When Dress Does Not Impress: the Negative Effects of Using Luxury Goods

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Contrary to the belief that luxury goods can improve one’s social attractiveness, we find that people’s (mis)usage of luxury goods can result in less positive impressions for the luxury user. The luxury user’s life goal (communion vs. agentic) is also identified as a mechanism that underlies these impressions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The desire for status is a fundamental human need and a potent source of motivation for many individuals (Winter et al. 1998). Having high status is not only emotionally and psychologically satisfying (e.g., McClelland, 1975), it can also make people more socially attractive (Belk et al. 1982; Henrich and Gil-White 2001). One of the ways people signal their status is by consuming products associated with wealth and exclusivity (Drèze and Nunes 2009; Thompson and Haytko 1997). Research has shown that men are more likely to choose luxury goods when mating motives are activated, presumably because these goods indicate their possession of economic resources (Griskevicius et al. 2007; Sundie et al. 2010).

Similarly, women sometimes purchase luxury goods in order to enhance their status among members of the same sex (Dunn and Searle 2010). While the link between luxury goods consumption and positive impressions has been shown in previous research, less work has considered when such goods might make people less socially attractive. The current paper examines the research question of whether an individual who displays multiple (vs. few or no) luxury products will result in negative impressions of that individual.

We also examine whether negative impressions associated with luxury users are due to inferences perceivers make about the underlying motives of these individuals (Frimer et al. 2011). Specifically, we propose a person who possesses multiple luxury products is more likely to be perceived as being motivated by agentic (e.g., social recognition) rather than communion (e.g., helping others) life goals (Abele and Wojciszke 2007; Cislak and Wojciszke 2008). An implication is that negative impressions of the luxury user could be mitigated if he is portrayed as someone who also cares for communion goals.

Finally, we investigate whether activating different life goals among perceivers of a luxury user also influences their impressions of that individual. While activating communion (vs. agentic) goals in the perceivers could make him/her evaluate the luxury user more negatively if such primes accentuated the contrast between themselves and the agentic orientation, perceivers may also evaluate the luxury user less negatively in order to elevate their self-views (Cwir et al. 2011).

Study 1 employed a one-factor (number of luxury items: none vs. one vs. multiple luxury items) between-participants design. Participants were first shown a photo of a casually dressed male, and the number of luxury items was manipulated by the number of luxury (e.g., Gucci) versus mid-range brands (e.g., Gap) in his wardrobe. Participants then rated him on a number of traits, including likability. Results showed that participants in the multiple luxury condition liked him less than the one and no luxury conditions. Likability between the one and no luxury conditions was nonsignificant. Hence, contrary to the common belief that displays of luxury goods improve social attractiveness, it can have the opposite effect. The next studies delve into the underlying mechanisms of this effect.

Study 2a employed a one-factor (number of luxury items: none vs. one vs. multiple) between-participants design. Manipulation was the same as study 1. After viewing the photo, participants indicated the extent to which they believed the person valued goals such as “gaining social recognition,” and “helping others” (Schwartz 1992). Results showed that participants in the multiple luxury condition rated him as valuing agentic-oriented goals more than the no luxury condition. The person with one luxury was also perceived as valuing agentic goals more than someone without luxury goods. The multiple luxury condition perceived the person as valuing communion goals less than the other two conditions. Study 2b examined the implication of these perceived life goals on people’s impressions of the multiple luxury user.

Study 2b employed a 3 (number of luxury items: none vs. one vs. multiple) x 2 (life goal: communion vs. agentic) between-participants design. Manipulation of the number of luxury items was the same as above. Life goal of the person was manipulated by the description attached to his photo. The agentic condition described this person’s life goal as working for a financial institution on Wall Street so he can be successful. The communion condition described this person as working for the UN so he can help impoverished individuals. Participant then rated him on likability, and a significant interaction effect was found. Among participants in the multiple luxury condition, those in the communion condition liked him more than the agentic condition. Likability was equal among those in the multiple luxury/communion, no luxury/communion, and one luxury conditions. These results suggest that the profligate luxury user who values communion life goals does not receive the same negative evaluation from perceivers.

Study 3 employed a one-factor (prime: communion vs. agentic vs. control) between-participants design. Participants either imagined that their mentor at their new job encouraged them to form social relationships with their colleagues (vs. climb the social ladder and promote their status in the company). Participants in the control condition did not imagine any scenarios. Following the manipulation, participants viewed the photo of a person wearing multiple luxury items, and formed their impressions. Results showed that participants in the communion condition liked the luxury user more than the agentic and control conditions. Hence, study 3 showed that the effect of goal orientation on evaluations of a profligate luxury user occurs not only when the individual is portrayed as valuing different goals, but also when a perceiver is primed to think about pursuing these goals.

While past research showed people’s positive impressions of those who project status through the ownership of luxury goods, little research has considered whether luxury users might also be perceived negatively under certain circumstances. The current research potentially has important theoretical and practical implications because one of the reasons why the luxury brand industry is lucrative because consumers believe that “more is better” when it comes to luxury goods. However, the current work suggests that “less” may in fact be better than “more” if an individual wishes to use the display of luxury goods to form positive impressions of him/herself. Importantly, we demonstrated a number of factors can offset these negative impressions.

REFERENCES


