



# Intrinsic motivations, self-esteem, and luxury goods consumption

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the dramatic growth of the luxury market over the past two decades, luxury consumer research remains fragmentary and scant. To address this knowledge gap, this study investigates consumers' intrinsic motivations for purchasing luxury goods. Data were collected from 587 consumers and analyzed using structural equation modeling. The results show that consumers who are primarily intrinsically motivated tend to purchase luxury products for superior quality and self-directed pleasure. The findings also demonstrate that self-esteem, an important concept in psychology and consumer behavior but rarely studied in luxury research, relates strongly to self-directed pleasure.

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## 1. Introduction

Global luxury goods accounted for \$175 billion in retail sales in 2008 (Bain and Company, 2009), and expectations are that the fast-growing markets of China and India will sustain the luxury market expansion for the next 10 years (Anestis et al., 2009). While the size and growth of this market has attracted increasing research interest to the luxury industry (see Tynan et al., 2010), in comparison to other research sectors, the literature remains scant (Truong et al., 2008).

Consumer behavior is a cornerstone of marketing in which individual aspirations and motivations play an important role. Aspirations influence motivation, which in turn influences a consumer's actions (Grouzet et al., 2005; Kasser and Ryan, 1996; Kim et al., 2003; Sheldon et al., 2004). Previous investigations of purchase motivations broadly categorize consumer motives for luxury consumption as either intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsically oriented purchases reflect internal self-fulfillment goals (Tsai, 2005). Extrinsically oriented purchasing reflects the importance of others' perception of the consumer as the main motivating factor. Thus, extrinsic motivations fall within the theory of conspicuous consumption, which states that customers purchase luxury goods largely to signal their wealth and status (Veblen, 1899).

As current print and television advertisements demonstrate, luxury marketing practitioners rely heavily on appeals to consumers' extrinsic motivations (Corneo and Jeanne, 1997; O'Cass and Frost, 2002; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). Consequently the luxury

consumption literature is concentrated on understanding the role and function of external motivations (e.g., Amaldoss and Jain, 2005; Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996; Mason, 1981, 2001; O'Cass and Frost, 2004; Wong, 1997), while few studies examine the influence of intrinsic motivations (Truong et al., 2010; Tsai, 2005).

In the case of luxury consumption, very little is known about which factors are relevant to intrinsic motivation. The present study reduces the current knowledge gap by developing and validating an empirical model that tests the effects of certain intrinsic motivations on luxury consumption. The research hypotheses address the effects of antecedents on consumer preference for luxury goods.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Motivation theory

In the context of this study, the intrinsic motivation constructs derive from self-determination theory, a macro-theory of human motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Self-determination theory addresses the development and functioning of personality within social contexts and asserts that humans are active organisms with a natural tendency toward psychological growth and development (Sheldon et al., 2004). Satisfying basic psychological needs, which are innate, universal, and essential to well-being nourishes and maintains this developmental process. Achieving the state of well-being therefore depends on an individual's ability to satisfy those needs.

A close relationship exists between the satisfaction of psychological needs and the pursuit of personal goals whereby individuals tend to prioritize goals that are consistent with their most salient needs. Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996) argue that everyone pursues life goals, and have identified seven universal aspirations,

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which they organize into two broad classes—extrinsic and intrinsic. In general, these authors reason that individuals tend to pursue one of the two broad classes more purposefully than the other. Extrinsic goals include financial success (money and luxury), social recognition (fame), and appealing appearance (image). Intrinsic goals are self-acceptance (growth), affiliation (relatedness), community feeling (helpfulness), and physical fitness (health). Consumers pursue intrinsic goals for internal “autonomous” reasons—that is, for the sake of the satisfaction, enjoyment, or personal meaning. Individuals who pursue extrinsic goals tend to focus on others’ perceptions of them, with motivation stemming from a desire to earn praise and rewards.

## 2.2. Luxury consumption motivations

Most contemporary research into luxury consumption has its roots in the well established concept of conspicuous consumption, which states that people with adequate means tend to consume highly visible goods to display their wealth and gain social status. The so-called Veblen Effect describes the willingness to pay a premium price for a functionally equivalent product that the purchaser perceives to be more prestigious (Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996). This readiness to pay more may generate considerably greater status for the consumer than any direct utility (Mason, 2001), and a premium price may paradoxically have positive effects on the consumer’s decision-making processes.

Individuals who engage in conspicuous consumption often do so to emulate the consumption patterns of the people who are directly above them in the social hierarchy (Ericksen, 1996; Mason, 1998). Since social status depends on others’ willingness to grant it, social emulation is normally overt, and the purchasing and ownership of luxury goods for status reasons tend to be more public than private (Bearden and Etzel, 1982). Today, more than a century after the appearance of Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), attempting to gain higher status through conspicuous consumption still seems to shape both consumers’ preferences for products and marketers’ practices in selling them (Corneo and Jeanne, 1997; Dholakia and Talukdar, 2004; Trigg, 2001).

While aspirational consumers tend to imitate the buying behavior of reference groups to which they would like to belong (Dholakia and Talukdar, 2004), not every consumer practices conspicuous consumption. Some consumers instead seek inconspicuous benefits, such as the quality of the product (Beverland, 2006; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999, 2004) or for self-directed pleasure (Fiske and Silverstein, 2004; Silverstein and Fiske, 2003, 2005; Tsai, 2005).

## 2.3. Desire for quality

Early efforts to define and measure quality predominately examine manufactured goods. Crosby (1979) discusses quality in terms of conformance to requirements, while Garvin (1983) measures quality by counting the incidence of internal failures (which occur in the factory) and external failures (which happen in the field). The desire for superior quality is one of the most salient attributes of luxury products (Bian and Moutinho, 2009; Kapferer, 1998) and, contrary to Veblen’s premise, luxury consumers may be more interested in quality than in social emulation (Mencken, 1919).

Recent studies often use perceived quality as a dimension of customer satisfaction relying on the disconfirmation model (Oliver, 1980) whereby customer expectations are compared with perceptions (Vickers and Renand, 2003; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Dubois et al. (2001) find that respondents perceive quality to be one of the strongest associations of luxury, suggesting that

quality may be synonymous with luxury. Since a desire for quality appears to be intrinsic, it is posited that

**H1.** A direct positive relationship exists between *intrinsic motivations* and *quality*.

## 2.4. Self-rewarding experience

Several authors argue that the desire for self-rewarding experiences may motivate luxury consumers to purchase (Silverstein and Fiske, 2003, 2005; Tsai, 2005). Some investigators refer to these experiences as hedonic motivations (Dubois and Laurent, 1996; Dubois et al., 2001; Dubois and Paternault, 1995; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Many consumers who trade up to luxury brands may not necessarily be wealthy, but nevertheless like to spend their increasing disposable income on hedonic goods and services (Silverstein and Fiske, 2003, 2005). Self-directed motives go beyond seeking the sole benefit of superior product quality and include personal emotional benefits, and may therefore be classified as intrinsic in nature (Tsai, 2005). On the basis of this discussion it is hypothesized that

**H2.** A direct positive relationship exists between *intrinsic motivations* and *self-directed pleasure*.

## 2.5. Self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to global feelings of self-liking, self-worth, self-respect, and self-acceptance (Brown, 1993; Rosenberg, 1965), or more simply, an overall evaluation of one’s self-concept (Leonard et al., 1995). Many authors suggest that self-esteem is an essential part of the human ego and posit that individuals naturally strive to enhance their self-esteem (Crocker and Nuer, 2003, 2004; DuBois and Flay, 2004; Greenwald et al., 1988; Pyszczynski et al., 2004; Renaud and McConnell, 2007; Sheldon, 2004; Sheldon et al., 2001).

Moreover, Sheldon et al. (2001) propose self-esteem to be a fundamental need, which may blend with goal pursuit and may therefore be an important concept in motivation theories and self-concept theories in marketing (Durgee, 1986; Ferraro et al., 2005; Hogg et al., 2000). Research in consumer behavior also suggests that acquiring goods help improve self-esteem by flattering one’s ego (Arndt et al., 2004). More specifically, self-gifts can sustain and improve self-worth, which is an important constituent of self-esteem (Mick and Demoss, 1990). It is therefore hypothesized that pleasures that are self-directed can help improve one’s self-esteem:

**H3.** A direct positive relationship exists between *self-esteem* and *self-directed pleasure*.

This study’s overarching hypothesis argues that these combined intrinsic motivations are not important to luxury consumers with extrinsic motivations. Therefore, it is argued that

**H4.** A direct negative relationship exists between *intrinsic motivations* and *conspicuous consumption*.

## 3. Method

This study relies on a theoretical model depicting the relationships between intrinsic motivations, self-esteem, quality, conspicuous consumption behavior, and self-directed pleasure (Fig. 1). Confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling validated and tested the model. Discriminant and convergent validity tests validated the structural and measurement models, leading to tests of the five hypotheses.

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