The Devil Wears Prada? How Luxury Consumption Influences Social Behaviors

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We propose that using luxury products boosts people’s perception of social status, which then alters their behavior. Four experiments show that luxury products trigger self-interested behavior. Additionally, we identify a theoretically-derived condition: luxury products can induce self-interested motives that lead people to behave altruistically under specific conditions.

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Fashion Signals and Symbols: Beyond Conspicuous Consumption
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Paper #1: The Devil Wears Prada? How Luxury Consumption Influences Social Behaviors
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Paper #2: New Wine in Old Bottles: Vintage Consumption, Death Awareness, and the Desire to Connect the Past, Present, and Future
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Paper #3: Don’t Go Broke, Go Back in Time: Vintage, an Alternative Status Symbol
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Paper #4: The Impact of Usage Frequency on Lifestyle Branding
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SESSION OVERVIEW
Conspicuous consumption, the public consumption of luxury goods in order to signal status to others, is now a well-understood phenomenon both in consumer research as well as among the general public. By consuming certain clothing and accessories, consumers can signal status and capitalize on the symbolic nature of goods. The research presented in this session offers a more nuanced and deeper understanding of how, when, and why certain brands and products act as signals, both to the public and to the consumer himself. Each of these projects takes a different perspective in examining the complex consumption choices involved in signaling status. Specifically, two of the projects consider the signals that consumers unknowingly communicate to themselves via the purchase and display of luxury and vintage products. The third and the fourth paper are rooted in consumers’ motivation to signal status to others, via vintage products, and illustrate one manner in which lifestyle brands garner their marketing outcomes.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Luxury consumption is skyrocketing and mounting to as much as $525 billion per year in the United States alone (Bev and Zolenski 2011). When millions of people are using luxury products every day, what are the consequences of such consumption?

Surprisingly, with sufficient research in the luxury area, we still know very little to answer the questions raised above. Past research has examined people’s attitudes, preferences, and motivations for acquiring luxury goods (Berger and Ward 2010; Han, Nunes, and Drezner 2010; Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012; Wang and Griskevicius 2014), leaving a blank for what happens to people when they actually use them. We investigate how luxury consumption influences psychology and behavior. We propose that the experience of using a luxury product boosts people’s perceptions of social status and therefore it triggers self-interested behavior such as taking more resources for the self and becoming more willing to cut in line. In addition, we identify a theoretically-derived condition that reverses the negative effects of luxury consumption: it can lead people to behave in a self-interested manner by giving more to others, but only under specific conditions. Four experiments test these hypotheses.

In study 1, female participants (N=72) first walked around a busy area wearing either a luxury (Prada, retail price $1890) or a non-luxury handbag (retail price $75) for about 15 minutes. Afterwards, they were presented with an opportunity to behave in a self-interested manner. The first measure was based on the notion of selfishly taking the last desirable item from a group’s common resources. The result indicated that people who wore the Prada handbag were far more likely to take the last desirable pen from com-
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munal pen box compared to the control condition (61.8% vs. 30.3%; \( \chi^2 (1) = 6.67, p = .01 \)). The second measure involved willingness to share resources with another person. We found that participants in the luxury condition gave significantly more money to themselves than control condition (\( M = $7.44 \) vs. \$6.69; \( p = .02 \)).

Study 2 sought to conceptually replicate and extend the findings from study 1, and tested the psychological mechanism. Women (N=42) once again walked around campus with either a luxury or a non-luxury handbag. To assess whether wearing the handbag influenced people’s perceptions of social status, participants filled out a short survey during their consumption experience. Embedded in this survey were items that measured participants’ perceptions of their current level of social status. Finally, we examined women’s self-interested behaviors across different situations such as cutting in line in a coffee shop and speeding ahead to get a parking space while another car is waiting for it. Responses to the four situations were averaged to form a selfish behavior index (\( \alpha = .73 \)). Findings showed that participants in the luxury condition were significantly more likely to behave in a selfish manner than control condition (\( M = 5.65 \) vs. \( 4.24, p = .008 \)). Furthermore, a 10,000 resample bootstrap revealed a significant indirect effect of type of product on selfish behavioral intentions via sense of social status, \( b = -.53 \) (SE = .32), 95% CI [-1.38, -.06].

Although higher status is often associated with taking more for the self, it should be associated with acting in a generous manner when the behavior affords an opportunity to gain more status (Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh 2010). Therefore, we predict that using a luxury (vs. non-luxury) product should make people more willing to donate money to charity in a public context. However, when there is no opportunity to display being helpful to others, luxury (vs. non-luxury) users will revert to selfish behaviors, which should result in donating less money to charity. Study 3 (2 product type: luxury vs. control) by 2 (donation context: public vs. private) between-subjects designed) tested this hypothesis. The results showed that in the private context, women donated less money to charity in the luxury condition versus the control condition (\( M = $2.94 \) vs. \$3.93, \( p = .05 \)). However, in public, women donated more money to charity in the luxury condition compared to the control condition (\( M = $4.63 \) vs. \$3.20, \( p = .027 \)).

Study 4 sought to “turn off” the effect of luxury consumption by considering a situation in which luxury products should not influence social behavior – when other people have similar products, luxury consumption should not effectively increase social status. To do so, in one of the conditions (luxury without status boost), we placed multiple Burberry products (e.g., umbrella, wallet, tote bag) along the route where these participants walked while wearing the Burberry scarf around campus. We found that women in the luxury condition donated significantly more money to charity than women in the control condition (\( M = $4.35 \) vs. \$3.47; \( p = .047 \)). Thus, replicating the novel finding from study 3, women wearing a Burberry scarf became more charitable when they had an opportunity to donate in public. By contrast, wearing the same luxury scarf had no effect on donations when the luxury product did not enhance status. There was no difference in donations in the luxury without status boost condition and the control condition (\( M = $3.38 \) vs. \$3.35; \( p = .84 \)). Finally, perceived social status once again statistically mediated the effects (\( b = .24 \) (SE = .13), 95% CI [.04, .61]).

This research makes several important contributions. First, these studies are the first to examine the psychological and behavioral consequences of luxury consumption. Rather than measuring pre-purchase desires, our experimental approach involves actual use of luxury products and observations of behavior triggered by using these products. Second, we show that luxury goods have an impact that goes beyond the luxury user alone, whereas prior work on luxury consumption has examined well-being from the standpoint of the consumer. Finally, this research contributes by showing that the social costs of luxury consumption are not inevitable. Instead, we show that under the right conditions the use of luxury products can spur behavior that benefits other people.

New Wine in Old Bottles: Vintage Consumption, Death Awareness, and the Desire to Connect the Past, Present, and Future

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Why would anyone want old products, especially old products not even a part of one’s own personal history? The concept of new has a special place in people’s minds and preferences, a novelty preference that starts in infancy (Roder, Bushnell, and Sasseville 2000). The existence and value of vintage products stands in contrast to the deeply ingrained motivation for that which is new, suggesting that there are powerful motivations that give rise to a desire for that which is old. This paper investigated death cues as one such motivation.

The etymology of the word “vintage” comes from wine making, describing the year and location in which a particular wine was made. Now the term is applied to clothing, accessories, furniture, cars, and other artifacts from an earlier era. Within fashion circles, items between 20 and 100 years old are generally considered vintage (items older than this tend to be viewed as “antiques,” Bardey and Coglantry 2002; Cervellon et al. 2012). The term is especially applicable to items seen as emblematic or representative of a particular time period. For the purposes of this research, we limited our consideration to items more than 20 years old, previously owned, and in good, working condition (Veenstra and Kuipers 2013).

Vintage items, as pieces that have stood the test of time, represent the continuity of existence. We argue that this physical blending of elements from different times means that vintage items need not be merely evocative of the past, but instead can be symbolic of the connections across time. This notion led us to propose that vintage items can be viewed by consumers as meeting the need of perceiving connections among the past, present, and future. To be sure, a need to perceive intertemporal connectedness is not always active for consumers. We posited that one situation that stimulates it is thoughts about death.

According to the Meaning Maintenance Model (Heine Proulx and Vohs 2006), when meaning frameworks are perturbed, people seek to reassert meaning by finding, affirming, and reinforcing meaning in some other domain. Meaning challenges come in a host of forms. Hampered agency, social ostracism, and lacking knowledge are known meaning threats (Proulx et al. 2010). Death encompasses all of those — and more — and as such is probably the biggest, most pressing meaning challenge that people experience.

Responses to meaning threats likewise come in many forms. We proposed a new salve to the meaning challenge posed by death: bolstering perceptions of intertemporal connections. We posited that when death is salient, meaning that when time is perceived to be ending, facilitating intertemporal connections can represent symbolic connections across time and can be a way to cope with threats to meaning.

The proposition that thoughts about intertemporal connectedness mark attempts to see life as being meaningful is supported by recent empirical work. Seeing one’s life as meaningful is one strategy that people can use to ward off the meaning threats associated
with death (Bassett and Connelly 2011), and the extent to which people reported that their thoughts were centered not only on the past but also the past and future predicted the degree to which they said their lives were meaningful (Baumeister et al. 2013). Hence our proposition that death cues arouse a need to quell a meaning threat, a need that vintage goods help to address due to aiding perceptions of temporal interconnectedness. That is, we posited that thoughts about temporality would account for preferences for vintage items caused by a reminder of one’s own eventual death.

In summary, we predicted that reminders of death would lead to increased preference for vintage goods, relative to conditions where a person’s mortality is not made accessible. We further predicted that this preference for vintage goods would be driven by an increased desire to perceive of time as interconnected following a death reminder.

We tested our predictions in five studies. The first study tested whether reminders of death altered people’s liking of vintage products, relative to participants who did not receive a death reminder. The second study had a similar aim, this time taking our investigation to the field. Elderly residents of a nursing home indicated their liking of both vintage and non-vintage (modern) products. Mortality awareness was inferred based on an assessment of residents’ physical health.

The third study tested the consequences of associating oneself with vintage goods after a death reminder. This study addressed the question of whether vintage goods can serve as an effective meaning maintenance tool by measuring differences in need for structure after associating with vintage goods (Thompson, Naccarato and Parker 1989).

The fourth and fifth studies tested the proposed mechanism. Study 4 investigated whether thinking about time being interconnected mediated the effect of mortality reminders on preference for vintage items. The fifth study provided an additional test of mediation by thoughts about time’s connectedness, and used a novel behavioral indicator of preference for vintage goods. Participants were encouraged to handle vintage and non-vintage clothing items and accessories. Duration spent touching the items while looking at themselves in a mirror was the behavioral indicator of preference.

Vintage goods can appeal to customers for a variety of reasons, from relatively low prices to a sense of authenticity. We investigated the possibility that vintage goods can serve the psychological need to perceive time as interconnected. We argued (and found) that this desire increases after a death reminder. As a result, the preference for vintage goods increases when a consumer’s mortality is salient.

Evidence for this effect was robust across different death reminder tasks (studies 1, 3, 4, and 5) as well as the proxy variable of physical ailments among an elderly population (study 2). We twice found evidence in support of mediation. Cuing people to think about death led their thoughts to attempt to integrate the past, present, and future, and the extent to which that happened predicted their preference for vintage items.

Don’t Go Broke...Go Back in Time: Vintage, an alternative status symbol

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Traditionally, social scientists have discussed luxury consumption as a way for consumers to signal social status (Bagwell and Bernheim 1996; Levy 1959; Veblen 1899). However, as consumers have increasing access to luxury products as well as recent market developments including cross-shopping (Skallerud and Korneliussen 2009) and the proliferation of counterfeit products (Gentry, Puetrevu, and Shultz 2006), displaying luxury products has become a less diagnostic signal of wealth, prestige, and connoisseurship. In response consumers have found other ways to signal status, such as through ‘conspicuous conservation’ (Griskevicius et al. 2010; Sexton and Sexton 2011), non-conforming behaviors (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014), and even the intentional targeting of non-luxury products (Geiger-Oneta et al. 2013). The present research identifies the consumption of vintage products—products from an earlier era that reflect the style of that era—as another such form of signaling. While prior research has linked vintage purchases with uniqueness and nostalgia (Carvellon et al 2012; Loveland et al 2010), consumer research has not fully investigated its social meaning nor the processes that underlie its social consumption. Drawing from perspectives in signaling theory, this work explores the similarities and differences between vintage and luxury products, and posits that, in contrast to luxury, vintage offers a stronger signal of area-specific (fashion) cultural capital. It follows that confidence in one’s fashion knowledge is a key distinguishing factor between consumers of the two.

While luxury products traditionally signal financial wealth, recent research has identified ways in which consumers take more nuanced approaches to status signaling. In these cases, status is implied through the potential social costs to the consumer, rather than the monetary cost of the product involved. For example, Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan (2014) suggest that nonconforming behaviors are costly and visible signals that can increase perceptions of status. Berger and Ward (2010) show that consumers with more cultural capital prefer subtle signals of luxury to loud ones, despite the fact that fewer people will interpret them as status symbols. We argue that vintage products are unique as price alone does not reflect their desirability. As such, they pose a similar social cost to potential consumers, namely, when making a vintage purchase, a consumer cannot rely solely on trends or price to discern what is fashionable and what is not. In this sense, vintage purchases require expertise that is not necessarily required when selecting luxury purchases. It follows that, while less broadly appreciated, vintage offers a signal, not of status or wealth, but of area-specific (fashion) cultural capital. This suggests, that while vintage and luxury purchasers may share an interest and appreciation for fashion, vintage purchasers will feel more confident in their area-specific cultural capital.

Before investigating what drives consumers to prefer vintage products, we first explored how vintage consumers are perceived by others. In study 1 participants read a paragraph describing a woman in a public, everyday scenario and gave their evaluation of her. Depending on the condition, the woman was described as sporting either vintage, luxury, or undescribed (control) accessories. Consistent with theories suggesting that people consume as a means of communicating identity (Belk 1988; Berger and Heath 2007), our results show that both vintage and luxury consumers are perceived as interested in fashion, but that they differ with respect to their perceived uniqueness and affinity for taking fashion risks. Specifically, when described with vintage accessories the woman was perceived as more unique and more likely to take fashion risks than the woman in both of the other two conditions. Not surprisingly, when described with luxury accessories she was rated as wealthier, more status-seeking, more attention-seeking, and less humble than the woman in both of the other two conditions.

Verifying the differences in perceptions of vintage and luxury buyers found in Study 1, Study 2 provided evidence for differences in fashion confidence between actual vintage and luxury consumers. The participants (a group targeted for their fashion expertise) were asked about their clothing purchase habits and also answered
questions measuring their fashion confidence. Vintage purchase was positively correlated with fashion confidence ($r(125) = .46, p < .001$), while luxury purchase was negatively correlated with fashion confidence ($r(125) = -.19, p = .03$).

Next, in Study 3 we further investigated the differential drivers of vintage versus luxury purchase, and sought to increase non-vintage consumers’ evaluations of vintage products. Specifically, we examined the role of fashion confidence by manipulating this variable by asking participants to consider their own fashion knowledge relative to an upward or a downward comparison (Collins 1996). Results indicated that non-vintage consumers who were made to feel more confident were more likely to select a vintage luxury product over an equivalent luxury non-vintage one, but only for relatively high income consumers. The moderating effect of household income highlights the fact that vintage is a status signaling alternative particularly for consumers who otherwise can afford luxury products.

Planned studies include examination of how desire for uniqueness also differentiates vintage from luxury purchases. Then building on both the fashion confidence and uniqueness differentiators of vintage, we will explore how marketing techniques signaling popularity (e.g. “best-selling”) versus scarcity (e.g. limited time offers) differentially appeal to these different audiences.

This research contributes to the literature on how consumers select new identity signals as the traditional identity markers (e.g. luxury products) lose their ability to differentiate due to their ubiquity in the marketplace. Further, we offer the perspective that individuals might turn to more costly signals even at the expense of the positivity with which they are perceived by others.

The Impact of Usage Frequency on Lifestyle Branding

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

To increase sales, companies often promote product usage by encouraging individuals to consume their products more frequently and across different usage occasions (Wansink and Ray 1996). The underlying conventional wisdom is that more product usage gives consumers greater utility than less product usage. The logic of this argument is supported by economic theory, which argues that a greater number of usage occasions enhances consumers’ willingness to pay (Marshall 2004). In this research, we challenge the universal validity of this approach and argue that under certain circumstances consumer willingness to pay can be enhanced by decreasing rather than increasing the number of usage occasions. We differentiate between two types of brands—functional and lifestyle—and argue that the type of brand influences the impact of varying product usage on willingness to pay.

In this context, we argue that limiting usage is likely to decrease willingness to pay only for brands that are high on functional attributes and that in the case of lifestyle brands this effect is reversed, such that limiting usage can increase rather than decrease willingness to pay. Our reasoning builds on the notion that consumers use brands to express their identity (Belk 1988; Fournier 1998) and that they are more likely to do so with lifestyle rather than functional brands. Specifically, we argue that in the case of lifestyle brands limiting usage frequency makes each usage occasion more special, which, in turn, increases customers’ willingness to pay. This argument implies that consumers rely on usage frequency to determine the value of self-expressive brands, and that their willingness to pay increases with the decrease in the number of usage occasions. We attribute this effect to the self-expressive nature of lifestyle brands and predict that in the case of functional brands restricting usage frequency will have the opposite effect, decreasing rather than increasing customers’ willingness to pay. We tested this prediction in a series of four experiments.

**Study 1**

Study 1 provides evidence that limiting usage can enhance product value when the brand is lifestyle rather than functional. Specifically, this experiment examines the impact of usage on product value for either a functional brand (GAP) or a lifestyle brand (Victoria’s Secret). We show that limiting the usage frequency of the functional brand decreases consumers’ valuation of this brand (e.g., consumers were willing to pay less for GAP sleepwear that they could wear only twice a month as opposed to every day). In contrast, limiting the usage frequency of the lifestyle brand increases consumers’ valuation (e.g., consumers were willing to pay more for Victoria’s Secret sleepwear that they could wear only twice a month as opposed to every day).

**Study 2**

To support our proposition that the impact of varying product usage on product valuation is a function of the self-expressive nature of the underlying brands rather than other differences associated with different brands, Study 2 shows that positioning the same brand as functional vs. lifestyle can also switch the impact of usage on product value. Specifically, we show that when the positioning of a T-shirt brand centers on its comfortableness, limiting the usage of this brand to only once a week as opposed to every day significantly decreases consumers’ willingness to pay for this brand. In contrast, when the positioning of this T-shirt brand centers on its self-designed features, limiting the usage of this brand to only once a week as opposed to every day significantly increases consumers’ willingness to pay for this brand. This supports the proposition that the impact of usage on product valuation depends on the brand’s self-expressiveness.

**Studies 3 and 4**

Studies 3 and 4 further examine the role of self-expression when usage is limited by comparing its effect on product valuation across consumers with high and low self-expressive needs. These experiments build on the notion that if the impact of usage on product value depends on the self-expressiveness of the brand, this effect should be stronger for individuals with a high need to self-express rather than a low need to self-express. In this context, Study 3 shows that consumers with a chronically high self-expressive need, rather than a low self-expressive need, exhibit increased valuation of their favorite items from their most self-relevant brands when usage is limited as opposed to unlimited. Following this line of reasoning, Study 4 shows that increasing consumers’ need for self-expression increases their willingness to pay for lifestyle brands and that this effect is more pronounced when usage frequency is limited.

The findings from these four experiments provide convergent evidence that limiting usage frequency can have a differential impact on lifestyle versus functional brands, decreasing valuation of functional brands while increasing valuation of lifestyle brands.

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