

## **Age and Perceptions of Luxury: An Investigation into the Impact of Age on the Perceptions of Old versus New Luxury**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the relation between age and perceptions of luxury. We explore the respondents' sensitivity to 'new luxury' and 'old luxury.' We empirically investigate these relationships using data from a Brazilian sample. Our total sample consists of 671 respondents mostly between 12 and 24 years of age. The findings reflect the conventional wisdom that the older the person the closer their perceptions are to 'old luxury,' and that younger people's perceptions more closely align with 'new luxury.' Furthermore, when examined in the context of gender, these differences in perceptions are only significant for females.

**Keywords:** Old Luxury, New luxury, Brazil, Teenager, University Students.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The concept of 'luxury' has been applied across multiple disciplines including history and archaeology (Berg & Eger, 2002; Hayden, 2003), psychology (Kemp, 1998), law and policy (Gastil, 2000; Shue, 1993), economics (Freeman, 2003; Martinez-Alier, 1995; Parkin, McGuire, & Yule, 1987), and even in the fields of environmental, biological and medical sciences (Lassen, 1966; Perry, 1995; Tripler, Canham, Inouye, & Schnurr, 2002; Valsecchi & Steliarova-Foucher, 2008). However, the marketing discipline appears to continue to dominate discussions about it. Luxury in the historical/traditional sense (and arguably, the more common understanding of it) refers to the "*class-oriented exclusivity goods and services that only a small segment of the population can afford or is willing to purchase*" (Granot, Russell, & Brashear-Alejandro, 2013, p. 32). Luxury brands were marketed to niche customers via high prices and limited supply (Granot & Brashear, 2008; Granot et al., 2013; Turunen & Laaksonen, 2011). This is (now) commonly described as *old luxury*, especially when contrasted against discussions of *new luxury* (Granot & Brashear, 2008; Ritson, 2008).

A term first coined by Silverstein and Fiske (2003) more than a decade ago, *new luxury* refers to the democratization of luxury, where both the symbolic meaning as well as forms of luxury consumption have significantly broadened to include, for example, low ticket and mass produced items that have reached a wider market. With the emergence of *new luxury*, luxury consumption is no longer limited only to a select few (i.e., exclusive to affluent consumers), nor is it limited only to goods that are rare and exclusive and charged at very high prices.

Existing literature has alluded to the potential influence the age of an individual may have on his/her attitudes towards luxury and their (level of) consumption of luxury goods (Gil, Johnson, & Leckie, 2016; Granot et al., 2013; Silverstein & Fiske, 2003), but offers little details or empirical evidence for such claims/suggestions (e.g., little is known about the nature and level of impact of one's age on attitudes

towards luxury and luxury consumption). Furthermore, while the terms *old luxury* and *new luxury* have gained popularity in the literature over the recent years, there remains very little empirical research comparing consumers' perspectives of old versus new luxury. To our knowledge, there appear to be only two studies that have indirectly compared the two forms of luxury. Dubois, Czellar, & Laurent (2005) showed consumers belonging in two different attitude segments, *elitist* and *democratic*, which appear to reflect perceptions that align with old and new luxury respectively. The elitists are prone to old luxury, while the democratic segment better understands new luxury. De Barnier, Falcy, & Valette-Florence (2012) compared consumer perceptions of inaccessible, intermediate and accessible luxury; where inaccessible luxury appears to align with old luxury, while intermediate and accessible luxury would align with new luxury. Empirical research specifically dedicated to comparing old versus new luxury, therefore, remains limited. To this end, this paper investigates the impact of age on perceptions of luxury, particularly in the context of old versus new luxury.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Defining Luxury***

Historically, luxury is *"always associated with wealth, exclusivity and power"* (Brun, Brun, & Castelli, 2013, p. 826). While luxury has been applied across multiple disciplines, it remains most widely used in the marketing context. As Granot et al. (2013, p. 31) aptly explain: *"Luxury offers a pure form of marketing, as the essence of capitalism, a superior method of self-expression, and a means to achieve entertaining and ego-satisfying outcomes."*

Various studies, including Vigneron & Johnson (2004), Turunen and Laaksonen (2011) and Brun et al. (2013), offer comprehensive summaries of the many existing perspectives and definitions of 'luxury,' which has led to their conceptualizations of the phenomenon. Brun et al. (2013, pp. 828-829) added *"[the way] luxury has been transformed over time reveals how its multifaceted nature makes it difficult to establish a clear definition"* and *"[to] avoid these ambiguities, some authors have chosen to focus on the primary characteristics of luxury brands and products in the current market rather than to determine how to define luxury"*.

In Vigneron & Johnson's (2004, p. 495) seminal work, which led to the development of the Brand Luxury Index (BLI), they offered five dimensions of luxury: 1) conspicuous (e.g., attracts attention, elitist, expensive, for the wealthy), 2) unique (e.g., exclusive, precious and rare), 3) quality (e.g., crafted, high quality, sophisticated, superior), 4) extended self (enhance self-concept), and 5) hedonic (e.g., sensory gratification and sensory pleasure expected from the consumption; personal rewards and fulfilment acquired through the purchase and consumption of products – with subjective emotional benefits and intrinsically pleasing properties [rather than functional ones]).

Recent investigations, such as Walley, Custance, Copley, & Perry's (2013) key dimensions of luxury, which include: 1) affect (emotional connection), 2) characteristics of quality, rarity, superiority and extreme expense, 3) status (indulge in highly conspicuous consumption of luxury goods and services in order to reinforce or enhance their social status), 4) gifting (willingness to purchase higher status goods for others as means of projecting an image of status to other), and 5), involvement (where luxury purchases are more planned, high involvement decision-making as opposed to impulse purchases); and Brun et al. (2013, p. 830) who listed the critical success factors (CSF) of luxury (which includes consistent premium quality, heritage, craftsmanship, exclusivity [e.g., limited production runs], excellence, superior performance, uniqueness, etc.); showed important overlaps with Vigneron & Johnson's (2004) five dimensions of luxury. As one might notice, defining luxury is not an easy task. Nevertheless, many definitions contain common themes that help us to form a relatively clear picture of what luxury represents.

### **Old versus new luxury**

Modern developments, such as in manufacturing, have resulted in the democratization of luxury in the past decade. Developments in manufacturing have meant that what once took many hours for a craftsman to carefully hand-make and produce, may be mass-produced in a much shorter period of time, thereby increasing the availability and diffusion of these accessible luxury products (Brun et al., 2013). This resulted in the separation of discussions within the literature in more recent years between the two forms of luxury: old versus new. While old luxury products are rare and exclusive, priced at a level affordable only by the wealthiest and affluent consumers, new luxury is more affordable, high volume products with a premium positioning, aimed at the average consumers (Ritson, 2008).

There are various forms of new luxury (Granot et al., 2013, p. 32; Silverstein & Fiske, 2003, p. 50), including 1) *accessible super-premium*, products priced near the top of their category, but middle-market consumers can afford them primarily because they are relatively low-ticket items (e.g., Starbucks coffee), 2) *old luxury brand extensions*, for instance, BMW and Louis Vuitton extended product lines to offer accessible, low-end versions of their high-end versions of these offerings, 3) *masstige* (representing mass prestige), are premium goods that carry a premium price, but that are still well below the highest-priced product in the category and far from the traditional super-premium or old-luxury goods, and 4) *populence* (representing popular opulence), include mass produced and distributed premium goods and services (Granot et al., 2013; Silverstein & Fiske, 2003).

While the phenomenon of new luxury has been discussed in the literature for more than a decade, it was not until in more recent years that research was conducted in this area. These studies include Truong, McColl, & Kitchen (2009) who empirically illustrated the presence of masstige marketing strategies adopted by companies such as Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren; De Barnier et al. (2012, p. 623) who showed “*there is a luxury continuum at a theoretical level, reinforcing the notions of accessible, intermediate, and prototypical inaccessible luxury*”, and Granot et al. (2013, p. 40) who phenomenologically demonstrated populence as a form of new luxury consumption.

### **Gaps in the existing luxury research/literature**

The existing literature has shed light on consumer perceptions of luxury. However, there continue to be calls to study differences in consumer perceptions of luxury and luxury consumption behavior according to factors such as culture and age. For example, Dubois et al. (2005, p. 126) explained that “*important differences in attitudes toward luxury may exist across generations. Further analysis again is warranted, because such information could indicate the likely orientation of consumer vision of luxury according to their age*”, which in turn influence their luxury consumption behaviors. Similarly, Granot et al. (2013, p. 32) added: “*Luxury consumption behavior can also vary significantly between localities, lifestyle, disposable income, and across age groups.*” Hauck & Stanforth’s (2007, p. 175) study shed light in this area, showing “*significant differences between cohort groups in their perceptions of luxury goods and services, especially between the oldest and youngest cohorts.*” Their study, however, did not explore the differences in perceptions between the age groups in terms of new versus old luxury.

The fact is that it is not clear yet which is the most significant factor when investigating luxury, especially related to young consumers. Research on luxury has shown a difference among sexes regarding reasons to consume luxury (Wang & Griskevicius, 2014) and their general disposition toward luxury (Stokburger-Sauer & Teichmann, 2013). However, research remains in its early stages, and therefore further explorations can be justified.

Similarly, cross-cultural comparisons of consumer perceptions of luxury have only recently moved into different cultures (Godey et al., 2013; Ngai & Cho, 2012). With most focused on West [e.g., (Walley et al.,

2013)] and Asian cultures [e.g., (Ngai & Cho, 2012)], it is proposed that research into consumer perceptions of luxury should also explore it from the perspective of Latin American consumers, especially in light of calls for consumer research in the context of Latin America (Gonzalez & Luna, 2004, 2005).

A review of the literature, and in particular, the research gaps identified above, has led to the development of the following research questions:

- R1.** Does age affect perception of luxury?
- R2.** Do younger people have more positive attitudes toward *new luxury* brands?
- R3.** Do older people have more positive attitudes toward *old luxury* brands?
- R4.** Do males and females have the same attitude toward luxury brands?

Since new luxury appears to be targeted at the aspirational segment and includes low-ticket items that are more affordable (Granot et al., 2013, p. 31), it is believed that luxury will appear more accessible to younger individuals, and therefore, individuals within the lower age group will perceive luxury more closely to new luxury (as opposed to old luxury).

## **METHOD**

We collected data using a paper-based self-administered survey of high school and university students in Santos, a city that belongs to São Paulo state in Brazil. The population of interest includes university students (from Santos) aged between 19 and 24 years, and high school students (also from Santos) aged between 12 and 18 years, corresponding to grades 7 through grade 12. We collected data from three private high schools in the city of Santos. Unlike the US, private schools in Brazil are not associated with affluence but cater to students from all socioeconomic backgrounds. We used school tuition fee as an indicator of socioeconomic status, and in order to obtain a diverse sample, selected three schools that represented a range of tuition fees.

São Paulo is the largest state in the Southern hemisphere (IBGE Brazilian Census, 2002). Santos, SP is considered a median city with a population of 418,436 (IBGE Brazilian Census, 2007). Santos' Port is the main port of Brazil and the largest port in Latin America (Ewing, 2007). The prices from high school nowadays vary from BRL 850 to BRL 1.900, which means USD 270 to USD 600 per month (Portal Guia Escolas®, 2017).

We recruited students for the survey based on cooperation with schools or university as well as receiving parental/guardian authorizations of survey participation (in case of the underage population). We advised the students that participation was entirely voluntary and their responses would be held with strict confidence.

## **Instrument and measures**

We first prepared the survey instrument in English that was then translated into Portuguese by a native speaker external to the project. A different native Portuguese speaker (also fluent in English) translated the instrument back into English. We kept the wording of the items in the instrument simple and straightforward (consistent with their usage in the literature) in order to reduce the risks of ambiguity and item demand characteristics (Brislin, 1986). We attempted to minimize the effects of potential common method bias through several procedural techniques mentioned in Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff (2003), who state that "*there is no single best method for handling the problem*" (p. 899). Some of the procedural remedies adopted were breaking up the questionnaire into sub-sections with respective introductions (to increase psychological separation of the variables), avoiding item inter-mixing and ensuring respondent anonymity. We ensured that the questionnaire items did not contain hidden cues to respondents (i.e., item demand characteristics), also a potential source of common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

We operationalized all the scales using multi-item seven-point Likert scales (anchored at 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). We measure *attitude towards luxury* using a six-item measure that was developed based on the work of Dubois, et al. (2005). Sample items are “*All things considered, I rather like luxury*” and “*I could talk about luxury for hours.*” For the purpose of this study and given the novelty that is the theme “*new luxury and old luxury*” we selected a subset of only seven items from the Dubois, et al. (2005) measure. The items selected by us were: 1) Few people own a truly luxury product; 2) Truly luxury goods cannot be mass produced; 3) A luxury product cannot be sold in supermarkets; 4) A real luxury brand does not advertise its products; 5) Some education is needed for appreciating luxury products; 6) Today, everyone should have access to luxury goods; 7) Those who buy luxury products are refined people. All items are related to old luxury, excepted item 6 which was reverse coded in order to follow the pattern of the other measures. The measure used by us in this study are not limited to young individuals and can be replicated in the future to a vaster age group.

## RESULTS

### Sample Description

Our total sample consists of 671 respondents of which 358 are female, and 313 are male, mostly between 12 and 24 years of age. Despite the seemingly large data set, and because of the large age range, in some cases, we had small samples for a particular age group (e.g. only seven respondents for the 23-year old category). However, the differences we seek are likely better accounted by re-grouping our cases by age groups a little wider; and with this in mind, we created three major age group categories, with the intention to investigate changing trends, designed to include the most homogenous age groups possible in terms of age range. This translated into three groups: 15 or younger, 16 to 20, and 21 and older.

Table 1 shows a brief description of some demographic variables of the database. All respondents have at least one cellphone, and most of them have indeed only one, regardless of their age or sex. Girls tend to spend more on clothes than boys and the latter prefer spending on entertainment, though, it must be said that entertainment is also an important expenditure for women, second only to clothes and shoes. Regarding family life, it shows little surprises, older respondents tend to have more siblings, and they are less likely to have married parents.

## TABLES

**Table 1. Demographic Data**

Category	Age	Female	Male
<i>Cellphone (average)</i>	<16	1.10	1.23
	16-20	1.06	1.14
	>20	1.23	1.05
<i>Spending (mode)</i>	<16	Clothes/shoes	Entertainment
	16-20	Clothes/shoes	Entertainment
	>20	Others	Others
<i>Siblings (average)</i>	<16	2.11	2.11
	16-20	2.20	2.20
	>20	3.53	3.51
<i>Parents married (%)</i>	<16	0.68	0.75
	16-20	0.72	0.77
	>20	0.57	0.60

**Data analysis**

Table 2 displays the means for each item. Using an ANOVA combined with a Tukey posthoc test (IBM SPSS Statistics, 2012), we find that the means are always higher for the older age group, suggesting that older respondents understand old luxury, but the younger ones identify themselves more to the concept of new luxury. It must be noticed that the sixth item, 'Today, everyone should have access to luxury goods,' is reversed, being the only one that points towards a different direction and contradicts our first conclusion. However, the posthoc analysis found that the means are statistically different in only two cases, the first and the last item. These include a difference in opinion in respect to the possibility that luxury is a popular thing ('few people own a truly luxury product') and in the kind of people that own it ('those who buy luxury products are refined people'). As expected, older respondents believe that luxury should be exclusive (mean = 5.27) and believe more in the affirmation that the consumers of it are more refined (mean = 4.27). However, no statistically significant difference was found in the other five items, even though the averages are higher for participants older than twenty. Something else to notice is the averages for the seven items considered. Only in one case are they above 5, and just two of them are under 3, suggesting that our respondents are not strongly committed to either new nor old luxury. These responses may stem from certain indifference or ignorance regarding luxury products (DuBois & Burns, 1975; Nowlis, Kahn, & Dhar, 2002; Raaijmakers, 2000; Shaw & Wright, 1967).

**Table 2 – Means per item and age group**

Item (scale 1 to 7)	<16 years	16-20 years	>20 years	Total
1. Few people own a truly luxury product	4.63	4.60	5.27	4.70
2. Truly luxury goods cannot be mass produced	3.47	3.83	4.00	3.77
3. A luxury product cannot be sold in supermarkets	3.75	3.65	4.02	3.72
4. A real luxury brand does not advertise its products	2.97	2.91	3.37	2.99
5. Some education is needed for appreciating luxury products	3.60	3.51	3.90	3.58
6. Today, everyone should have access to luxury goods	4.09	3.79	4.10	3.90
7. Those who buy luxury products are refined people	3.55	3.65	4.27	3.71

Research on luxury documents a pronounced difference among sexes regarding reasons to consume luxury (Wang & Griskevicius, 2014) and their general disposition toward luxury (Stokburger-Sauer & Teichmann, 2013), so the next step was to evaluate males and females separately in order to see if the averaging of both groups was affecting our results. In Table 3 are the means for females and the table shows the male means.

**Table 3 - Means per item and age group (females)**

Item (scale 1 to 7)	<16 years	16-20 years	>20 years	Total
1. Few people own a truly luxury product	4.49	4.72	5.47	4.78
2. Truly luxury goods cannot be mass produced	3.28	3.97	4.13	3.83
3. A luxury product cannot be sold in supermarkets	3.75	3.67	4.23	3.77
4. A real luxury brand does not advertise its products	2.80	2.91	3.55	2.99
5. Some education is needed for appreciating luxury products	3.58	3.36	3.87	3.49
6. Today, everyone should have access to luxury goods	3.93	3.95	4.21	3.98
7. Those who buy luxury products are refined people	3.73	3.63	4.38	3.77

**Table 4 - Means per item and age group (males)**

Item (scale 1 to 7)	<16 years	16-20 years	>20 years	Total
1. Few people own a truly luxury product	4.80	4.47	5.00	4.61
2. Truly luxury goods cannot be mass produced	3.71	3.68	3.82	3.70
3. A luxury product cannot be sold in supermarkets	3.74	3.62	3.74	3.66
4. A real luxury brand does not advertise its products	3.18	2.91	3.13	3.00
5. Some education is needed for appreciating luxury products	3.62	3.66	3.95	3.69
6. Today, everyone should have access to luxury goods	4.29	3.62	3.95	3.81
7. Those who buy luxury products are refined people	3.33	3.67	4.11	3.64

Considering only females, posthoc results show statistically significant differences in four items. Besides the two statistically significant differences already noticed (items 1 and 7), we have that females of different ages feel different also regarding mass-produced luxury (item 2) and advertising (item 4). Males, however, feel almost the same regardless of their age, the only statistically significant difference found is on one item, number 6, regarding universal access to luxury.

Females show a clear tendency towards the democratization of luxury. Older female respondents believe real luxury is only owned by few (item 1), cannot be mass produced (item 2), does not advertise (item 4) and is enjoyed by more refined people (item 7). In two other categories, items 3 and 5, while we did not find any statistically significant difference, the means show the same tendency towards new and old luxury. The only exception is item 6, which does not follow the same tendency as the rest.

The male responses do not show any tendency by age, except for item 6. Younger male respondents believe luxury is more popular than the group 16 to 20 years old (item 1), but their responses are not statistically different from that of the oldest respondents. Overall, the tendency is not clear, in four items there is no identifiable tendency (items 1, 2, 3 and 4), and none of the other three show any statistical difference.

Regarding the means of male responses, only one of the averages reached 5, and just one is below 3. These results are in this sense similar to those observed for females, and should be a source of preoccupation for the industry in that they may mean ignorance and/or indifference toward the industry (DuBois & Burns, 1975; Nowlis et al., 2002; Raaijmakers, 2000; Shaw & Wright, 1967).

## DISCUSSION

Most results are very close to the middle of the scale (scale with values 1 to 7), which, according to the literature may mean indifference or ignorance (DuBois & Burns, 1975; Nowlis et al., 2002; Raaijmakers, 2000; Shaw & Wright, 1967). If what we see is indifference, then customers are not valuing exclusivity and status, which may be undesirable from the perspective of a marketer of luxury products or brands (Stokburger-Sauer & Teichmann, 2013; Wang & Griskevicius, 2014). However, if the problem is ignorance, then brands are failing to make a meaningful impact on their consumers.

Our findings reflect the conventional wisdom that the older the person, their perceptions are more strongly aligned with “old luxury” and that young people’s perceptions are more strongly aligned with “new luxury.” Nevertheless, when examining females, we realized that these differences in perception are more significant, while in men they are almost nonexistent.

The results of our study suggest that the concept of old luxury is more associated with older people, even with our relatively young sample. The older the person, the more he or she believes that luxury is something only for the lucky few, richer, wealthier and more affluent of our society. This might relate to the fact that most of them now work or are closer to starting their work life, and consequently to pay for their own things, which in turn makes them perceive differently the most expensive, rare and exclusive items, therefore, believing that these items should not be available for everyone.

On the other hand, the younger generation (our sample has people as young as 12 years old) who do not work to make a living (most of them receive money from their parents or immediate family members) perceive luxury as something much more democratic, should be available for everyone in all social classes. This segment of the population also believes that luxury should be distributed in several retail outlets in order to make it more accessible. Recent news on teens reflects that this group usually spends without guilt (different from most adults) and that most parents have less time to dedicate to their children which in turn leads to the higher allowance or more expensive and luxurious gifts (Kendrick, 2015). Consequently, one might think that receiving expensive, rare and exclusive gifts makes teens believe that luxury is for everyone.

Interestingly, this distinction between old and new luxury is not as clear for males as it is for females. There are two possible explanations for this; one is that our questionnaire did not capture the answers in a way it should, and the other that males, in general, do not care as much for luxury as females. Nevertheless, it is worthy to mention that recent news stated just the opposite, that is, that males are the future for luxury brands (Fenner, 2014). Future research might examine this finding in more detail.

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Dr. Emily Chung received her Ph.D. from the University of Melbourne in 2011 and is currently a Lecturer in the School of Economics, Finance and Marketing at RMIT University. She was a Marketing Executive prior to entering academia; her role specializing in market research and quality and customer relationship management resulted in her current interest in consumer research exploring such areas as loyalty, forgiveness, and well-being. Dr. Chung is particularly interested in understanding intense consumer-brand relationships, including topics such as collecting, materialism, fanaticism, obsession, and addiction. She has been a lecturer since 2007, and has professional experience in marketing consulting and continues to serve commercial clients since 1999.

Lester W. Johnson is Professor of Marketing at Swinburne University of Technology, Australia. He holds a Ph.D. in econometrics from the University of Connecticut. He was elected as one of three inaugural Fellows of the Australia New Zealand Marketing Academy in 2004, and in 2008 was also elected as a Fellow of the Australian Market and Social Research Society. His research interests lie broadly in the area of marketing modeling. Recent work includes models investigating consumer brand equity, consumer brand engagement, celebrity endorsement, and luxury consumption.