Men, women, and luxury brand signals

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Introduction

The branch of evolutionary theory known as signaling theory is an attempt to explain various forms of communication (Palmer & Pomianek, 2007). Durable material substances and objects have been used by people in Africa and Eurasia as media for signaling to convey messages for at least 250,000 years (Kuhn, 2014). In modern society conspicuous consumption also serves the function of signaling, with wealthy consumers using luxury brands to signal their dissociation from less affluent groups in society (Dreze, Han, & Nunes, 2010).

In relationships, men flaunt luxury brands to potential mates as a way to display economic resources, serving as a short term mating strategy (Sundie, Kenrick, Griskevicius, Tybur, Vohs, & Beal, 2011). Women flaunt luxury brands as a signal to other women that their romantic partner is devoted to them, which in turn deters other women who might pose a threat to the relationship (Griskevicius & Wang, 2014). Much is known, therefore, about the psychology of luxury signals being sent from men to women, and women to women. Although these past studies have proven valuable to the understanding of luxury marketing and human relationships, there has been no prior study about the luxury signals being sent from women to men. This seems to be a significant knowledge gap. In response to this gap, this exploratory research is aimed at finding out how women’s luxury signals are decoded by men and how the situational context might influence the men’s interpretation of these signals.

The central research questions were: how do men decode the luxury signals sent by unknown women? How do the situational context influence the perceived signals? Griskevicius & Wang (2014) have argued that it is unnecessary to research how males interpret these signals, because males “are unable to differentiate if a woman’s handbag, shoes, or outfit costs $50 or $5,000”. We challenge this assumption and believe that, at least in the context of this study, men are fully familiar with some of the luxury brands that are commonly used by females. This study raises ethical issues in two dimensions 1) somewhat controversially, we view the phenomenon through the lens of evolutionary psychology, and 2) we offer an ethical dilemma in terms of the response strategies that marketers might adopt based on knowing how men decode women’s luxury signals.

Research Design and Procedures

The interpretivist philosophy was applied in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of males who had seen females with luxury brands. Although normally using smaller samples than more positivist approaches, the interpretivist researcher needs to go deeper and concentrate on understanding and interpreting how and why different people have different ways of experiencing a situation. Within interpretivism, the phenomenological line of inquiry was selected because of all the lines of qualitative inquiry, phenomenology is most focused on understanding the essence of an experience. Phenomenological interviewing focuses on the depth and the quality of information rather than the quantity of subjects. In line with this philosophy, we interviewed a sample of males and asked them to describe, in depth, their experiences of seeing women with luxury brands. The aim was to reduce the men’s experiences to an essential, invariant structure i.e., the essence of the experience.
The study was conducted in Chinese. A translation-back translation process was employed in translating the study instruments, including the interview protocol and consent letter, from English to Chinese to ensure that equivalent procedures were followed and equivalent constructs were being measured. The interview protocol was then pretested to eliminate any inconsistencies or erroneous interpretations before implementation.

The interview protocol began with a definition of luxury brands: “Luxury brands are regarded as images in the minds of consumers that comprise associations about a high level of price, quality, aesthetics, rarity, extraordinariness and a high degree of non-functional associations.” (Heine, 2012). Based on this definition, interviewees were then asked to rate on a 7-point scale how familiar they were with luxury brands. The interview continued with participants who scored above the mid-point. This ensured all subjects were familiar with luxury brands. Qualified participants were then asked two core questions: “what do you think of unknown women with luxury brands?” “How does the situational context influence your perspectives on that?” These two questions, and their follow-up probes, aimed to collect information to generate the textural and structural descriptions. A purposeful sample was chosen of men who were familiar with luxury brands and had experienced seeing unknown women carrying luxury brands. Sampling continued to the point of saturation. This resulted in 21 in-depth, face-to-face interviews being conducted.

Respondents’ transcripts were analyzed using Moustakas’s (1994) phenomenological method. The study was verified by the following methods: bracketing the researcher’s own experience, using counter-biasing techniques, having a purposeful sample of respondents, sampling to the point of saturation, and member checking. The study was conducted in an ethical manner as all subjects participated in the interview voluntarily and with informed consent.

All the recordings and transcripts were reviewed several times to extract the essence of the experience, which was men’s experience of seeing women with luxury brands. Thirty-nine significant statements were identified from 21 verbatim transcripts and these were clustered into seven themes to form the textural and structural descriptions that captured the experience of the phenomenon.

Results

Only selected quotations are used in our results section to elaborate on the textural and structural themes, but it is worth noting that all themes were supported by numerous statements.

Textural Description

Theme 1: it is very common for women to have luxury brands

This was the dominant textural theme to emerge. A 28-year-old man expressed his views with respect to luxury brands and how they are commonly seen in Hong Kong: “Women with luxury brands are common since it is easy to buy luxury brands in Hong Kong and the purchasing power of Hong Kong people is not low. I grew up with the situation of women carrying luxury brands.” A 24-year-old man described how he sees women with luxury brands on a daily basis and how he considers it to be an acceptable occurrence: “Since I am working in Central, I always see women with luxury brands around the area when I am on my way to work and getting off from work. Seeing women with luxury brands, to me, is quite
common.” He continued “I think women with one to two luxury items on them are normal and very acceptable. I think having some, not excessive, luxury items is a hobby to women.” Some men think the predominance of women with luxury brands is due to a herd mentality and women carry luxury brands to fit into a group: “As the surrounding environment, like workplace and social settings, are full of women with luxury brands, I think a woman carries luxury brands to fit in the circle and doesn’t want other women to look down on her.” (aged 22). Furthermore, a 23-year-old man noted that he deems women believe that by conforming to the common practice, they will be associated with beauty: “I think women with luxury brands are just following a trend of wearing luxury brands. They think they will look great with luxury brands or become a model because they saw other women look great with luxury brands or the advertisement of models with luxury brands.”

Theme 2: women with luxury brands have a higher social status and financial ability

Men think the luxury brands on women are a signal of their financial situation and their social class. They view the women carrying luxury brands as relatively rich and in a higher social class. For example: “I think the luxury brands on women are a symbol of affluence. They are from a rich family.” He continued “They are showing that they are not from a low social class.” (aged 22). Moreover, it is necessary for women belonging to a higher social class to carry luxury brands. A 55-year-old respondent expressed: “I think that for women in a higher social class, carrying luxury brands is a necessity. It’s a symbol of their status and they are scared of being laughed off if they don’t have it.” Men also think that women with luxury brands are superior: “I perceive them as having better financial support and a higher social status. They give me the impression of being a bit more superior.” (aged 20).

Theme 3: the luxury brands should match the woman’s outlook and status

Men expressed that the overall appearance and behavior of the women influence how they feel about women with luxury brands. Men have a more positive feeling when a woman’s overall appearance matches the luxury items she is carrying and her behavior concurs with a higher social class standard. “When I see a woman with luxury brands, I would also look at her personality, talking style, posture, posture is very important, and also skin quality. They are like my source of information if I don’t know the woman. If I have a positive feeling toward her personality, talking style, posture and skin quality, I would think of her maybe as a professional, well-educated, her job is probably thinking-based, work in high-level management, having family background, good up-bringing.” (aged 25). “When I see a woman carrying a luxury purse and the way she dresses, her hair style, makeup match the purse, I think of her as elegant, expressing a sense of women sexuality and more attractive.” (aged 22). On the contrary, men have negative feelings toward women whose overall appearance and actions do not match with the luxury brands they are carrying. A 31-year-old man recalled: “I ran into women who just put all the luxury brands on themselves with a terrible fashion sense, different lines, and seasons of products are put together, wrong color tones. I would call it ‘Mix and mess’. I have a very negative feeling towards these women. I feel like they are rich but don’t use the money wisely, they are rich but have no taste. I feel like they have bad taste and I automatically repel them.” He continued “I think they are using all these luxury brands to establish a higher status for themselves but it’s really working in the opposite way.” Men also had a negative sentiment towards women with luxury brands who act in a less refined manner: “When I see a woman carrying a luxury purse but her clothes are cheap, her posture is disgraceful, her way of carrying the purse is not elegant, I have a disgusted feeling towards it. I think she ruins the luxury purse, humiliates the luxury brand.” (aged 23).
Theme 4: negative feelings generated when young women have luxury brands

Men held negative views toward women when, based on their age, they perceived them as not having the financial means to afford the luxury brands. A 23-year-old man noted that women at a young age should not have luxury brands: “I think for young women with luxury brands, aged around 16, 17 or early 20s, it’s a mismatch as luxury brands are expensive and their financial ability is inadequate. I don’t think they should have luxury brands.” A 22-year-old interviewee expressed that young women using luxury brands are trying to show off: “For the women that are too young, I don’t think they have the financial ability to afford luxury brands, I think carrying luxury brands doesn’t match their identity. I think they are deliberately showing off, trying to be adults, telling their friends that they are rich as her friends around her age can’t afford luxury brands.” (aged 22)

Theme 5: the more conspicuous the luxury brands’ logo and patterns are, the more they are showing-off

The size of the luxury brands’ logo and the distinctiveness of the luxury brands’ pattern influenced how men viewed the purpose of women carrying the luxury brands. The bigger the luxury brands’ logo and the more distinctive the luxury brands’ pattern, the more men tend to think women are deliberately showing-off their luxury items. “When I see women with luxury brands and the luxury brands’ logos are large, having distinctive, signature patterns or monogram, I think this is deliberately to be seen.” (aged 25). “I think women with large logo luxury brands are not after the quality of luxury brands but instead trying to show off.” (aged 22)

Structural Description

Theme 6: luxury brands should match the usage situation

Situational factors influence how men view a woman with luxury brands. Men often interpret the meaning of the luxury brand within the context in which it is presented. Men think that luxury brands are designed for a more formal situation, so they tend to have a more positive feeling toward women with luxury brands in those situations. For example: “In the wedding setting, it’s grand. I think an appropriate amount of luxury items wore on women is suitable. It matches the atmosphere, environment of the wedding. I support women carrying luxury brands to weddings.” (aged 24). Men also think that wearing luxury brands at a more formal situation is a sign of respect for the social event: “In a more formal situation like annual dinner or conference, I think using luxury brands is perceived as good manners.” He continued “It’s a kind of respect, conformity to the situation as situations like these are full of people with luxury brands.” (aged 23). On the other hand, men felt negatively toward women with luxury brands in situations which do not match with the luxury image. A 25-year-old man mentioned: “I saw an undergraduate in university carrying a MCM bag, I think to myself, ‘seriously?’ I think this is inappropriate and a sign of immaturity. I don’t think that’s the function of the classroom, it’s about study, not luxury brands. I think she values the luxury item more than the situation or the task itself.” Similarly, in situations where men think luxury brands are not useful, they hold negative feelings toward the women carrying luxury items. “I think women carrying a luxury purse to barbecue or hiking are deliberately showing off and quite selfish. As it is expected to dress casually and carry a backpack in those settings, a luxury purse doesn’t fit in the situation. Also, you need to carry a lot of stuff to barbecue or hiking and a luxury purse doesn’t live up to that function. I think of her as having expectation of others to carry everything for her and she doesn’t need to carry anything.” (aged 23). Another man associated women carrying luxury brands to unnecessary
situations with the purpose of deliberately showing-off their luxury brands: “There’s this one time I went to see ice-sculptures in a rural area in Yuen Long and there were two women talking about luxury brands so excitedly the whole time on the shuttle bus getting there. When we got off the bus, I saw them and they have a lot of luxury brands on them. I don’t think luxury brands fit the situation that it is supposed to be with causal wear. I felt like they want to show people they have luxury brands all over them wherever they go.” (aged 24)

Theme 7: usage location serves as a financial indictor and luxury brands should match accordingly

Different from theme 6, which is the usage situation, another theme merged which is in relation to the usage location. The locations where women were seen is considered to be a financial indicator of the women to men and men showed negative feelings toward women they perceived as financially limited yet still purchase luxury brands. Two men showed their negative feelings: “I see a woman with luxury brands on mass transits, like MTR, I would think the luxury items count for a great portion of her salary and it’s a financial burden to her. I think of her as having the luxury item for the sake of having it. I don’t share the same value system as her. If I am being uncharitable towards her due to my bad mood, I would think of her as materialistic, shallow, has a low education level, irrational and I question her world view.” (Aged 25). Another 24-year-old respondent viewed it as those women wanting to associate themselves with affluence but in reality they are not: “I see women with luxury brands appearing in Mong Kok. I think the prices of products there are cheap and I don’t think the area matches the elegance of the luxury items. I don’t think real rich people will go there, they would probably go shopping in Central instead. I would think of the woman as pretending to be rich.” On the contrary, men felt at ease when they saw women in areas that they perceived as being financially-sound districts: “I deem Central as a more high-class location, people there are in suits or well-dressed and people are rich there. Therefore, I think a woman with luxury brands in Central is reasonable and carrying luxury brands is parallel with the surrounding environment.” (aged 20).

Composite Description

The seven themes developed from the textural and structural descriptions were combined into the following composite description capturing the ‘essence’ of men’s experience of seeing women with luxury brands:

Women with luxury brands are commonplace, and the brands reflect social status. Luxury brands on women are perceived as a symbol of affluence, coming from a rich family, having a high-income job, and having a high level of education. The overall image of the women influences how men interpret their use of luxury brands. Men expressed favorable feelings when the overall appearance (skin quality, hair style, makeup, and dressing style) and manner (posture, talking style, attitude, behavior and the way of carrying the luxury items) of women were congruent with the luxury brand image. When there is congruence between the user image and the brand image, luxury brands amplify the beauty of the women. On the other hand, when the image of the woman does not reach the image of the brand, men felt negatively toward these women. Men felt that such women have bad taste and are pretending to have a higher status. Men felt positively of women who carry luxury brands at a more formal situation like a wedding, annual dinner and high-class restaurant as they believe luxury brands are designed for these situations. Social
settings such as these are in line with the image of a high social class where women are expected to possess luxury brands in order to conform to the norm. However, in situations where men think carrying luxury brands are unnecessary and the situations give them a hint of the low financial ability of the women, for instance, at mass transit, public housing estate, university, and outdoor sport activities, they have negative feelings toward the presence of luxury brands. Those usage situations and locations are incongruent with the high social class image. Luxury brands in these situations are perceived as ‘inappropriate’, and a sign of pretending to be rich and trying to belong to a social class that they are not. Men have a similar interpretation when they see women with luxury brands that consist of a big brand logo or a distinctive pattern. Men perceived the carriage of these luxury items as excessively conspicuous, and signals an attempt to deliberately show off.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

We have viewed this research through the lens of evolutionary psychology. Previous research shows that women flaunt luxury brands as a signal to other women that their romantic partner is devoted to them. But our research shows that such women also send signals to men. In that regard, based on the findings, we argue that the overall perceived image of the women, the situational context, and the luxury brands need to form a “triangle of congruency” in order for the luxury brand signal to be positively perceived by males. Furthermore, there is the potential for reverse image transfer if the image of the woman does not match the image of the luxury brand, with a negatively perceived woman damaging the luxury brand image. Moreover, males dislike women carrying luxury brands that are too conspicuous, as this suggests impression management and the female might be trying too hard to position herself in a social class in which she does not belong.

The findings give rise to an ethical dilemma for marketers: should they avoid selling their brands to female customers whose outlook, or usage context, does not match the luxury brand, or, should they provide brand education to such women? In practice it would be nearly impossible for marketers to exclude certain women from buying their brands. Probably, instead, marketers should offer “brand education” to female consumers, to ensure that they are aware of the image the luxury brands are trying to establish, and what is the appropriate usage situation. This will help ensure that the woman and situational context are congruent with the luxury brand, which in turn will amplify their perceived attractiveness and social status in the eyes of males. Moreover, such consumer education would eliminate the negative image transfer from the customers to the luxury brands.
References


