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From Luxury to Populence: Inconspicuous Consumption As Described By Female Consumers

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Luxury as a concept has transformed from a snobbish exclusive class of products reserved for the rich, to a democratized, mass-market class of products available to most consumers across income and class levels. Our study looks into the phenomenon through the eyes of consumers describing their experiences with this new form of luxury which we coin as Populence-popular opulence.

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From Luxury to Populace: Inconspicuous Consumption as Described by Female Consumers

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Rising standards of living and increasing consumer product knowledge have given rise to a democratization of traditionally top-of-the-range products, (Bialobos 1991; Sharpe 2002). The result has been a much broader conception by consumers with regard to the concept of luxury. Fiske and Silverstien (2002) note that a \$9 million Faberge egg and a \$40.00 Victoria's Secret bra are both referred to as luxuries (Faberge being "old luxury" and Victoria Secret as "new luxury").

"Old luxury" conceptions can be traced to Veblen (1899) who wrote that the rich communicate social advantage by buying and, more importantly, displaying luxury goods, their medals of status. Conspicuous consumers can be categorized as conformists or snobs. Snobs prefer limited products and while refraining from products consumed by many (Dubois, 1993; Leibenstein 1950; Corneo and Jeanne 1997).

In an effort to delineate luxury, Dubois' (1995) found that luxury producers buy into the idea that their customers focus on two attributes of the luxury goods: a) a very high price, in absolute and relative terms, and b) luxury goods have no utility. Subsequently, Dubois et al. (2001) found that French subjects classified luxury goods as expensive, polysensual, with a sense of legend or history, exclusive, aesthetic and superfluous.

Thus, luxury as we have known it, "old luxury" has been defined by snobbish, class oriented exclusivity-goods and services that only a small segment of the population can afford or is willing to purchase. "Old luxury" is the facilitator and result of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899). However, "new luxury" includes products for mass-market appeal to consumers across various income and social classes. Our study looks into the phenomena through the eyes of consumers describing their experiences with "new luxury" which we call Populace-popular opulence. To explore how consumers make meaning of Populace, we perform a hermeneutic phenomenological investigation, using in depth interviews in a modified method of Seidman's (1998) three interview structure.

Our interviews yielded two types of information: 1) a first-person description of the participant's history in context and (2) contextual details concerning the participant's lived experience. Products in this study included intimate apparel as well as shoes and accessories. Sixteen women, between the ages of 20 to 28 were interviewed. Stories describing the genesis, evolution, and usage of new luxury brands in the participant's repertoire were elicited. To begin, participants were asked to "tell the story" behind any products under consideration that they were wearing at the time. The remainder of the interviews were driven by participants. We recorded and transcribed interviews and the authors conducted the analysis. Our findings are based on the views, comments, and meaning offered by participants on various consumption patterns, brands and products. Seven categories surfaced which help define and structure the cognitive domain of content. They are presented below.

Overall superiority-All of the participants stressed the importance of quality in their purchase decision and attachment processes. This omnipresent characteristic is indicative of Populace goods offering a high level of quality, much higher than conventional middle-market goods and often higher than "old luxury" goods. Participants who consume Populace undergarments expect the product to be free of faults of manufacture and assembly and to perform precisely as promised.

Fashionable and 'cool'-This emergent theme is about expressing personal taste, differentiating oneself from others, and demonstrating sophistication, discerning abilities, and success. This theme is also about being hip and looking stylish and feeling unique. For sophisticated and discerning spenders, Populace goods provide a rich and broad vocabulary with which to speak-without saying a word.

Moonshooting and Bottombarreling-Participants say they are willing to pay a significant premium for goods that are emotionally important to them and that deliver the perceived values of quality, performance, and emotional engagement. But in other categories that aren't emotionally important, they become value driven bargain hunters: the same participant who splurges on intimate apparel also buys generic earrings at target at \$5.99 for three pairs.

Signaling-Signaling is about finding, building, maintaining, and deepening relationships with people who are important to them. Signaling includes the following subspaces: attracting mates, belonging (Bandwagoning) with friends and groups, and social signaling. To help attract mates, participants buy clothing, lingerie, jewelry, accessories, and cosmetics to make themselves more appealing. Populace goods provide participants a means to align themselves with people who have similar values and interests- to join the club

Self-Catering-Most of the participants say they are looking for ways to get a few moments alone, reward themselves after a tough day of studies and working, rejuvenate their body, and soothe their emotions. Self-Catering is also about indulging oneself but buying luxuries is no longer a guilty self-indulgence; it is exercising a right and almost an obligation to make sure consumers are feeling their best.

Exploring-Exploring is about seeking out new experiences and experimenting with added identity dimensions. Participants describe their sense of adventure and liberation when they complete their appearance by using and exhibiting Populace goods. In addition, participants appreciate the sense of freedom that comes with switching brands and consumption situations. Intimate apparel (underwear

and lingerie) provides participants with a canvas for experimenting and variety seeking that does not pose a threat of social scrutiny. Finally, exploring provides participants with a legitimate experience of product trial and evaluation.

Inconspicuous Consumption—The most conspicuous difference between “old” luxury goods and consumption and Populence is the element of display and the degree to which it applies. Participants purposely chose to select goods that are high quality and relatively expensive, but that do no display any visual brand elements.

Our data also serve to induct a new luxury Populence paradigm that is radically different from the traditional “old” luxury. This paradigm stems from significant mass market shifts, rather than exclusive, snobby elite segments. We call it the Populence paradigm because it involves the mass production and distribution of premium goods and services, enabling the majority of consumers to pick and choose their consumption of New Luxury brands.

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