

**The Less Conspicuous Road to Virtue:
The Influence of Luxury Consumption on Socially Valued Behavior**

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ABSTRACT

People desire luxury products because they are highly valued by society, among other reasons, but little is known about how wearing luxury products influences consumers' self-identity and behavior. This research demonstrates that wearing luxury products can lead consumers to engage in behaviors that are highly valued by society. Study participants who wear or simply imagine themselves wearing luxury products subsequently work harder at difficult tasks, donate time and money to charity, and are willing to pay more to help local businesses. However, this only occurs when wearing luxury does not involve the conspicuous display of status and wealth. When the luxury consumption experience is conspicuous, people are less likely to display socially valued behavior.

Keywords

Luxury, Conspicuous Consumption, Status, Self-Concept, Social Behavior

The luxury market is large and more diverse than ever before. Estimates suggest that the global market for luxury goods currently exceeds \$151 billion (Intel 2012) and is expected to increase significantly over the next several years (PwC 2013). One factor that has contributed to this growth is that ordinary consumers are buying luxury products at an increasing rate (Silverstein and Fiske 2003). It is not uncommon for young secretaries in China to save several months of their salary in order to purchase a Gucci handbag or La Mer facial cream (Rein 2011). Private sale sites, such as Gilt and Rue La La, have become increasingly popular both with firms and consumers because they offer luxury branded products at more affordable prices without damaging the brand's image (Miller and Wortham 2009). Accordingly, a recent survey conducted in eleven global markets found that two thirds of consumers occasionally treat themselves to luxury branded products (Synovate 2010).

Marketing researchers have recently begun taking more notice of luxury consumption behavior. However, the majority of this research has focused on the factors that motivate people to buy luxury brands (Berger and Ward 2010; Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010; Rucker and Galinsky 2008, 2009) and ways managers can more effectively market luxury brands to consumers (Mandel, Petrova, and Cialdini 2006; Torelli, Monga, and Kaikati 2011). Less is known about how consumers respond to the experience of consuming luxury brands. Because the brand experience plays an important role in connecting consumers to luxury brands (Atwal and Williams 2009), understanding how consumers respond to the experience of luxury consumption should offer managers greater insight into ways to improve their marketing activities.

The current research represents a preliminary step toward deepening our knowledge of consumer responses to the luxury brand experience by introducing a theoretical account for how the consumption of luxury brands influences consumers' self-identity and behavior. We propose

that because luxury brands are highly valued by society, the consumption of luxury brands activates an aspect of the self that reflects the internalization of concepts associated with being a valuable member of society. As a result, when people consume a luxury brand they are more likely to engage in behavior that is consistent with being a valuable member of society, which we refer to as socially valued behavior.

Evidence for this prediction is demonstrated in five studies showing that people who consume or simply imagine themselves consuming a luxury brand (vs. a non-luxury brand) are more likely to display socially valued behavior. This effect is shown on a range of behaviors that are unrelated to the initial consumption experience, including volunteering, donating money to charity, and demonstrating greater persistence at difficult tasks. However, this effect primarily emerges when the consumption experience is relatively inconspicuous. When people conspicuously consume luxury brands, the influence of luxury consumption on socially valued behavior is eliminated. Thus, while previous research suggests that firms should focus their efforts on inconspicuous luxury consumption because it can lower the demand for counterfeits (Wilcox, Kim, and Sen 2009) and allow them to charge higher prices (Berger and Ward 2010; Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010), our findings suggest that less conspicuous displays of luxury can also have positive effects on behavior.

LUXURY AND STATUS

Consumers are motivated to purchase luxury branded products for a variety of different reasons. Nevertheless, status is often viewed as one of the most important factors in the decision to consume luxury brands (Griskevicius et al. 2007; Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010; Kuksov and

Xie 2012; Nelissen and Meijers 2011; Rucker and Galinsky 2008, 2009; Veblen 1899). Because they are symbols of status, luxury brands are often purchased to signal status to others (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010; Veblen, 1899). From an evolutionary perspective, wearing luxury brands can increase status (Saad 2007) and the ability to attract and retain prospective mates (Griskevicius et al. 2007). When people are in states of low power or have a pessimistic view of their future earnings potential, they show a greater desire to consume luxury brands to restore their sense of status (Mandel, Petrova and Cialdini 2006; Rucker and Galinsky 2008, 2009). Not surprisingly, luxury firms cater to these status motives by promoting their products using images and reference groups associated with status.

Status is defined as a person's position relative to others within a society (Brekke 2003). A person who possesses status is someone that is highly ranked on some characteristic (e.g., wealth, intelligence, or attractiveness) that is considered important to others (Hyman 1942). Status is typically accompanied by respect, power, and entitlement (French and Raven 1959; Nelissen and Meijers 2011). As a result, consumers who wear luxury brands are afforded prestige and enhanced social capital (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010; Nelissen and Meijers 2011; Veblen 1899), which can result in a number of social benefits. For instance, people who wear luxury brands are more likely to be considered for a job, are better at raising money from others, and are generally more effective at getting people to comply with their requests than people who do not wear products that convey status (Nelissen and Meijers 2011).

The implication from these findings is that luxury brands are highly valued by society because they are associated with status. As a result, people who wear luxury brands are themselves socially valued. Next, we discuss how the social value that is imbued in luxury brands can influence a consumer's self-identity and behavior.

LUXURY AND SOCIALLY VALUED BEHAVIOR

Everyone has a basic understanding of who they are. They perceive themselves as having certain physical attributes, traits, and abilities that comprise their self-identity (Kettle and Häubl 2011). Research on self-identity demonstrates that the self is comprised of multiple aspects (Lewicki 1984; Markus and Kunda 1986). These aspects of the self are context-dependent and serve as guides for behavior (McConnell 2011). As a result, distinct aspects of the self can be made salient by different factors in the environment, and the activation of a particular aspect can make people more likely to behave consistently with that aspect (Wheeler and Petty 2001). For instance, priming people with an elderly stereotype can lead them to walk more slowly compared to people that are not primed with an elderly stereotype (Bargh, Chen, and Burrows 1996). Having people sign their name can activate a particular aspect of their self-identity and lead them to act consistently with this salient aspect (Kettle and Häubl 2011).

Importantly, the self is not limited to the collection of traits and characteristics that make one unique from others, which are often referred to as the personal self (Brewer and Gardner 1996). The self also includes collective identities that result from the perception of the self as a member of groups and reflects the internalization of group norms and values (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Turner et al. 1987). In other words, a collective identity entails perceived commonalities with a group of others (Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe 2004). These commonalities can be based on ascribed characteristics, such as being female, or achieved states, such as being a professor. The connection one has with a group is often symbolic in nature and does not require close personal relationships amongst group members (Brewer and Gardner

1996). Thus, a collective identity represents a shift from perceiving the self as a unique person toward the perception of the self as an exemplar of a social category (Turner et al. 1987).

Like other aspects of the self, collective identities are context-dependent and thus can be activated by factors in the environment (Mandel 2003). Once a collective identity is activated, the self becomes focused on the characteristics that make one a good representative of the group (Brewer and Gardner 1996), which can lead people to behave in a manner that is consistent with the group (Hogg and Reid 2006). Priming people to think collectively leads them to place more importance on social norms (Ybarra and Trafimow 1998). Showing people cultural icons makes concepts associated with the culture salient, which biases judgment in a manner that is consistent with the culture (Hong et al. 2000). Making African Americans' race salient before they take a difficult exam reduces their performance on the test because they act consistently with the African American stereotype of academic underachievement (Steele and Aronson 1995).

We propose that luxury brands are associated with an aspect of the collective identity and that the consumption of luxury brands will influence behavior through this relationship. More specifically, we posit that because status is highly valued by society, it is integrated into an aspect of the collective identity that represents characteristics associated with being a valuable member of society. Because luxury brands symbolize status, the consumption of luxury brands will activate this aspect of the collectivist identity and lead people to perceive themselves as an exemplar of this social category. Thus, when people consume luxury brands they will be more likely to act in a manner that is consistent with being a valuable member of society. We refer to the set of behaviors that are associated with being a valuable member of society as socially valued behaviors. In sum, we hypothesize that when people consume luxury brands they will

subsequently be more likely to engage in socially valued behavior than people who do not consume luxury brands.

It is important to distinguish our conceptualization of socially valued behavior from a related construct, prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior is defined as voluntary intentional behavior that benefits another person (Eisenberg 1982). Prosocial behaviors include a range of positive social behaviors including helping, sharing, donating, cooperating, and volunteering (Brief and Motowidlo 1986). Since prosocial behaviors are, by definition, ones that benefit others within a society, we consider most (if not all) prosocial behaviors to be socially valued. However, some socially valued behaviors would not be classified as prosocial. For example, task persistence is highly valued in many societies, but people often work hard at difficult tasks that do not directly benefit another person. Similarly, being well read is highly valued, but people often read books for knowledge for their own benefit. Thus, while we view most prosocial behaviors as ones that are socially valued, there are also highly valued behaviors that would not be classified as prosocial. We expect luxury consumption not only to promote prosocial behavior, but also non-prosocial behaviors that are socially valued.

We conducted a pilot study to test our assumption that highly valued members of society possess characteristics and engage behaviors that are prosocial and non-prosocial. The study was conducted with sixty participants from Mechanical Turk. Half of the participants were asked to think about someone who is a highly valued member of society. The remaining half was asked to think about someone who is a typical member of society. They were then asked to indicate the extent to which they felt that the person possesses (1 = “Not at all” and 7 = “Very much”) a range of characteristics. Included in the list were two characteristics that were associated with prosocial behavior (charitable, kind) and two characteristics that were not directly related to

being prosocial (persistent, well read). We also included status in the list to confirm that status is associated with being a highly valued member of society. As expected, participants perceived the highly valued person as being more charitable ($M = 5.37$) than the typical person ($M = 4.00$, $F(1, 58) = 20.07$, $p < .001$) and more kind ($M = 5.07$) than the typical person ($M = 4.37$, $F(1, 58) = 5.15$, $p < .05$). Additionally, the highly valued person was seen as being more persistent ($M = 5.80$) than the typical person ($M = 4.00$, $F(1, 58) = 55.49$, $p < .001$) and more well-read ($M = 5.43$) than the typical person ($M = 3.70$, $F(1, 58) = 39.81$, $p < .001$). Finally, the highly valued person was also perceived as possessing more status ($M = 5.90$) than the typical person ($M = 3.63$, $F(1, 58) = 74.91$, $p < .001$). Thus, as expected, highly valued members of society are viewed as possessing characteristics that are related to being prosocial and ones that are not necessarily prosocial.

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

With a set of five studies, we test our theory that the consumption of luxury products would lead people to engage in socially valued behavior. Study 1a demonstrates that having people imagine themselves wearing a product by a luxury brand makes them more likely to persist at a difficult task compared to those who imagine themselves wearing a product by a non-luxury brand or a control group. Study 1b replicates this finding by demonstrating that people are more likely to volunteer their time to a local charity after imagining themselves wearing a product by a luxury brand. Study 2 replicates the findings from the previous studies while also demonstrating a boundary condition for the effect. Specifically, the study shows that wearing luxury brands promotes socially valued behavior when the consumption experience is relatively

inconspicuous in nature, but not when it is conspicuous. Study 3 replicates these findings while having people actually wear luxury branded products. The results of this study also provide initial evidence for our proposed process by demonstrating that wearing less conspicuous luxury brands activates concepts associated with being a valuable member of society. Finally, study 4 extends our theory to services. Specifically, the findings show that people who imagine themselves consuming a luxury branded service (i.e., staying at a Ritz Carlton) are more likely to engage in socially valued behavior compared to those who imagine themselves consuming a non-luxury branded service (i.e., staying at a Best Western). This study also provides additional support for our proposed process.

STUDY 1A

The primary objective of study 1a was to demonstrate that the consumption of luxury brands would lead people to engage in socially valued behavior. In this study, participants imagined wearing either a luxury branded product or a non-luxury branded product. We then examined how this experience influenced their persistence at a difficult task. We expected that participants who imagined the experience of wearing a luxury brand would show greater persistence compared to those who imagined the experience of wearing a non-luxury brand.

Method

Design. One hundred and nineteen people from Mechanical Turk (62% female) participated in the study for a small payment. The study was a single-factor (brand type: luxury vs. non-luxury vs. control) between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three brand conditions and instructed that they would be participating in two supposedly unrelated studies. Participants in the luxury condition were instructed that the purpose of the first study was to understand how people respond to luxury brands and that they would be asked several questions related to luxury brand consumption. They were then asked to pick their favorite brand from a list of ten luxury apparel brands (e.g., Louis Vuitton, Prada, Gucci) and to indicate how much they like the brand on a seven-point scale (1 = “Dislike extremely,” 7 = “Like extremely”). Afterwards, participants were instructed to write for several minutes about the experience of wearing a product by the luxury brand they had selected. They were further instructed to be as detailed as possible and to describe the feelings, emotions, or thoughts that come to their mind when thinking about wearing the product. The procedure for the non-luxury condition was identical to that of the luxury condition, except participants wrote about their favorite non-luxury apparel brand, which was picked from a list of ten non-luxury brands (e.g., Gap, Levi’s, American Eagle). In the control condition, participants picked their favorite brand from the same list of brands as the luxury condition, but were instructed to spend several minutes writing about their typical day.

The second study was an unsolvable anagram task that was purportedly designed to be a test of their verbal ability. Participants were given ten words and asked to turn each word into a new word in the English language using all of the letters from the original word. They were further instructed that if they got stuck on any of the anagrams they could continue to the next one. Only one of the ten anagrams could actually be turned into a new word in the English

language, so the task was unsolvable. We recorded how long participants spent on the task as a measure of persistence.

Results

One participant was excluded for failing to follow the study directions (only wrote one word during the writing task). On average, participants spent approximately four minutes on the anagram task. Since the time participants spent on the task was not normally distributed, we submitted the measure to a square root transformation and eliminated one participant whose time was more than four standard deviations away from the mean. As expected, participants persisted longer on the task in the luxury condition ($M = 16.27$) compared to those in the non-luxury condition ($M = 14.22$, $t(114) = 2.05$, $p < .05$), and the control condition ($M = 14.22$, $t(114) = 2.07$, $p < .05$; see figure 1a). The difference in persistence between the non-luxury and control conditions was not significant ($t(114) = .01$, NS).

Discussion

The findings of study 1a provide initial support for our theory that wearing luxury products can promote socially valued behavior. Participants who imagined wearing a luxury branded product were willing to work harder at an unrelated task compared to those who imagined wearing a non-luxury branded product and a control group. We sought to replicate these findings in the next study while also ruling out an alternative explanation.

STUDY 1B

Because self-control has been shown to influence task persistence (Baumeister et al. 1998), we wanted to rule out the possibility that the consumption of luxury brands increases self-control in this study. Thus, we had participants write about the experience of consuming a luxury brand, a non-luxury brand, or their typical day before indicating their intention to engage in two behaviors: one that requires self-control but is not socially valued and one that is socially valued but does not require self-control. We expected wearing a luxury branded product to increase socially valued behavior and to have less of an effect on the behavior requiring self-control.

Method

Design. Seventy-seven students (55% female) from a Northeastern College participated in the study for partial course credit. The study was a single-factor (brand type: luxury vs. non-luxury vs. control) between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three brand conditions and were instructed that they were participating in two supposedly unrelated studies. The procedure for the first study was identical to the luxury, non-luxury, and control manipulations in study 1a. The second study was purportedly designed to examine how people behave in daily situations. In the first task, participants were asked to choose between a granola bar and a chocolate chip cookie as a snack. In the second scenario, participants were told that a local Children's Hospital was looking for volunteers for an upcoming fundraiser. They were asked to indicate, on a slider

that ranged from zero to twelve hours, how much time they would be willing to volunteer to help with the event.

Results

Pretest. Forty participants from Mechanical Turk participated in a pretest to validate that selecting a healthy snack was perceived to require more self-control than volunteering and that volunteering was considered more socially valued than selecting a healthy snack. First, participants were shown a list of behaviors and asked to indicate the extent to which they believed the behavior was highly valued by society (1 = “Not at all valued” and 7 = “Highly valued”). Included in the list were our two target behaviors: eating a healthy snack and volunteering time to a charity. Next, participants saw the same list of behaviors and indicated the extent to which they believed the behavior required self-control (1 = “Does not require self-control” and 7 = “Requires self-control”). As expected, participants perceived volunteering time to charity as being more socially valued ($M = 5.80$) compared to eating a healthy snack ($M = 3.98$, $t(39) = 10.22$, $p < .001$). Participants perceived eating a healthy snack as requiring more self-control ($M = 6.03$) than volunteering time to charity ($M = 4.78$, $t(39) = 3.93$, $p < .001$).

Hypothesis tests. The differences in preference for the healthy snack between the luxury (44.4%) and control conditions (38.5%; Wald's $\chi^2 = .16$, NS), and the luxury and non-luxury conditions (39.4%; Wald's $\chi^2 = .12$, NS) were not significant. Thus, wearing luxury did not significantly affect the likelihood of engaging in a behavior associated with self-control that was not considered socially valued. However, as predicted, participants were willing to volunteer more of their time in the luxury condition ($M = 5.22$ hours) compared to those in the non-luxury

condition ($M = 3.21$ hours, $t(74) = 2.74$, $p < .01$), and those in the control condition ($M = 3.58$ hours, $t(74) = 2.15$, $p < .05$; see figure 1b). There was no significant difference in volunteering between the non-luxury and control conditions ($t(74) = .56$, NS).

Insert figure 1 about here

Discussion

The results of study 1b provide additional support for our prediction that wearing luxury products encourages socially valued behavior. The findings also suggest that wearing luxury products may have less of an influence on self-control. Our theory argues that imagining luxury consumption encourages socially valued behavior because it activates an aspect of the collective identity associated with being a valuable member of society. However, another possibility is that imagining luxury consumption may activate an aspect of the collective identity that is associated with being a person who wears luxury brands. In other words, the social category that is activated may be “people who wear luxury brands” as opposed to valuable members of society. For this alternative explanation to be valid, people would have to believe that behaviors such as persistence and volunteering are associated with people who wear luxury brands. We attempted to rule out this possibility in a follow-up study conducted with sixty participants from Mechanical Turk. Participants were shown either the list of luxury or non-luxury brands from previous studies and asked to think about a person who wears products by the brands. Participants then indicated how likely this person would be to show persistence at difficult tasks and to volunteer their time to charity compared to the average person (1 = “Less likely” and 7 =

“More likely”). The results revealed that participants believed people who wore luxury brands to be less likely to show persistence at difficult tasks ($M = 4.23$) compared to those who wore non-luxury brands ($M = 4.93$, $F(1, 58) = 4.74$, $p < .05$). Additionally, they believed people who wore luxury brands to be less likely to volunteer their time to charity ($M = 3.23$) compared to those who wore non-luxury brands ($M = 4.38$, $F(1, 58) = 12.81$, $p = .001$). Thus, it does not appear that people believe that consumers of luxury brands are more likely to engage in socially valued behavior. In fact, it appears that they expect them to be *less* likely to engage in such behaviors, which rules out the possibility that participants are simply conforming to behaviors associated with people who wear luxury brands. Next, we introduce a boundary condition for the effect and in doing so rule out another alternative explanation.

STUDY 2

Although luxury brands may be highly valued by society, the conspicuous consumption of luxury brands is less likely to be socially valued. Consumers often conspicuously display their status and wealth in order to inspire envy in people and to dissociate themselves from others (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010; Veblen 1899). As a result, conspicuously consuming luxury brands and other overt displays of wealth are often viewed as distasteful (Galbraith 1984). Thus, the conspicuous consumption of luxury brands should be less likely to be associated with a highly valued social category because the behavior is about separating oneself from others and is often viewed negatively by others. This suggests that the more conspicuous (i.e., noticeable) the luxury consumption experience is, the less likely it is that wearing a luxury product will promote socially valued behavior. Thus, we predicted that the effect of luxury brand consumption on

social valued behavior would be mitigated when people are made aware that others will notice them wearing the product.

Demonstrating this would also rule out another potential explanation for the effect. Luxury purchases are often viewed as violations of a spending goal because such purchases are viewed as an unnecessary, frivolous expense (Kivetz and Simonson 2002). As a result, consumers often report feeling guilty about purchasing luxury products (Synovate 2010). Thus, people may perceive the consumption of luxury products as a personal transgression and may subsequently engage in positive behavior as a way of compensating for their misbehavior. However, this compensatory behavior explanation implies that the effect of wearing luxury products on socially valued behavior should be strongest (or at least not weaker) when people conspicuously consume luxury products because such consumption is often perceived negatively. Thus, if the conspicuous consumption of luxury brands mitigates the effect of wearing luxury brands on socially valued behavior, as we predict, it would rule out compensatory behavior as an alternative process explanation.

Method

Design. One hundred-nineteen adults (50% female) from Mechanical Turk participated in the study for a small payment. The study was a 2 (brand type: luxury vs. non-luxury) x 2 (consumption: control vs. conspicuous) between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. All participants were instructed that they were participating in two supposedly unrelated studies. In the control condition, participants wrote about the experience of wearing a product by their

favorite luxury or non-luxury brand. The manipulation was identical to those in studies 1a and 1b, except that participants were instructed to write for three minutes and the submit button was disabled during that period. After four minutes, participants were automatically advanced to the next screen. The procedure was similar in the conspicuous condition, but participants were explicitly instructed to write about the experience of wearing a product by the brand *in public*. They were reminded to write about the experience of wearing it in public three additional times during the instructions.

The next study was purportedly about a program called Local Trade. Participants were instructed that Local Trade is a project that seeks to help local farmers out by offering them a reasonable price for crops like coffee, cocoa, and bananas. Additionally, the movement promotes local farmers to help them sell products to companies. After reading the description of the movement, participants were told that a national coffee chain is considering whether to change all of their coffee to Local Trade coffee. However, doing so would increase the price of coffee by a certain amount. Participants were then asked to indicate, on a ten-point scale (1 = “0% more” and 10 = “90% more”), how much more they would be willing to pay for a cup of coffee that was part of Local Trade.

Results

Pretest. We conducted a pretest on twenty-six adults from the same population as the main study to ensure that participants perceived Local Trade as a socially valuable project. Participants were given the same description of the project. After reading the description they indicated the extent to which they agreed that the project was socially valued on a seven-point,

five item scale (“It is good for society,” “It provides social value,” “It is socially desirable,” “It is socially responsible,” “It is a worthy cause”; $\alpha = .93$). Participants perceived the project to be socially valued with a mean that was significantly greater than the midpoint ($M = 5.39$, $t(25) = 7.60$, $p < .001$).

Hypothesis tests. Four participants were eliminated from the analysis for failing to follow instructions¹. We examined participants’ willingness to pay for Local Trade using ANCOVA with brand type and consumption as the factors, and income as a covariate. Because willingness to pay was not normally distributed, we submitted the variable to a square root transformation. The predicted brand type x consumption interaction was significant ($F(1, 110) = 4.26$, $p < .05$). See figure 2 for means. Within the control condition, participants in the luxury condition were willing to pay more for Local Trade ($M = 1.88$) compared to those in the non-luxury condition ($M = 1.60$, $F(1, 110) = 4.83$, $p < .05$). However, as expected, in the conspicuous consumption conditions, there was no significant difference between the luxury condition ($M = 1.61$) and the non-luxury condition ($M = 1.71$, $F(1, 110) = .60$, NS).

Manipulation check. Two research assistants, who were blind to the study conditions, coded the consumption descriptions based on the extent to which they involved being noticed by others (1 = “Very little” and 7 = “A lot”). The correlation between the ratings was high ($r = .72$), so they were averaged. We assessed the efficacy of our conspicuous manipulation using ANOVA with noticed by others as the dependent variable and brand type and consumption as the independent variables. The effect of consumption was significant such that participants were more likely to write about an experience that involved being noticed by others in the conspicuous condition ($M = 4.48$) compared to the control condition ($M = 2.25$, $F(1, 111) = 42.46$, $p < .001$).

The effects of brand type ($F(1, 111) = 2.34, NS$) and the brand type x consumption interaction were non-significant ($F(1, 111) = .02, NS$).

Insert figure 2 about here

Discussion

Study 2 provides additional support for our theory while also demonstrating a boundary condition for the effect. When it was not salient that others would notice their consumption, participants who wrote about wearing a luxury product were more likely to engage in socially valued behavior compared to participants who wrote about wearing a non-luxury product. However, this effect was mitigated when it was made salient that others would notice participants' consumption. Thus, the findings suggest that the conspicuous consumption of luxury products does not promote socially valued behavior, which rules out compensatory behavior as an alternative explanation for the effect. The purpose of the next study was to replicate this finding using a different operationalization of conspicuous consumption while also providing initial evidence for our process.

STUDY 3

A person may wear a luxury product in public, but if the logo is not prominently displayed, as is the case with many luxury products (Berger and Ward 2010; Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010), then it is less likely to be noticed by others. Thus, the size of the logo on a luxury

product also determines whether a luxury product worn in public is conspicuous (Wilcox, Kim, and Sen 2009). The smaller the logo on the product, the less conspicuous the consumption experience is perceived to be. In study 3, participants actually wore luxury or non-luxury branded products in public that had small or large logos. We expected that when the logo was small (i.e., less conspicuous), those who wore a luxury branded product would display more socially valued behavior than those who wore a non-luxury branded product. However, we expected this effect to be attenuated when people wore a luxury branded product with a large logo.

In this study, we also wanted to provide initial evidence for our process. We propose that luxury promotes socially valued behavior because it leads them to focus on being a valuable member of society. Initial support for this process would be provided if wearing luxury makes concepts that are associated with being an exemplar of this social category salient. Thus, in addition to measuring the extent to which people would engage in socially valued behavior, we also measured the accessibility of concepts associated with being a valuable member of society. We expected that when participants wore a product with a small logo, those who wore a luxury branded product would show greater accessibility of concepts associated with being a valuable member of society compared to those who wore a non-luxury branded product. However, we expected these concepts would not be more accessible when participants wore a luxury branded product with a large logo.

Method

Design. Ninety-three native French speakers (57% female) participated in the study, which was conducted at a behavioral lab in the middle of Paris. We screened for native French speakers because our measure of accessibility was a task that required participants to complete words in French, so aptitude with French would likely play a role in their performance on the task. The study was a 2 (brand type: luxury vs. non-luxury) x 2 (logo: small vs. large) between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. All participants were instructed that they were participating in two unrelated studies. For the first study, participants were instructed that a company was interested in having them evaluate some sunglasses. They were then given a pair of sunglasses to wear and instructed to walk around the block to test the sunglasses before evaluating them. We selected Louis Vuitton as the luxury sunglasses because the company agreed to loan us sunglasses for the study. We selected Polaroid as the non-luxury sunglasses because it was a non-luxury brand that had sunglasses resembling those by Louis Vuitton with large and small logos. In the large logo condition, participants were given a pair of sunglasses with highly visible logos by either Louis Vuitton or Polaroid that were matched to their gender (i.e., males received male sunglasses). In the small logo condition, participants were given a pair of sunglasses with less visible logos by either Louis Vuitton or Polaroid that were matched to their gender. After walking around the block, participants handed the sunglasses back to the experimenter before sitting at a computer to evaluate the sunglasses.

After evaluating the sunglasses, participants were administered the next study that had several different tasks. First, participants were told that later on in the study they would be reading an article and had the choice of either an informative article or an entertaining article to read. We selected this task as our first measure of socially valued behavior based on the results

of a pretest indicating that being well read is something that is highly valued in France. Thus, the selection of reading the informative article was representative of socially valued behavior. The second task was our accessibility measure. Specifically, participants were given ten words with missing letters and asked to complete as many of the words as they could. Five of the words were associated with being a valuable member of society (i.e., complete, perfect, ideal, pure, virtue) and five were neutral words. We recorded how many of the words they completed as a measure of accessibility². Finally, participants indicated the extent to which they agreed that the logo on the sunglasses they had worn was easily visible to others (1 = “Strongly disagree” and 7 = “Strongly agree”)

After completing the tasks, participants were instructed to open an envelope on the table in front of them. Inside the envelope were five euros. They were told that the money was their compensation for taking part in the study. They were then asked if they would like to donate part of their payment to the charity Les Restaurants du Coeur (a French charity that feeds underprivileged people) and to leave their chosen amount in the envelope before leaving the lab. We recorded how much was left in each envelope as a donation to charity as an additional measure of socially valued behavior.

Results

Pretest. Sixty people from Mechanical Turk participated in a pretest to confirm that the target words were associated with being a valuable member of society³. Half of the participants were asked to think about someone who is a highly valued member of society. The remaining half was asked to think about someone who is a typical member of society. Afterwards,

participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they associated (1 = “Not at all” and 7 = “Very much”) the five concepts from the main study (i.e., complete, perfect, ideal, pure and virtue) with the person they had been asked to think about. The measures were highly correlated and combined to form an index ($\alpha = .93$). As expected, participants who focused on the highly valued person considered the concepts more strongly associated with that person ($M = 4.67$) compared to those who focused on the typical person ($M = 3.02$, $F(1, 58) = 24.61$, $p < .001$).

Hypothesis tests. Two participants were excluded for failing to follow the study directions⁴. We examined preference for the informative article using logistic regression. Because females were significantly more likely to choose the entertaining article than males ($\chi^2 = 7.28$, $p < .01$), we included gender as a covariate. The predicted brand type x logo interaction was significant ($\chi^2 = 4.51$, $p < .05$; see figure 3a). Consistent with prior findings, within the small condition, participants in the luxury condition were more likely to select the informative article than the entertaining article (90%) compared to those in the non-luxury condition (60%; $\chi^2 = 4.87$, $p < .05$). As predicted, within the large condition, there was no significant difference in article preference between the luxury condition (50%) and the non-luxury condition (56.5%; $\chi^2 = .28$, NS).

The amount donated to charity was analyzed using ANCOVA with income as a covariate. We eliminated one respondent from the analysis who indicated that he already volunteered at the charity. The predicted brand type x logo interaction was significant ($F(1, 86) = 5.11$, $p < .05$; see figure 3b). Consistent with previous findings, within the small condition, participants in the luxury condition donated more money to charity ($M = \text{€}1.40$) compared to those in the non-luxury condition ($M = \text{€}.58$, $F(1, 86) = 3.87$, $p = .05$). As expected, within the large condition,

there was no significant difference in the amount donated between the luxury ($M = \text{€}1.56$) and non-luxury conditions ($M = \text{€}1.04$, $F(1, 86) = 1.52$, NS).

We examined the number of words completed that were associated with being a valuable member of society using ANOVA. The predicted brand type x logo interaction was significant ($F(1, 88) = 5.89$, $p < .05$; see figure 3c). As predicted, within the small condition, participants in the luxury condition completed more words correctly ($M = 4.05$) compared to those in the non-luxury condition ($M = 3.56$, $F(1, 88) = 5.07$, $p < .05$). As expected, within the large condition, there was no significant difference in words completed between the luxury ($M = 3.67$) and non-luxury conditions ($M = 3.91$, $F(1, 88) = 1.36$, NS).

A similar analysis did not find any significant effect of brand type ($F(1, 88) = .82$, NS), logo ($F(1, 88) = .01$, NS), or their interaction ($F(1, 88) = .22$, NS) on the number of neutral words solved correctly. Thus, luxury consumption did not lead all concepts to be more accessible, but only those associated with being a valuable member of society.

Manipulation check. We assessed the extent to which participants felt the logo on the sunglasses was visible using ANOVA. As expected, there was a main effect of logo such that participants in the large condition perceived the logo to be more visible ($M = 3.79$) compared to those in the small condition ($M = 2.67$, $F(1, 88) = 8.56$, $p < .01$). The effects of brand type ($F(1, 88) = 2.08$, NS) and the brand type x logo interaction ($F(1, 88) = 1.65$, NS) were non-significant.

Insert figure 3 about here

Discussion

The results of study 3 replicate the findings of the previous studies in the context of actual consumption. Specifically, the results demonstrate that the consumption of a luxury (vs. non-luxury) product that has a small, inconspicuous logo encourages socially valued behavior, while this effect is eliminated when the product has a large, conspicuous logo. This pattern of results is documented for the choice of a preferred article as well as for actual donation behavior. Additionally, the results provide initial evidence for our process by demonstrating that wearing a luxury brand less conspicuously makes concepts such as being virtuous and perfect accessible. The purpose of the last study was to provide more direct evidence for our proposed process.

STUDY 4

We propose that wearing luxury activates an aspect of the collective identity associated with being a valuable member of society, which makes people focus on being an exemplar of this social category and leads them to engage in socially valued behavior. To provide direct evidence for this process, we adopted a procedure from Kettle and Häubl (2011) where we had participants name someone that they consider to be a valuable member of society (i.e., an exemplar of the social category). Afterwards, they indicated how closely they identify with the person, their desire to engage in socially valued behavior, and the extent to which they perceive themselves as a socially valued person (i.e., perceive themselves as virtuous and perfect). We also measured the strength of people's collective identity because we expected that the extent to which consuming a luxury brand would influence participants would depend on their trait disposition to perceive themselves as a member of a social category.

People differ in the extent to which they think of their self-identity in terms of their group membership. Those who are chronically focused on their collective identity are prone to view the self as belonging to groups and are more likely to identify with groups (Gabriel and Gardner 1999). Thus, people with strong collective identities are predisposed to think of themselves as part of a social category. Based on this reasoning, we predict that when primed to think about a valuable member of society, people with relatively strong collective identities should be more likely to identify with the person compared to people with relatively weak collective identities. They should also be more likely to perceive themselves as a socially valued person, and therefore show a greater desire to engage in socially valued behavior than those with weak collective identities.

We also expected the influence of imagining the consumption of a luxury brand to have the greatest effect on people with relatively weak collective identities. Since people with strong collective identities are already predisposed to identify with social categories, they should be less influenced by situational factors in this regard. In contrast, participants with relatively weak collective identities should be more responsive to situational factors that increase their identification with a social category. Thus, we hypothesized that imagining the consumption of a luxury brand should lead to greater identification with a valuable member of society, a greater perception of the self as a socially valued person, and a greater desire to engage in socially valued behavior for those with relatively weak collective identities. However, we expected that imagining the consumption of a luxury brand should have less of an effect on those with relatively strong collective identities.

Method

Design. Eighty participants (55% female) from Mechanical Turk participated in the study for a small payment. The study was a 2 (brand type: luxury vs. non-luxury) x 2 (collective identity: weak vs. strong) between-subjects design with brand type manipulated and collective identity measured.

Procedure. Participants were told that they would be participating in two unrelated studies. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two brand type conditions that were similar to prior studies except, instead of writing about a product, they wrote about a service. Specifically, participants in the luxury condition were shown a picture of a room and a picture of the lounge area of a Ritz Carlton hotel. No people were visible in the images, to avoid giving the impression that the consumption was conspicuous. Participants were then asked to spend three minutes describing the feelings, emotions, and thoughts that come to their mind when they think about staying in the hotel. Those in the non-luxury condition were shown pictures of a room and the lounge area of a Best Western and then asked to write for three minutes about the experience of staying at the hotel. After four minutes, all participants were automatically advanced to the next screen.

The next study was a “Society Study” where participants were asked several questions related to being a valuable member of society. First, participants were asked to write down the name of the society that they live in and the name of a person who is highly valued by this society. Afterwards, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they identify with this person on the same three-item, seven-point scale used by Kettle and Häubl (2011; “How similar are you to the person?”, “How much do you like the person?”, “How much do you identify with the person?”; $\alpha = .88$). They were then asked to indicate the extent to which they

wanted to engage in socially valued behavior on a three-item, seven-point scale (“I want to be charitable”, “I want to help others”, “I want to contribute to society”; $\alpha = .80$). Finally, they were asked to indicate the extent to which they perceived themselves as socially valued. Specifically, they rated the extent to which they viewed themselves as virtuous and perfect on a five-item, seven-point scale (“I am virtuous”, “I am ideal”, “I am pure”, “I am perfect”, “I am complete”; $\alpha = .96$). Finally, participants completed the ten-item Collective Interdependent Self-Construal scale (Gabriel and Gardner 1999; $\alpha = .91$), which served as a measure of the strength of participants’ collective identity.

Results

Hypothesis tests. We examined the extent to which participants identified with the valuable member of society (identification) using regression with brand type (coded -1 = non-luxury and 1 = luxury), mean-centered collective identity, and their interaction as the independent variables. As expected, the effect of collective identity on identification was significant ($\beta = .35$, $t(76) = 2.79$, $p < .01$), suggesting that people with strong collective identities were more likely to identify with the valuable member than those with weaker collective identities. The effect of brand type was not significant ($\beta = .17$, $t(76) = 1.10$, NS). However, the predicted brand type x collective identity interaction was significant ($t(76) = -2.37$, $p < .05$). We explored the interaction using spotlight analysis. Brand type had a significant positive effect on identification when collective identity was centered at one standard deviation below the mean ($\beta = .54$, $t(76) = 2.46$, $p < .05$). Thus, as hypothesized, imagining the consumption of a luxury brand increased identification for participants with relatively weak collective identities. As expected,

brand type did not have a significant effect on identification when collective identity was centered at one standard deviation above the mean ($\beta = -.20$, $t(76) = -.90$, NS).

Participants' desire to engage in socially valued behavior was examined using regression with brand type, mean-centered collective identity, and their interaction as the independent variables. As expected, the effect of collective identity on socially valued behavior was significant ($\beta = .30$, $t(76) = 3.32$, $p = .001$). Additionally, the effect of brand type on socially valued behavior was significant ($\beta = .28$, $t(76) = 2.48$, $p < .05$). Thus, consistent with previous studies, imagining the consumption of a luxury brand increased participants' desire to engage in socially valued behavior. The predicted brand type x collective identity interaction was marginally significant ($t(76) = -1.80$, $p < .10$). We explored the interaction using spotlight analysis. Brand type had a significant positive effect on socially valued behavior for participants with relatively weak identities ($\beta = .48$, $t(76) = 3.03$, $p < .01$). Brand type did not have a significant effect on socially valued behavior for participants with relatively strong identities ($\beta = .08$, $t(76) = .48$, NS). Thus, as predicted, imagining the consumption of a luxury brand had the greatest effect on participants with relatively weak collective identities.

The extent to which participants viewed themselves as a socially valued person (socially valued perceptions) was examined using regression with brand type, mean-centered collective identity, and their interaction as the independent variables. As expected, the effect of collective identity on socially valued perceptions was significant ($\beta = .39$, $t(77) = 4.07$, $p < .001$). The effect of brand type on socially valued perceptions was also significant ($\beta = .30$, $t(77) = 2.54$, $p < .05$). Additionally, the predicted brand type x collective identity interaction was significant ($t(77) = -4.01$, $p < .001$). We explored the interaction using spotlight analysis. Brand type had a significant positive effect on socially valued perceptions for participants with relatively weak

identities ($\beta = .77$, $t(77) = 4.64$, $p < .001$). Brand type did not have a significant effect on socially valued perceptions for participants with relatively strong identities ($\beta = -.17$, $t(77) = -1.04$, NS).

Mediation. We tested whether socially valued perceptions mediates the effect of consuming a luxury brand on socially valued behavior using conditional process modeling (Hayes 2012; model 8). Conditional indirect effects analyses revealed that socially valued perceptions mediated the effect of brand type (i.e., luxury versus non-luxury) on socially valued behavior for participants with weak collective identities, but not for participants with strong collective identities. Specifically, the brand type x collective identity interaction on the mediator (socially valued perceptions) was significant ($p < .001$). Once the mediator (socially valued perceptions) was included in the analysis, the brand type x collective identity interaction on the dependent variable (socially valued behavior) was not significant (NS). The direct effect of brand type on socially valued behavior for those with weak collective identities had a confidence interval that included zero (direct effect = .08, 95% CI [-.22, .39]). The indirect effect of brand type socially on valued behavior for those with weak collective identities was positive with a confidence interval that did not include zero (indirect effect = .40, 95% CI [.17, .80]). The direct effect of brand type on socially valued behavior for those with strong collective identities had a confidence interval that included zero (direct effect = .17, 95% CI [-.11, .44]). The indirect effect of brand type on socially valued behavior for those with strong collective identities had a confidence interval that included zero (indirect effect = -.09, 95% CI [-.27, .05]).

Discussion

The findings of study 4 provide additional support for our process. Specifically, the results demonstrate that luxury consumption leads people to perceive themselves as a socially valued, which increases their desire to engage in socially valued behavior. However, this effect primarily emerges in people with relatively weak collective identities because they are more likely to respond to situational factors that increase their identification with social categories.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Findings and Contributions

Taken together, the five studies presented here support our proposition that imagined or actual luxury consumption encourages socially valued behavior. This effect is demonstrated in different contexts and with a variety of behaviors. However, it only arises when the luxury consumption is inconspicuous. Public (vs. less public) consumption tends to eliminate the favorable influence on behavior, at least if this consumption stands out among others who are present. For instance, luxury consumption may be conspicuous if the product worn in public has a prominent logo, as is the case with Louis Vuitton sunglasses worn while walking around in Paris in study 3. The current research also provides evidence for our proposed process, namely, that inconspicuous luxury consumption activates concepts associated with being a valued member of society. Additionally, we rule out increased self-control and compensatory behavior as alternative explanations to our findings.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first research that examines how luxury consumption affects behavior. Given the role of luxury consumption in society, and given the

growing market it represents around the world, marketing scholars are paying increased attention to factors such as luxury attributes and drivers of luxury purchases. However, it is also important to investigate how the consumption in turn affects behavior. This has implications not only for the reputation and marketing activities of luxury firms, but also for consumer welfare and societal goals. Without scholarly research on behavior resulting from luxury consumption, managers and public policy makers must rely on assumptions and intuitions to make assessments in this regard. As with many forms of consumption, it is likely that luxury consumption has both drawbacks and benefits. Perhaps the latter consequence is more surprising, given the negative light in which luxury consumption is often cast, but the current research provides evidence that it may represent more than wasteful or extravagant indulgence. It may in fact encourage favorable behavioral consequences, such as increased task persistence or charitable giving. It may also behoove marketers of luxury products, as well as society at large, to highlight these favorable consequences and to explore ways in which to utilize them for the benefit of consumers as well as firms. Notably, the favorable influence of luxury consumption does not coincide with the common practice of conspicuous signaling, so this is an important limitation to bear in mind for those trying to inspire desirable behaviors in themselves or others.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Future research could expand on these findings by uncovering other boundary conditions for the favorable influence of luxury consumption on socially valued behavior. For instance, perhaps certain types of luxury products differ in the degree to which they are associated with a consumer's identity, or perhaps they vary in what they signal to others. In the current study 4, for

instance, the hotel images shown to participants intentionally excluded people so as not to imply conspicuous signaling, but perhaps the consumption of this type of service is also intrinsically different from some other forms of luxury consumption. For example, everybody walking around in Paris is not necessarily wearing Louis Vuitton, but everybody at a hotel is presumably a guest, so any single guest does not stand out from the crowd by being there. Generally speaking, the influence of luxury consumption might also depend on the consumer's level of affluence. For extremely wealthy individuals, the products used in the current research may not be considered aspirational at all, and this could diminish their potential for encouraging socially valued behaviors. It seems likely that the aspirational nature of luxury consumption is central to its association with valued characteristics, but future research could do much to clarify this relationship as well.

Another factor to consider is the extent to which consumers focus on the specialness of the product, on the reputation of the brand, or on the premium price the product commands. Luxury may represent a quest for excellence, but it may also represent decadence, and it seems likely that these two views would differ in how they resonate with aspirations and ideals. Relatedly, future research could assess the impact of luxury consumption on how we evaluate others. Previous research has investigated how observers interpret luxury consumption (e.g., Nelissen and Meijers 2011; Sundie et al. 2011). The present research explores how the consumption of luxury impacts behavior. Hence, a logical next step would be to consider how others are perceived by individuals consuming luxury products.

This research could also be expanded to incorporate the influence of various brand concepts on behavior. In related research, Fitzsimons, Chartrand, and Fitzsimons (2008) demonstrate that exposure to goal-relevant brands can prompt specific behaviors. Moreover, they

argue that goal-relevant behaviors are triggered by brand primes only when the brands are associated with the individuals' desired qualities. Other research has documented the impact of priming specific product categories, such as counterfeits (Gino, Norton, and Ariely 2010) or green products (Mazar and Zhong 2010), on unethical and ethical behaviors. The current investigation builds on and adds to this stream of research, and future research could do more to clarify whether the impact of specific brand concepts may interact with that of luxury, thus diluting, strengthening, or in other ways altering the influence of luxury consumption on behavior. In general, the relationship between luxury, identity, and behavior remains a fruitful avenue for future research, with much scope to contribute to both theory and practice.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1) One participant was eliminated for only writing a few words and three participants were eliminated for taking a long break between the writing task and dependent measure.
- 2) We also administered the same anagram task from study 1a. However, some inconsistencies in the data file for approximately 20% of the subjects led to concerns that the survey software did not accurately record the time spent on the task. Consequently, we did not include this measure in our subsequent analysis.
- 3) The pretest was conducted as part of the pilot study that was reported earlier in the paper.
- 4) One person was excluded for taking a long break between the sunglasses manipulation and the dependent measures. A second person was eliminated for asking the research administrator several questions during the survey.

FIGURE 1**STUDY 1: INFLUENCE OF LUXURY ON TASK PERSISTENCE AND VOLUNTEERING****(a)****(b)**

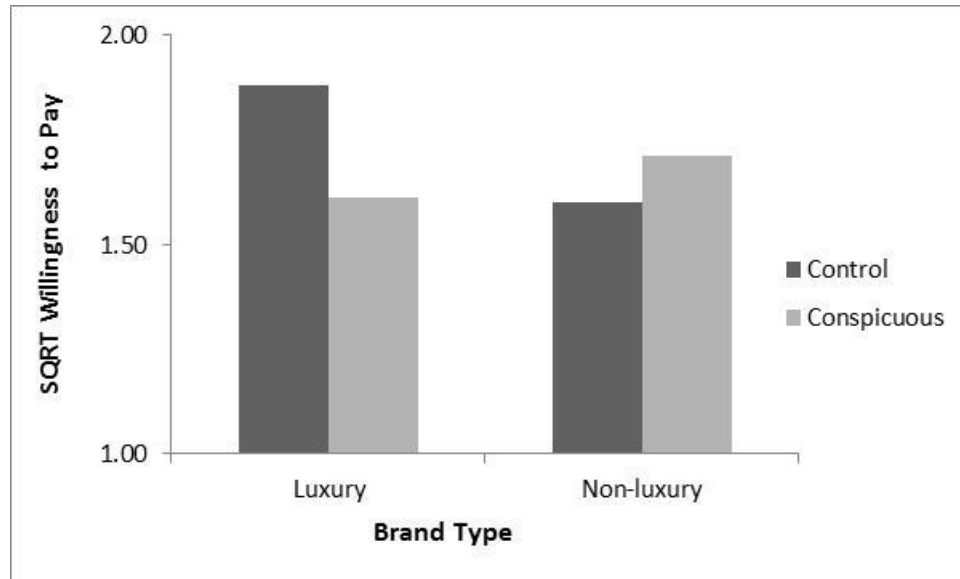
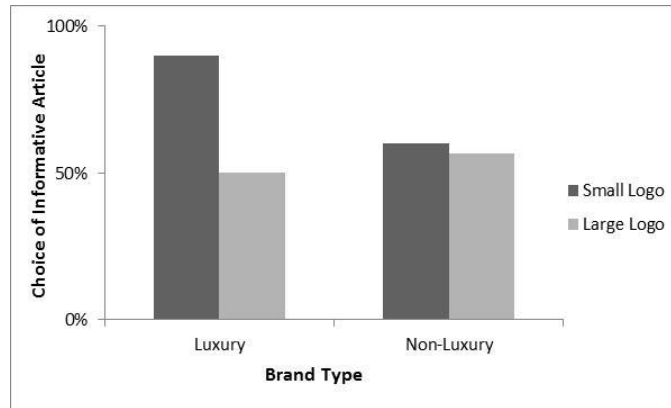
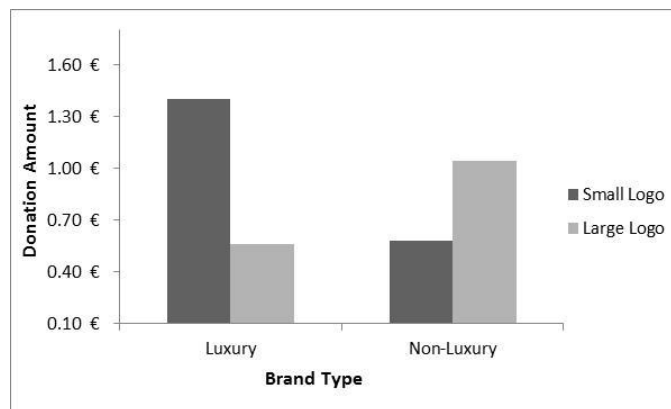
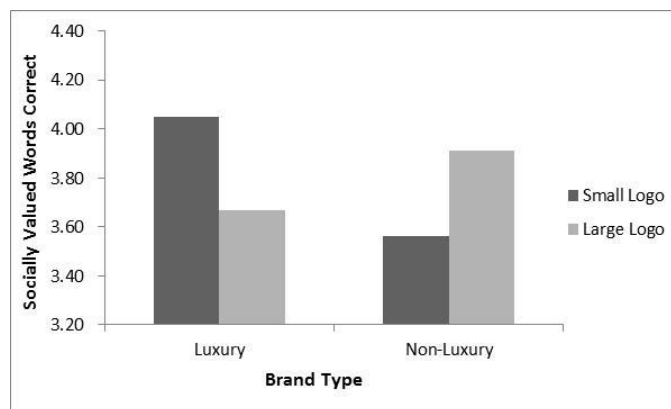
FIGURE 2**STUDY 2: INFLUENCE OF LUXURY ON WILLINGNESS TO PAY FOR LOCAL PRODUCTS**

FIGURE 3**STUDY 3: INFLUENCE OF LUXURY ON ARTICLE CHOICE, DONATION, AND****ACCESSIBILITY OF SOCIALLY VALUED CONCEPTS****(a)****(b)****(c)**