.g., Louis Vuitton, Gucci) and top 10 non-luxury brands (e.g., IBM, Coca Cola) from 2000 to 2013. Because the economic climate has a large impact on brand values, we calculated the pure brand values as the ratio of the original brand values relative to the annual Dow Jones average. There was a positive correlation between luxury brand values and the number of fertile women in the population ( $p < .05$ ). As the number of fertile women increased so too did luxury brand values. In contrast, there was no relation between non-luxury brand values and the number of fertile women in the population ( $p > .15$ ). This specific pattern of findings provides initial support for the prediction that fertility influences women's luxury spending.

Study 2 examined whether fertility amplifies women's desire to achieve status relative to other women. Here we focus on examining whether women's materialism might be amplified at high fertility. While materialism is comprised of three dimensions: success, centrality, and happiness (Richins and Dawson 1992), the competitive tendency amplified by ovulation should be most strongly linked to women's materialism on the *success* dimension, which reflects a desire to own possessions as a measure of one's own status relative to others. Women reported higher scores on the success materialism dimension at high fertility compared to low fertility ( $p < .035$ ), whereas there was no effect of fertility on either centrality materialism or on happiness materialism ( $ps > .76$ ). Moreover, women's success materialism tracked a continuous measure of conception probability across the cycle. As conception probability within the cycle increased, so too did success materialism scores ( $p < .036$ ). There was no relation between conception probability and centrality materialism or happiness materialism ( $ps > .26$ ).

Study 3 tested whether women's desire for status near ovulation boosts preference for luxury brands. To do this, we measured women's attitudes toward luxury versus non-luxury brands as a function of fertility status. As predicted, there was a two-way interaction between fertility (low vs. high) and brand type (luxury vs. non-luxury),  $p < .01$ . Ovulating women had significantly higher desire luxury brands ( $M_{low} = 5.01$  vs.  $M_{high} = 5.97$ ,  $p < .004$ ). In contrast, there was no effect of fertility on non-luxury brands ( $M_{low} = 4.58$  vs.  $M_{high} = 4.73$ ,  $p > .50$ ). Again, there was a significant correlation between a continuous measure of conception probability and women's attraction to

luxury brands ( $p < .04$ ), but not to non-luxury brands ( $p > .36$ ). These results provided additional support for the prediction that women have a stronger desire for status consumption near ovulation.

Study 4 sought to test an important boundary condition for how fertility influences women's luxury consumption with a direct behavioral measure in a within-subjects study using hormone tests to detect ovulation. Specifically, we examined whether the fertile phase of the cycle amplifies women's *intra-sexual competition* by testing whether ovulation influences women's luxury choices depending on the target users for the luxury (vs. non-luxury) products. According to the ovulatory competition hypothesis, the fertile phase of the cycle should have different effects on a woman's choices depending on whether those choices improve a woman's standing relative to other women. Hence, ovulation should boost women's desires for more superior products than other women. To measure desire for conspicuous luxury products, we had women draw logos on products (after Wang and Griskevicius 2014), once when they were at a high fertility point in the cycle and again at low fertility. At both test sessions, women were instructed to draw several luxury brand logos on products for themselves and for other women. We calculated the size of the luxury brand logo and measured participants' financial status. There was a two-way interaction between fertility (high vs. low) and targeted users (self vs. other women) after controlling for financial status ( $p < .001$ ). Ovulating women drew significantly larger logos for themselves compared to the logos they drew for other women ( $M_{self} = 1.28$ ,  $M_{other} = 1.13$ ,  $p < .04$ ), whereas non-ovulating women drew significantly smaller logos for themselves compared to the logos they drew for other women ( $M_{self} = 1.12$ ,  $M_{other} = 1.35$ ,  $p < .04$ ). In other words, near ovulation, women drew significantly larger logos for themselves ( $M_{low} = 1.12$ ,  $M_{high} = 1.28$ ,  $p < .02$ ), but drew significantly smaller logos for other women ( $M_{low} = 1.35$ ,  $M_{high} = 1.13$ ,  $p < .007$ ).

Our findings suggest that fertility may motivate women to seek out and purchase luxury goods. If the ovulatory cycle systematically alters women's desire for luxury products, this has important implications for marketers, researchers, and consumers. Female consumers might choose more opulent goods depending on when during the month they are shopping. Researchers might explore how manipulated cues to competition affect women's conspicuous consumption. And, marketers may provoke different responses from the same message at different times of the month.

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