Does Self-Expression Really Matter? Investigating Gender Perspective in Global Luxury Fashion Purchase

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Abstract

The fashion industry's business is expanding more than ever with the growing tendency of people towards self-glorification. According to McKinsey (2020), brands like LVMH, Kering, and Richemont defied market expectations with an extreme surge in sales in the second quarter of 2021. Luxury fashion brands enable individuals to express their personality traits in society. Through their symbolic appeals, these brands attempt to resonate with consumers' feelings. Self-expressive products reflect the essence of consumer personality. The expectations of both men and women vary considerably with the symbolic appeals of the brands. The present study evaluates the perceived significance of self-expression through luxury fashion brands in male and female consumers. A cross-sectional survey of 217 university students using the top ten global luxury brands, including Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Hermes, Gucci, Rolex, Cartier, Dior, Saint-Laurent / Yves Saint Laurent, Burberry, Prada from Northern India was conducted. An independent sample Z test was used to analyse the perceived significance of self-expression in both genders. Results indicate that males consider 'the inner self', 'social role', 'social perception', and 'personal connection' as essential dimensions of self-expression. At the same time, females value the dimensions of 'personality', 'social status', 'social image', and 'inner self' in global luxury fashion purchases, and overall perceived significance is the same for both genders. Marketers can utilise the study's findings while designing symbolic attributes of luxury fashion products.

Keyword: Self-expression, Luxury Fashion Brands, Gender Differences, Social-Self, Inner-Self

Introduction:

Marketers should contemplate the symbolic role of brands in consumers' social lives. People dress distinctly with many intentions: 1) maintaining an identity consistent with their ideal self. 2) to fit in with a group, 3) to communicate through non-verbal cues. Fashion as self-expression is a way to enhance their self-esteem. In the digital age, social media has emerged as a display platform. It has further heightened the urge for self-expression. Brands must figure out an approach for customising the needs per the relevant forecasts of the season (Khanuja, 2017).

Individuals fulfil the need to define their personalities through their exclusive material possessions. Luxury fashion brands are a statement of identity. They are rare, so being seen with a luxury brand identifies the stature and uniqueness of consumers. The present study aims to understand the perceived significance of self-expression for luxury fashion brands' consumers. The roles of men and women have influenced the evolution of the fashion industry. Men and women have their

expectations from the symbolic appeals of these brands. Thus, this study also examines the significance of self-expression for male and female customers.

Customers long to identify with brands that mark their sophistication with excellent design and aesthetics. To align brand personality with consumers' personality, brands should understand the self-image of consumers and their underlying motivators. Only then could brands be capable of achieving self-image brand congruency.

Self-Expression

Self-expression is a way of expressing the unique

propositions of individuals. Possessions like attire, hairstyles, and accessories are all used to express oneself. People can make their essence felt as well as present their personality fairly. Belk (1988) states that individuals represent an embodiment of their possessions. The attitude objects, such as brands, provide symbolic benefits for the consumers along with utility benefits. Some brands are highly congruent with the personality traits of consumers (Aekar,1999). These brands help consumers create a distinct identity in their peer groups by reflecting their choices and preferences. Moreover, self-expressive brands help in achieving several psychological and social goals. They have an alliance with the value system of consumers.

Therefore, self-expressive brands enjoy high emotional attachment, loyalty, and love from consumer groups.

Gender-Based Differences

People are conditioned with fixed gender roles from their birth. It leads them to have fixed judgments, such as men like cars and sports, while women like shopping and reality TV. Past research has followed this conception and contributed significantly to the market research literature. Contrarily, these maxims do not seem to reflect complete reality. As notions of gender are constantly evolving, a male can associate himself with a feminine gender identity, and a female can have a masculine one.

With this emerging awareness of what it means to be a man or a woman and further improvement in gender equality, gender-based studies can yield thought-provoking insights for marketers. The goal of accessing a wider audience is conceivable only with a well-balanced association with both gender groups. Brands must analyse the emerging social situation and the modern needs of both sexes. Recycling tired ideas and obsolete gender roles will only lead to losing precious consumers to their competitors.

Luxury Fashion Brands

A luxury brand provides an offering that consumers perceive as 1) of relatively high quality, 2) having authentic values, 3) of a prestigious image within the market, built on abilities such as uniqueness or service quality, 4) having a premium price; and 5) to be capable of rousing a deep connection with the consumer (Ko et al., 2019). The Indian luxury market anticipates a healthy growth rate for the next decade. In 2030, the Indian luxury market is expected to exceed $200 billion. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a global slowdown in 2020-21. The global growth outlook for fashion sales in this scenario determines that recovery will be possible by the third quarter of 2022.

Several global fashion brands plan to enter India in the next two years. Indian market seems attractive due to several factors like the increasing population of millennials, growing internet penetration, upsurge in the number of high-net-individuals and middle-income groups, and, changing demographics. The new class of consumers buying luxury goods in the country looks forward to a more delightful experience from their purchases. Luxury brands can develop strong brand connections with consumers through tools like media, public relations, and special events. It is a self-boosting appeal of the brand that will yield maximum favourable outcomes. Brand acquaintances that affiliate with ideal and social selves will play a significant role in the survival of luxury fashion brands. Therefore, luxury fashion brands are the point of focus in this study.

Need and Significance of Study

Consumers who believe in self-concept prioritise their happiness, feel comfortable in their skin, and indulge in goods and services that elevate their sense of self. Offerings that help consumers feel fulfilled, positive and self-assured will improve brand relationships. Millennials prefer symbolic values over traditional functional factors. The significance of gender perspectives in consumer brand relationships has got little attention in developing countries. Analysis regarding the role of gender in need of self-expression is essential for marketers to formulate marketing strategies based on changing consumer demographics.

Review of Literature

Self-Expression

Consumers always favour brands that are convergent with identities. They are iconic experiences. Consumers'

self-expression through brands is influenced mainly by brand-self congruence, the brand's social facilitation, brand warmth, and memorable brand experiences (Ahuvia et al.,2008). Consumers may employ the self-expressive characteristics of brands to convey their self-concept, which leads to subsequent purchase intentions (Fazehi Salehi et al.,2020). Finding a particular brand that fits their personality will be delightful for consumers as they are instrumental in communicating the right message about their inner and social selves to the audience. Brands that shape consumers' identities produce more powerful emotional responses (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Catalina and Andreea (2013) offer a solid premise that customers trust brands with an appropriate brand identity that states their self-identity. It will be like a source of comfort and contentment. The emotional bond between consumers and brands will intensify as the brand becomes indispensable to consumer self-definition (Huber et al., 2015). Self-brand congruency results in much stronger outcomes for brands through brand love, word-of-mouth, advocacy, and brand loyalty (Coelho et al., 2019). Self-expressive brands have constructive effects on both harmonious brand passion and obsessive brand passion that further predict a much more intense and valuable outcome of brand addiction (Bai et al., 2021). Coelho et al. (2018) state that consumer-brand identification fosters a constructive thought process favouring the mechanisms that convert consumer-brand encounters into positive brand perceptions. Across brands, brand personality–self-concept congruence led to positive consumer responses, including favourable brand attitude, stronger brand preference over competing brands, brand effect and trust, a higher degree of attitudinal and behavioural brand loyalty, stronger purchase intentions, and increased likelihood of positive word-of-mouth communication (Grohamann, 2009). Fung et al. (2017) outlined attributes like brand prestige, differentiation, and remarkable brand experiences commanding brand attractiveness, ultimately resulting in consumer brand identification.

The growth of the luxury market worldwide has increased interest among researchers. The number of studies attempted on the marketing of luxury products has increased. Heine (2010) provided five traits of luxury fashion brand personalities. They are trendiness, unconventionality, opulence, exclusiveness, and

strength. Tong et al. (2017) argue that consumers seek luxury fashion brands to express themselves as prestigious, competent, exclusive, and creative. In addition, brand personality has a significant effect on both brand trust and brand commitment. Therefore, personality traits are central to building trust and long-term consumer relationships. New luxury consumers in India search for unique products that help them create the desired image for social adjustment. Proactive marketers should grab this opportunity to fulfil the needs of customers. (Ajitha & Sivakumar, 2019).

Impact of Gender Differences

Dittmar (1989) investigates the types of belongings women and men consider and the essence they drive out of them. Men favour traits that are influential, realistic, and self-referent. At the same time, women value belongings not just for their utility but also their symbolic value in terms of interpersonal integration and emotional attachment. Ayman and Kaya (2014) found that the symbolic reasons for consumption were valuable for both men and women. These symbolic reasons comprise status, prestige, affection, and showing off. Tulika (2017) noted no genuine difference for different clothing categories (casual, professional, and trendy) at individual gender levels. Men have a more self-centred approach to clothing, emphasising its use as expressive symbols of personality and its functional benefits, whereas women have people-oriented concerns; they choose to use clothing as symbols of their social and personal interconnectedness with their peer groups. Clothing was mentioned far more frequently by males than by women as a way of self-expression. Furthermore, men also rated clothes' cost and luxury value more highly than women. More than women, men see clothes as fulfilling a social prestige function, which may form part of their concern with self-expression (Cox & Dittmar, 1995).

Numerous studies discussed the importance of possessions (clothes, jewellery, vehicles) for social identification with noteworthy findings. Lately, societal norms and gender roles, particularly, are rapidly shifting. Also, there is an increasing demand for luxury fashion brands in India. Therefore, gaining knowledge about the perceived significance of self-expression through luxury fashion brands in both genders is

imperative.

Research Methodology

Sampling and Data Collection

This study used exploratory and descriptive research design to analyse the perceived significance of self-expression in consumers of luxury fashion brands and how this construct rolls up between genders. University and college student communities symbolise a momentous division in the luxury market (Eastman & Ruhland, 2020). This consumer segment is very expressive due to its active involvement with social media platforms. Luxury brands are perceived as essential tools to fulfil their needs for self-expression. Youth in developing countries like India are also becoming ostentatious with the proliferation of Western entertainment, limitless opportunities provided by the internet through social media handles, and a rise in earning while learning opportunities. These factors are constantly changing the traditional landscape of this segment. Thus, the present study has chosen university students as the target population for research. Due to the closure of universities during the COVID-19 pandemic, the study used a judgement sampling method to collect data from university students.

These students were approached with the help of an online survey, and a questionnaire was circulated through e-mail and other social media handles like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. The survey was carried out for 1 month. Researchers received a total of 232 responses. After the data screening, 217 responses were found to be effective for analysis. For this study, two questionnaires (A and B) were developed. Questionnaire A was developed for careful screening of those respondents who are aware of global luxury fashion brands and often purchase them. Questionnaire B was then circulated to those respondents who reported positively. A comprehensive literature review was undertaken to develop questionnaire B. This was divided into three sections: a) for obtaining general information regarding purchase frequency, place of purchase, source of information, etc. b) This section included the items meant for measurement of perceived significance of self-expression among respondents on a seven-point Likert scale. The items were imported from already established self-expression scales in literature. c) The last section was about the demographic profile of the respondents.

Constructs, Measures, and Operationalisation

The questionnaire items were adapted from validated scales of previous studies (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Escalas & Bettman, 2005), and each item was assigned a title after a recommendation from expert surveys. Items were modified in the context of global luxury fashion brands. Table 1 briefs about the operationalisation of constructs.

Table 1: Operationalisation of Constructs

Construct	Items	Source
Self-expression	Inner Self (SE 1)	Carroll and Ahuvia (2006)
	Personality (SE 2)	Carroll and Ahuvia (2006)
	Self-Embodiment (SE 3)	Carroll and Ahuvia (2006)
	Reflection (SE 4)	Carroll and Ahuvia (2006)
	Social Image (SE 5)	Carroll and Ahuvia (2006)
	Social Role (SE 6)	Carroll and Ahuvia (2006)
	Social Perception (SE 7)	Carroll and Ahuvia (2006)
	Social Status (SE 8)	Carroll and Ahuvia (2006)
	Voice (SE 9)	Escalas & Bettmen (2005)
	Personal Connection (SE 10)	Escalas & Bettmen (2005)

For precision and applicability, the completed research instrument was evaluated for reliability and validity. The content or face validity of scale items was verified by circulating instruments to eminent experts in the marketing field. A pilot study was also performed. Their suggestions were incorporated to ensure that the instrument adequately captures the essence of the measured construct. The internal consistency coefficient was computed by measuring coefficient alpha or Cronbach's alpha through SPSS software to test reliability. The Cronbach Alpha Value for the self-expression scale was 0.838, approving the instrument for detailed investigation (George & Mallery, 2011).

Analysis and Results

Respondents' Demographic Profile

Analysis Technique

Descriptive statistics and parametric tests, namely Two samples Z, have been employed to analyse the perceived significance of self-expression in both genders.

Research Hypothesis

HO: The difference between males and females regarding the perceived significance of self-expression is insignificant

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Gender		
Male	106	48.8
Female	111	51.2
Total	217	100.0
Age (in yrs.)		
18-30	192	88.5
31-40	22	10.1
41-50	3	1.4
Total	217	100.0
Educational Qualification		
Senior Secondary	3	1.4
Graduation	85	39.2
Post-Graduation	113	52.1
Other	16	7.3
Total	217	100.0
Family Income (in rupees)		
12lacs and above	18	8.3
4lacs-8lacs	85	39.2
8lacs-12 lacs	22	10.1
Below 4 lacs	92	42.4
Total	217	100.0
Area of Residence		
Rural	33	15.2
Semi-Urban	19	8.8
Urban	165	76.0
Total	217	100.0

Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample. 51.2% of the respondents were female and 48.8% were male. The majority (88.5%) of respondents belong to the age group of 18-30 years. Most are either graduated (39.2%) or post-graduated (52.1%). The family income of 42.4% of respondents was below 4 lacs. Another major class of family income was between 4 lacs and 8 lacs. 76% of respondents are from urban areas, while 15.2% are from rural areas.

Gender-Based Analysis on Perceived Significance of Self-expression

The difference between males and females regarding the perceived significance of self-expression is insignificant.

Table 3: Gender-Based Analysis on Perceived Significance for Self-Expression

Items	Mean		Mean Difference	t-value	Significance
	Male	Female			
1.Inner Self	4.74	5.27	-0.53	-1.059	0.291
2.Personality	4.53	4.88	-0.35	-1.907	0.058
3.Self-Embodiment	4.42	4.39	0.03	.169	.866
4.Reflection	4.21	4.23	-0.02	-.076	.940
5.Social Image	4.66	4.89	-0.23	-1.162	.246
6.Social Role	4.66	4.81	-0.15	-.822	.412
7.Social Perception	4.69	4.63	0.06	.282	.776
8.Social Status	4.56	4.59	-0.03	-.138	.890
9.Personal Connection	4.65	4.57	0.08	.418	.676
10.Voice	4.42	4.23	0.19	.818	.414

Note: The abovementioned t-values and other items have been adopted based on applying an Independent Samples t-test comprising an F-test to examine the equality of population variance.
(Source: Authors' Compilation Based on Primary Survey)

From the above table, it can be inferred that the null hypothesis regarding the perceived significance of self-expression between males and females is accepted at a 5 % significance level. The Sig. (2-Tailed) value is more significant than .05. Results of the analysis show that in statement 1, the 'inner self' mean score of both cases in gender male and female is 4.74 and 5.27, respectively, indicating no significant difference. This shows that both males and females consider luxury fashion brands as objects reflecting their inner personalities. Similarly, in statement 2, 'personality', the values come out 4.53 and 4.88, again indicating the significance of self-expression among male and female buyers of luxury brands as both share similar personality traits. In the third statement, 'self-embodiment', the mean value of both genders is 4.42 and 4.39, signifying similar opinions about brands being an extension of their selves. In statement 4, 'Reflection', the mean scores are 4.21 and 4.23, respectively, which indicates a similarity between male and female perceptions regarding the statement. Because of this, it can be concluded that both males and females have similar opinions about luxury fashion brands being a mirror reflection of their selves. In the following statement, the 'Social Image' mean values are 4.66 and 4.89, again indicating that both males and females have similar opinions that luxury fashion brands facilitate the creation of their social image. In the statement 'Social Role', the mean values of both males and females are 4.66 and 4.81. In the statement 'Social Perception', mean values are 4.69 and 4.63. Both males and females have parallel opinions that luxury brands create a favourable social impression for them. In the statement 'social status', the mean scores of males and females are 4.56 and 4.59. Both groups have similar opinions that luxury fashion brands add to their social status. In the statement 'Personal connection', mean values are 4.56 and 4.57, and in the last statement 'voice', the mean scores are 4.42 and 4.23. Because of this, we can conclude that both males and females agree that they feel a personal connection with luxury fashion

brands and that luxury fashion brands act as their voice in public. Hence, in the case of all ten statements, the P value is > 0.05, which clearly shows no difference in customers' perception of luxury fashion brands concerning the significance of self-expression.

Discussion & Findings

Most statements used to measure the perceived significance of self-expression favour the null hypothesis. Findings reveal no significant difference between the opinions of males and females regarding self-expression through luxury fashion brands. Both males and females consider self-expressive luxury fashion brands to enhance their image and complete their social roles. Additionally, these brands form a constructive impression of their personality amongst others. The social dynamics of the 21st century are changing drastically. In today's social spectrum, women are more self-sufficient and career-oriented; men, on the other hand, have also developed an urge for self-expression and self-indulgence (Ray, 2015). In another study, there was no significant direct impact of gender consciousness on brand consciousness, as people across the nation have started to embrace their manhood or womanhood (Ye et al., 2012). Therefore, it can be concluded that with everchanging gender roles, consumers' need for self-expression is also moving the luxury market to a new non-binary gender segment.

Suggestions

1. To get more familiar with the inner personality traits of potential or new customers, brands should train their sales staff to get essential notes about them during purchase encounters. If brands are operating online, they should arrange a small survey during the website registration. These surveys should particularly ask questions about consumers' ideal and desired selves.

2. Managers could urge feedback through short video clips from their consumers about their experience after purchase. Such enriched information can provide important clues for marketers to use in future brand offerings.

3. Tapping into consumers' memories is a powerful way of expressing their identity through brands. They are a collection of sensations and experiences. Marketers can represent their consumers' nostalgia through product features. The memories can also be reinforced by associating the brand story with the story of consumers.

4. Consumers tend to associate with the latest trends and buzz. They are more aware than ever. Proactive marketers should not maintain track of the latest social trends. If brands truly want to be the voice of their customers, then trend engagement may prove worthy.

5. When some customers want to express their identity or values, they typically choose a brand that matches them over one that stands out in the market. Brand managers may respond to these desires by offering a venue where customers can not only express themselves and satisfy their need for self-confirmation but also create connections with other like-minded customers and be influenced by their brand choices. Members of a friendly online community should be able to freely communicate with one another, allowing marketers to study impressions and feelings toward their brands in real time.

6. Nowadays, social media influencers play a significant part in consumers' purchase journey. Some influencers associate with potential consumers at an intense level. Meaningful collaboration with such influencers can make brands a part of consumers' extended selves.

7. Brand assets such as shapes and patterns, logos, packaging, advertising elements, celebrities, slogans, and sponsorship can evoke strong predispositions. Consumers may detect a similarity between any of these elements. Marketers can formulate a compelling brand positioning by carefully structuring these elements in a brand's personality.

Conclusion

Luxury fashion brands that symbolise consumer personalities with a sharp focus stay on the leading edge

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