



Luxury Fashion Consumption: The Interplay of Guilt and Pleasure

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Keywords: Luxury consumption, affect balance theory, pleasure, guilt

Phenomenon Statement. Luxury consumers may feel conflicted between their aspiration to seek pleasure and their desire to wash away a feeling of guilt (Berens, 2013). As many consumers experience guilt over what they consume (i.e., luxury consumption) and how they spend (i.e., conspicuous consumption), they are becoming more cautious about their luxury purchases. In fact, consumers are increasingly shunning away from buying luxury only to show off to others, but are favorable towards products that are style-oriented and high in quality (Berens, 2013).

This recent phenomenon of luxury consumers raises three important research questions: (a) Are more consumers buying luxury products as a means to consume timeless style and long-lasting quality (i.e., style consumption) over a means to display wealth and gain status (i.e., conspicuous consumption)?; (b) Will conflicting emotions (i.e., pleasure and guilt) “coexist” after consumers make luxury purchases?; and (c) If two contradictory emotions are expressed, will they interactively as well as independently work to influence consumers’ post-consumption behavior?

Purpose Statement. To address the aforementioned phenomenon, we draw on the Affect Balance Theory to (a) explore whether two distinct modes of luxury consumption (i.e., *conspicuous consumption* and *style consumption*) are related to *pleasure* (i.e., positive affect) and *guilt* (i.e., negative affect); and (b) determine whether *pleasure* and *guilt* interplay to make interactive impacts, as well as independent impacts, on consumers’ repurchase intention.

Theoretical Framework & Hypotheses Development. The Affect Balance Theory posits that positive affect and negative affect are both significant factors in influencing people’s satisfaction (Bradburn, 1969). Recognizing that one side of emotion is not sufficient in predicting satisfaction, positive affect (i.e., pleasure) and negative affect (i.e., guilt) should be considered *together* because they are *interrelated* in predicting human’s satisfaction (i.e., repurchase intention). Thus, we hypothesize as following:

- H1a:** Conspicuous consumption is positively related to pleasure (positive affect).
- H1b:** Conspicuous consumption is positively related to guilt (negative affect).
- H2a:** Style consumption is positively related to pleasure.
- H2b:** Style consumption is negatively related to guilt.
- H3:** Pleasure is positively related to repurchase intention.
- H4:** Guilt is negatively related to repurchase intention.
- H5:** The interaction effects between guilt and pleasure will predict repurchase intention, such that increased pleasure will weaken the negative association between guilt and

repurchase intention (H5a); and increased guilt will weaken the positive association between pleasure and repurchase intention (H5b).

Methods & Results. We collected 600 valid responses from consumer panelists of a commercial online survey company. The measurement items were adapted from existing scales. To test the hypotheses, we adopted a series of seemingly unrelated regressions (SUR) instead of structural equation modeling (SEM) due to two factors inherent to the empirical analysis of this study: (a) The SEM model does not estimate *endogenous moderation effects* efficiently; (b) it requires variables to be *latent*, and to be measured using multi-item scales, rather than being *observed*.

According to our results, all the hypotheses were supported: H1a ($\beta = .352, p = .001$); H1b ($\beta = .524, p = .0002$); H2a ($\beta = .531, p < .0001$); H2b ($\beta = -.116, p < .0001$); H3 ($\beta = .902, p < .0001$); and H4 ($\beta = -.241, p < .0001$). In addition, H5, positing that *interaction effects* between guilt and pleasure will predict repurchase intention, was supported: H5a ($\beta = .195, p < .0001$) and H5b ($\beta = .195, p < .0001$). Further, we tested the double mediation effects by using bootstrapping methods, and found that *pleasure* and *guilt* are the significant double mediators (i.e., *coexist*) between the relationship of *conspicuous consumption* and *repurchase intention*, but not between the relationship of *style consumption* and *repurchase intention*, which indicates that *style consumption* is mediated only by *pleasure*, not by *guilt*.

Contributions. The theoretical contribution of our study lies in that we provide empirical support for the “coexistence” and “interaction” of two conflicting emotions (*pleasure* and *guilt*) in the relationship between *luxury consumption* and *repurchase intention* in the context of a luxury fashion product based on the Affect Balance Theory. Based on our findings, first, we suggest luxury fashion retailers to promote *style consumption* via promotion campaigns that highlight their craftsmanship. If consumers realize that craftsmanship is involved in luxury production, it will assure them that the products are high in quality and will gain in value over time, making them feel that their money is well spent. In this way, luxury retailers can evoke consumers’ positive emotional experience, while alleviating their sense of guilt, which will lead to repurchase intention. Second, we recommend luxury retailers to maximize consumers’ *pleasure*: (a) by paying particular attention to the environment of their physical stores where consumers can walk in, touch and wear the products, and experience the store ambience, which will evoke consumers’ positive emotions; and (b) by providing exclusive promotions, such as private invitations to their new product launch and fashion shows, through which consumers can feel special and valued, which will lead to pleasure and eventually repurchase intention.

References.

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