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How consumers' need for uniqueness, self-monitoring, and social identity affect their choices when luxury brands visually shout versus whisper

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ABSTRACT

This study theorizes and tests the effects of consumers' personality and social traits on preferences for brand prominence, and it explores the mediating effects of gender and culture. It focuses on how consumers' need for uniqueness and self-monitoring affects their choices between luxury brands that shout (are loud) versus those that whisper (are discreet), that is, the degree of brand prominence. This study uses a quantitative methodology to study 215 young consumers from Finland, Italy, and France. The findings show that most consumers in the sample were connoisseur consumers who prefer luxury brands that whisper. Social norms affect luxury brand choices; the Finns were found to prefer discreet visible markings on products more than the French and the Italians did. Finally, more men than women were found to link luxury brands to self-expression and self-presentation; this has marketing implications in terms of segmentation and brand management.

1. Introduction

Although the growth in the global luxury market has started to decline, consumers' appetite for luxury goods continues (Kapferer, 2012; Li, Li, & Kambele, 2012). This is owing to online stores and mobile applications (e.g., Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Kluge & Fassnacht, 2015); increasing wealth in emerging markets like China and India (Liu, Perry, Moore, & Warnaby, 2016); and brand accessibility due to the luxury industry's investments in productivity (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003).

The appetite for luxury goods is attributable to the inherent characteristics of luxury brands and the beneficial values (Roux, Tafani, & Vigneron, 2017) gained by having, owning, and using them (Cristini, Kauppinen-Räisänen, Barthod-Prothade, & Woodside, 2017). Luxury offerings provide outstanding quality (e.g., Choo, Moon, Kim, & Yoon, 2012) and have a more appealing appearance than non-luxury products. Luxury products are also attractive owing to features like quality materials, connoisseurship, and the core competencies of creativity, craftsmanship, and innovation that go into their making. These features make such offerings exclusive, rare, and unique, and therefore, they are sold at a premium price point (Kapferer & Laurent, 2016), or at least at higher prices than most other offerings in the same category. These features also suggest that luxuries are unreachable by and inaccessible to most (e.g., Roper, Caruana, Medway, & Murphy, 2013). Consequently, luxury goods intrinsically reflect the status of their owners and users; they are something that most people would like to possess, but only a privileged few can obtain. Luxury is a marker of one's status, and through visible brand marks, it is perceived to enhance such symbolic benefits in everyday social interactions, which feeds many new luxury consumers' appetites (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012).

Luxury has become an important field of research (Stokburger-Sauer & Teichmann, 2013). Although many aspects of the luxury sector have been covered, some issues remain unclear. One such issue is what triggers the desire for luxury brands, beyond the product's characteristics and the benefits gained from using it. Seemingly, a shift in contemporary luxury consumption occurs, where the new luxury is no longer too exclusive or rare and neither is it unreachable nor inaccessible (Kapferer & Laurent, 2016). Luxury thus requires courting new consumers who are characterized more by their personality, values, attitudes, interests, and lifestyles than by their income levels. Therefore, more research is needed to understand behavior related to various types of luxury. This includes popular to high-end luxury and designer brands (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014), the specific traits of luxury consumers themselves, such as their demographic background (e.g. nationality, gender), motivations, and attitudes (Chan, To, & Chu, 2015; Chandon, Laurent, & Valette-Florence, 2016; Cheach, Phau,

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Chong, & Shimul, 2015; Kauppinen-Räisänen, Koskull, Gummerus, & Cristini, 2018; Roux et al., 2017; Shukla & Purani, 2012).

To fill this gap in literature, this study focuses on high-end luxury brands and examines how personality and social traits are linked to consumers' behaviors for such brands. Research has found that self-awareness and personality traits such as the need for uniqueness (NFU) and self-monitoring (SM) are personal triggers for behaviors in the context of luxury brands (Bian & Forsythe, 2012). The need for uniqueness is related to self-expression (SE). Consumers with high need for uniqueness are found to place a higher emphasis on expressing oneself, establishing an independent identity, and using distinguishing brands (Shavitt, 1989). Self-monitoring is closely linked to self-presentation (SP) (Shavitt, 1989). A high level of self-monitoring leads consumers to adapt their behavior to the social context.

Instead of focusing on status consumption or conspicuous consumption, this study contributes to luxury research by examining brand prominence, which is the extent of a brand's visual conspicuousness, and the fact that status can be private or public (Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010). Specifically, this study examines the relationship between personality traits (need for uniqueness and self-monitoring) and social traits (self-expression and self-presentation) and how it determines a consumer's preferred degree of brand prominence (i.e., consumer's "luxury trait"). While studies focusing on cultural and personal factors are also called for, this study contributes by investigating the mediating influences of gender and culture across three countries (e.g. Bian & Forsythe, 2012; Roux et al., 2017).

2. Theoretical framework

Visibility is essential to status consumption and has therefore been used interchangeably with conspicuous consumption (O'Cass & Frost, 2002), which is defined as "the social and public visibility surrounding the consumption of a product" (Piron, 2000, p. 309). This means that consumers strive for status through visible markers of luxury brands, such as the brand's logo. However, some researchers have argued for a distinction between the two concepts (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004; Truong, Simmons, McColl, & Kitchen, 2008). This is because the desire for status can be public, as expressed through conspicuous consumption, or "the tendency for individuals to enhance their image through the overt consumption of possessions, which communicates their status to others" (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004, p. 34). Alternatively, it can be private as per the definition of status consumption, or "the behavioral tendency to value status and acquire and consume products that provide status to the individual" (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004, p. 34). Therefore, brand prominence, or "the extent to which a product has visible markings that help ensure observers recognize the brand" (Han et al., 2010, p.15), implies that the preferred degree of conspicuousness may vary but is always based on the need for status. A product with high brand prominence is conspicuous, opulent, pretentious, gaudy, and logo-oriented, whereas a product with low brand prominence is modest, unobtrusive, discreet, purist, and minimalistic (Heine, 2009). Interestingly, low brand prominence does not imply that the consumer desires a low level of status, as the need may relate to private status instead of public (Han et al., 2010).

Fig. 1 shows need for uniqueness and self-monitoring. Self-expression and self-presentation are two dimensions that together comprise the function of social identity (SI) (Shavitt, 1989). Owing to the preference for brand prominence, they are believed to reveal consumers' luxury trait. The basic assumption is that the need for uniqueness and self-expression lead to a preference for low brand prominence (connoisseur consumption), whereas self-monitoring and self-presentation lead to a preference for high brand prominence (fashion consumption).

2.1. Personality traits of need for uniqueness and self-monitoring

Solomon (2011, p. 240) defined personality as "…a person's unique psychological makeup and how it consistently influences the way a person responds to her environment." Accordingly, the need for uniqueness and self-monitoring are perceived within the realm of marketing as personality traits serving social needs (Lynn & Harris, 1997).

The need for uniqueness indicates consumers' need to differentiate themselves from others and to be seen as one of a kind (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). This need is related to self-expression, and it suggests that consumers with high need for uniqueness emphasize the independent self, seek differentiating brands, and are more prone to adopt new products (e.g. Snyder, 1992). Because material possessions are regarded as an extension of the self (Belk, 1988), material goods are used to express one's identity. Thus, exclusive, rare, and unique brands like luxury brands are used as a means of accomplishing the need for uniqueness (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). Past studies have shown that the need for uniqueness is triggered by status consumption and that it influences purchase intentions (Chan et al., 2015; Park, Rabolt, & Jeon, 2008). Tian et al. (2001) further developed the concept of need for uniqueness and found that it is a three-dimensional construct reflecting consumers' need for differentiation while highlighting different degrees of social divergence. "Creative choice counter conformity" (NFUCC) means that the consumer seeks social dissimilarity, but in a safe and socially approved manner. Consumers thus seek out dissimilar brands to fulfill their need for uniqueness without being perceived as too abnormal in social settings (Snyder, 1992). "Unpopular choice counter conformity" (NFUUC) means that the consumer seeks dissimilarity or uniqueness and is willing to accept social disapproval. "Avoidance of similarity" (NFUAS) suggests that dissimilarity from social norms (SN) is an end in itself and that the consumer does not sustain interest in conventional possessions.

Self-monitoring is related to self-presentation (Snyder, 1974). As opposed to wanting to be unique compared to others, the consumer has a need to be socially appropriate and to not diverge from the group by conforming to others' attitudes. Therefore, self-monitoring is closely related to the need for conformity (NFC). Consumers with high need for conformity want what other consumers have (Amaldoss & Jain, 2005). Self-monitoring consumers monitor the environment and modify and adapt their behavior and self-presentation accordingly (Graeff, 1996; O'Cass, 2000) as they are sensitive to social norms (Bian & Forsythe, 2012). For example, Chinese consumers show high self-monitoring, and they use luxury goods to conform in terms of their social identity (e.g. Zhan & He, 2012). However, these consumers are also confident in this conformity and in how they present themselves, even though this is contradictory to their personality. Consumers who show low self-monitoring are less sensitive and less responsive, and they prefer consistency in their behavior (e.g., Dubois, Czellar, & Laurent, 2005; O'Cass, 2000; Snyder, 1974). They are also more focused on staying true to themselves and in living by their personal values and private realities (O'Cass, 2000). Furthermore, they judge products based on their performance and not the conveyed image (DeBono, 2006).

2.2. Social traits of self-expression and self-presentation

In this study, the need for uniqueness and self-monitoring are treated as motivational aspects of the attitudinal behaviors of self-expression and self-presentation and are believed to contribute as a function of social identity.

An attitude is defined as "a more enduring state of mind" (Argyriou & Melewar, 2011, p. 444) or "a learned predisposition to behave in a consistently favorable or unfavorable way with respect to a given object" (Schiffman, Kanuk, & Hansen, 2008, p. 248). The functional theory of attitudes (Katz, 1960; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956) examines the motivations behind attitudes; it emphasizes that attitudes occur as they are perceived to be useful and to serve a function (e.g., DeBono, 1987; Grewal, Mehta, & Kardes, 2004; Shavitt, 1989).

Attitudes serve various functions. Attitudes that have a communicative or a value-expressive function help consumers communicate

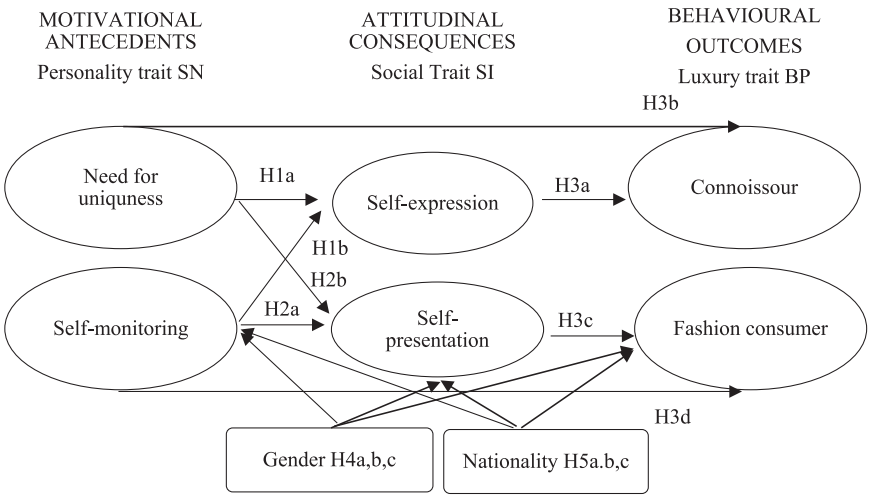

Fig. 1. The theoretical framework constructed for this study.

their intrinsic values to others (Grewal et al., 2004; Katz, 1960; Shavitt, 1990; Wilcox, Kim, & Sen, 2009). These attitudes may appear as self-expression (Snyder & DeBono, 1985) in social situations. Past research has described the link between self-monitoring and self-expression by concluding that consumers with low self-monitoring aim for consistency in their values and their social interactions and do not adjust their behavior to fit social situations (DeBono, 1987). At the same time, past research has indicated that high need for uniqueness induces status consumption (Chan et al., 2015; Park et al., 2008). Status consumption is one way to express one's values (Eastman & Eastman, 2015). Based on previous findings, this study hypothesizes that the need for uniqueness leads positively to self-expression, whereas the need for self-monitoring has a negative impact on self-expression.

H1a. High need for uniqueness is positively related to self-expression.

H1b. High self-monitoring is negatively related to self-expression.

Attitudes that serve as a means of social interaction or that have a social-adaptive function conform to the expectations of others, thereby helping consumers gain approval in social situations and enhancing their self-presentation (e.g. Grewal et al., 2004; Shavitt, 1989; Smith et al., 1956). Products that fulfill the social-adaptive function are consumed to gain approval and achieve one's coveted social goals (e.g. Belk, 1988; Wilcox et al., 2009). Thus, products are consumed for image-related reasons, and outdated possessions are replaced with new items (e.g. Schlenker, 1980; Wilcox et al., 2009). The attitudes of consumers with high self-monitoring are related to social appropriateness, suggesting that they serve a social-adaptive function (DeBono, 1987). Such consumers' yearning for conformism suggests that people interested in perfecting their self-presentation do not have a high need for uniqueness, as they would rather fit in like everyone else than stand out. Accordingly, this study hypothesizes the following:

H2a. High self-monitoring is positively related to self-presentation.

H2b. High need for uniqueness is negatively related to self-presentation.

2.3. Two degrees of brand prominence as a luxury trait

Brand prominence refers to the different degrees of conspicuousness of a brand's logo—loud (or conspicuous) or quiet (discreet or inconspicuous)—and reflects their owner's signaling intentions (Han et al., 2010). While Han et al. (2010) showed that the preferred degree of brand prominence relates to the need for status, Wilcox et al. (2009) studied brand conspicuousness and counterfeits and found that consumers with a positive attitude with regard to self-presentation preferred loud conspicuousness, that is, more prominent brand logos. As the links between the need for uniqueness and self-expression and between self-monitoring and self-presentation have already been shown (Shavitt, 1989), this study hypothesizes that a high need for uniqueness partially corresponding to low self-monitoring is triggered by value-expressive attitudes, resulting in quiet self-expression. This means that while the need for uniqueness has been found to be linked to status consumption (Chan et al., 2015; Park et al., 2008), the hypothesis is based on the idea that the need is in fact for private status (Han et al., 2010). In contrast, a low need for uniqueness corresponds to seeking high brand prominence as a means of self-presentation.

H3a. Self-expression is positively related to a preference for low brand prominence.

H3b. The need for uniqueness positively affects a preference for low brand prominence.

H3c. Self-presentation is positively related to a preference for high brand prominence.

H3d. Self-monitoring positively affects a preference for high brand prominence.

2.4. Luxury behavior explained by gender and nationality

Gender influences luxury behavior. In 2007, 80% of luxury consumers were female (Okonkwo, 2007); this figure reduced to 40% in 2011. Interestingly, prices of luxury offerings for women have been shown to be higher than those of the corresponding products for men (Stokburger-Sauer & Teichmann, 2013). Nonetheless, women have a more positive attitude toward luxury products than men, and they experience a greater difference in the value between luxury and non-luxury offerings in terms of uniqueness, status, and hedonism (Stokburger-Sauer & Teichmann, 2013). Roux et al. (2017) found that women value luxury products for their refinement, whereas men appreciate the exclusivity and elitism they afford.

In terms of personality traits, research has found that gender differences exist in levels of self-monitoring, which has been found to be higher among men than women (O'Cass, 2001). Gender differences also exist in social traits. Segal and Podoshen (2012) showed that women are inclined to buy symbolic goods that facilitate self-expression more than self-presentation. Studies have shown gender differences in conspicuous consumption, with men favoring more conspicuousness (e.g. Eastman & Liu, 2012; Gardyn, 2002; O'Cass & McEwen, 2004; Segal & Podoshen, 2012). This could be because conspicuous consumption is a way of attracting attention and showing one's economic achievements.

Furthermore, it has been claimed that "women typically use earning power and status as cues to evaluate the reproductive value of a man" (Stokburger-Sauer & Teichmann, 2013, p. 2). Interestingly, it has been implied that conspicuous consumption may also have a physiological affect as it can increase men's testosterone levels (Saad & Vongas, 2009).

Based on the previous discussion, this study hypothesizes the following:

H4a. Men are higher in self-monitoring than women (personality trait).

H4b. Men are higher in self-presentation than women (social trait).

H4c. Men give more importance to high degree of brand prominence than women (luxury trait).

Luxury consumption varies based on nationality. The few studies investigating nationality report differences between consumers from Western and Eastern countries, between consumers in Western countries, and even among consumers from different European countries (e.g. Bian & Forsythe, 2012; Dubois et al., 2005; Eng & Bogaert, 2010; Godey et al., 2012; Phau & Prendergast, 2000). With a cross-country design, this study investigates consumers across three European countries: two South European countries, Italy and France, and one Nordic country, Finland.

Italians attach great importance to quality and craftsmanship, value the country of origin as an indicator of quality, and are less price sensitive (Amatulli & Guido, 2011; Godey et al., 2012). They also value the opportunity to distinguish themselves, the timelessness of the products they purchase, the quality affirmation of possessing a luxury product, and its aesthetic value (Amatulli & Guido, 2011). Amatulli and Guido (2011) found no motives around ostentation in the ownership of luxury goods, suggesting that Italian consumers prefer lower brand prominence. The French do not consider the country of origin and design important; they attach greater significance to the brand and the guarantee it comes with (Godey et al., 2012). If the brand itself is considered important, it could result in a need to display it, leading to a preference for loud brands. Finns attach great importance to active membership in a social community as one of the factors that affects their consumption habits. This kind of social consumption, often based on a need for belonging, can turn a brand into a necessity if it is considered a luxury in a particular social setting (Leipämaa-Leskinen, Jyrinki, & Laaksonen, 2012). This type of social consumption could suggest that Finns engage in self-monitoring and therefore prefer loud brands.

Unlike Finland, Italy and France set cultural and fashion trends, house the world's luxury capitals, and have a wide availability of luxury offerings, and self-presentation can be hard to accomplish through brand prominence on their streets. For Finns, brand prominence can have two interpretations. First, high-end luxury is hardly accessible, which may lead to a preference for products with loud branding, which can help consumers gain a higher social status. Second, this lack of availability can lead to a higher need for uniqueness among Finns, as luxury products are exclusive enough to satisfy their need for a high need for uniqueness. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H5a. Finns are higher in self-monitoring than French and Italians (personality trait).

H5b. Finns are higher in self-presentation than French and Italians (social trait).

H5c. Finns give more importance to high degree of brand prominence than French and Italians (luxury trait).

3. Methodology

3.1. Data sampling

The respondents completed a self-administered online questionnaire, including a picture sorting task, to test the relationship between the personality traits of need for uniqueness and self-monitoring (functions of social norms), social traits of self-expression and self-presentation (functions of social identity), and preferred degree of brand prominence (a luxury trait). To enable a comparison among the countries, this study was conducted in Finland, Italy, and France. While the Finns, and Nordic people in general, are rather casual in their choices and behaviors around clothing, Italy and France have a larger number of luxury consumers (Passariello, 2011).

To focus on the consumer segment of young people, the questionnaire was distributed among students at three universities—Hanken School of Economics in Finland, University of Milan in Italy, and Bordeaux École de Management in France. A convenience sampling procedure with students was used (Kelly, Clark, Brown, & Sitzia, 2003), and respondents' e-mail addresses were compiled from the Universities' registers and fellow students. In the short cover letter included in the e-mail sent to the students, they were kindly asked to participate in the study. The study purpose and academic use of the findings were explained, and the students were asked to answer the questionnaire at their earliest convenience. Finally, at the end, a web-link to the questionnaire was included. No gifts or rewards were given to those who completed the questionnaire. On receiving the invitation to participate in our study, most students responded instantly, and only four questionnaires had to be rejected owing to their incompleteness. For face validity, a small-scale version of the questionnaire was piloted in all countries (altogether 30 respondents). Based on that the used brands were reassured to represent high-end brands and only minor wordings in one question needed adjustment. The chosen consumer set was students who purchase luxury products, although they live in "economically limited conditions" (Leipämaa-Leskinen et al., 2012, p. 189), with lower income levels. This is a unique characteristic of the contemporary desire for luxury products, and it implies that motivational factors other than simply financial status underlie luxury consumption. Although most students are clearly not frequent consumers of high-end luxury products, any factors influencing even a single luxury purchase can be of importance for the aim of this study. Furthermore, in the context of the Dream Formula proposed by Dubois and Paternault (1995), the desire to own luxury items among this consumer set may guide the degree of brand prominence they favor as well as be influenced by the social needs discussed earlier.

3.2. Questionnaire design

The questionnaire was divided into three sections and administered in five languages—Finnish (Finland), Swedish (Finland), Italian (Italy, France), French (France, Italy), and English (Finland, Italy, France). The multilingual implementation was aimed at ensuring conceptual equivalence and achieving high response rate, as respondents could answer in the language they were more proficient in. To ensure consistency, the questionnaire was translated and then back-translated to the original language.

The first section captures the respondents' demographic characteristics such as nationality, age, and gender. The second section assessed their level of interest in loud or quiet brand conspicuousness. The respondents were asked to choose one out of two branded offerings in a hypothetical purchase scenario from each of the following five products—a Prada belt, a Gucci handbag (for women) or a briefcase (for men), a Louis Vuitton wallet, Mulberry gloves, and a Burberry iPad case. Respondents had to select a brand by ticking the box next to their choice. Pictures of each of these items were shown to the respondents, with the brand logo clearly visible (shouting) or hidden (whispering) in products with high or low brand prominence, respectively. For each product category, women and men had to choose between different product sets, except in case of the iPad case, which is a unisex item. To prevent respondents from favoring a specific brand over another owing to its design or color, both alternatives were always of the same brand

and of the same color family.

The third section was structured to measure the respondents' level of need for uniqueness, self-monitoring, and social identity. To assess the need for uniqueness on three dimensions—creative choice counter conformity, unpopular choice counter conformity, and avoidance of similarity—this study used Ruvio, Aviv, and Brencic's (2008) shorter version of the Tian et al. (2001) scale. For the purpose of this study and based on the recommendation of Bian and Forsythe (2012), only the first dimension (ability to modify self-presentation) of Lennox and Wolfe's scale was used (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984). To measure the social identity functions (self-expression, self-presentation), this study used the two scales developed by Wilcox et al. (2009): one measures value-expressive behavior and the other, social-adaptive behavior.

3.3. Data analysis

For statistical analysis and hypotheses testing, this study uses a 7-point Likert-style rating scale for the need for uniqueness (12 questions), self-monitoring (7 questions, called the SMscale), self-expression (4 question, called the SEscale), and self-presentation (4 question, called the SPscale), following the procedure proposed by Bian and Forsythe (2012). Cronbach's alpha calculated for each item on the scale exceeded 0.7, indicating good internal consistency (Table 1) (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). SMscale included two negatively worded items. These were removed as they had a negative impact on the internal consistency. Obviously, the respondents did not react to its full on the inverted scale items.

Social identity consists of two dimensions—self-expression and self-presentation, and comprised the SEscale and SPscale. The SMscale was used to measure social norms.

The information collected through the binominal brand prominence scale (BP-scale) was also converted to a nominal variable (BP-category), with the categories being connoisseur (0) and fashion consumers (1). In this study, the variable was coded so that respondents with scores of 5–6 and 7–10 points on the brand prominence scale were categorized as connoisseurs and fashion consumers, respectively. Therefore, connoisseurs could choose one loud product (coded as 2) while the remaining four had to be discreet (coded as 1). Two or more loud products resulted in being classified as a fashion consumer.

This study benefits from the use of structural equation modeling, and it uses the partial least squares (PLS) path analytic technique (Ringle, Wende, & Will, 2005) (Table 2). This was because of the confirmatory nature of this study (Jöreskog & Wold, 1982) and the method's strength in calculating unbiased estimates with small samples (Falk & Miller, 1992). The PLS method was executed in two steps (Barclay, Higgins, & Thompson, 1995; Hulland, 1999). First, the reliability and validity of the measurement model was assessed. Second, the structural model was assessed. For a more granular analysis of the effects of the need for uniqueness on brand prominence, three separate models were tested: one creative choice counter conformity item, one unpopular choice counter conformity item, and one avoidance of similarity item. The statistical significance of the path coefficients was tested using a bootstrapping procedure (Chin, 1998) with 251 cases and 5000 bootstrap samples, as suggested by Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2011). For checking the significance of the structural path, generated t-statistics were analyzed. Furthermore, the PLS outputs were assessed using composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). (Wong, 2013). A *t*-test and ANOVA were used to measure the differences in social identity and social norms based on gender and nationality.

Table 1
Internal consistency of the scale items.

	Cronbach's alpha
NFUCC	0.782
NFUUC	0.773
NFUAS	0.896
SMscale	0.750
SEscale	0.937
SPscale	0.795

Table 2
The hypotheses and statistical analyses.

No.	Hypotheses	Methods
1a	A high NFU relates positively to self-expression.	PLS-SEM
1b	High self-monitoring is negatively related to self-expression.	PLS-SEM
2a	High self-monitoring is positively related to self-presentation.	PLS-SEM
2b	A high NFU is negatively related to self-presentation.	PLS-SEM
3a	Self-expression is positively related to a preference for low brand prominence.	PLS-SEM
3b	A preference for low brand prominence is positively affected by NFU.	PLS-SEM
3c	Self-presentation is positively related to a preference for high brand prominence.	PLS-SEM
3d	A preference for high brand prominence is positively affected by self-monitoring.	PLS-SEM
4a	Men are higher in self-monitoring than women (personality trait)	*t*-Test
4b	Men are higher in self-presentation than women (social trait)	*t*-Test
4c	Men give more importance to high degree of brand prominence than women (luxury trait)	PLS-SEM
5a	Finns are higher in self-monitoring than French and Italians (personality trait)	ANOVA
5b	Finns are higher in self-presentation than French and Italians (social trait)	ANOVA
5c	Finns give more importance to high degree of brand prominence than French and Italians (luxury trait)	PLS-SEM

4. Results

4.1. Demographic statistics

The data sample analyzed for this paper consists of 215 respondents: 72 from Finland, 72 from Italy, and 71 from France. Of these, 139 were women and 76, men (Table 3). The respondents had an average age of 22.6 years (s = 3.15).

4.2. Preferred degree of brand prominence

As Table 4 illustrates, 140 (65.1%) respondents were categorized as connoisseur consumers (score of 5–6 on the brand prominence scale), whereas 75 (34.9%) were fashion consumers (score of 7–10). Furthermore, 78 (36.3%) respondents chose only discreet products, and 1 respondent preferred products with high brand prominence in all product groups.

A majority of the Finnish (79.2%) and French (69.0%) respondents were connoisseur consumers in comparison to the Italian ones. The Italian sample included the highest share of fashion consumers (52.8%). Table 5 shows the level of brand prominence for each brand.

Table 3
Sample characteristics.

		Gender		Total
		Female	Male	Age (average)
Nationality	Finnish	50 (69.4%)	22 (30.6%)	72
				23.7
	Italian	44 (61.1%)	28 (38.9%)	72
				23.4
	French	45 (63.4%)	26 (36.6%)	71
				20.8
	Total age (average)	139 (64.7%)	76 (35.3%)	215
		22.4	23.0	22.6

Table 4
Preferred degree of brand prominence based on nationality.

		Degree of brand prominence	
		Connoisseur	Fashion
Nationality	Finnish	57 (79.2%)	15 (20.8%)
	Italian	34 (47.2%)	38 (52.8%)
	French	49 (69.0%)	22 (31.0%)
	Total	140 (65.1%)	75 (34.9%)

Table 5
Gender and the chosen level of brand prominence for each brand.

		Gender			
		Female		Male	
		Low/quiet	High/loud	Low/quiet	High/loud
Brand	Prada	115 (82.7%)	24 (17.3%)	61 (80.3%)	15 (19.7%)
	Gucci	111 (79.9%)	28 (20.1%)	54 (71.1%)	22 (28.9%)
	Louis Vuitton	111 (79.9%)	28 (20.1%)	63 (82.9%)	13 (17.1%)
	Mulberry	105 (75.5%)	34 (24.5%)	61 (80.3%)	15 (19.7%)
	Burberry	86 (61.9%)	53 (38.1%)	59 (77.6%)	17 (22.4%)

Both women and men prefer low brand prominence. The Burberry iPad case with high brand prominence was selected by 38.1% of female respondents, and the Gucci briefcase with high brand prominence was selected by 28.9% of male respondents.

The largest difference was seen for Prada for women (only 17.3% wanted the belt with the logo) and Louis Vuitton for men (only 17.1% wanted the wallet with the trademark “LV” monogram). The results for women could be because the belts were too different: the discreetly branded belt had a gold-colored buckle, whereas the loud one had a silver-colored buckle, and this could have impacted their choice. For men, however, both buckles were of the same color. The Burberry iPad case was used for comparison because it was the only product common to both men and women. Based on this product category, 38.1% of women were classified as fashion consumers based on their choice between the loud and discreet Burberry product; 22.4% men were classified as fashion consumers.

4.3. Measurement model

Factor loadings were investigated and found to be above 0.5, indicating good item reliability (Hulland, 1999). For assessing the convergent validity, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were used (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All latent constructs except self-monitoring had AVE above 0.5, and CR exceeded 0.7, indicating adequate convergence reliability (Chin, 1998) (Table 6).

4.4. Structural model and hypotheses testing

Four out of the fourteen hypotheses tested were fully accepted, one was partially supported, and nine were rejected (Table 7). Significant relationships were found between self-monitoring and self-expression and between self-monitoring and brand prominence, but in the reverse direction from the assumptions made in H1b and H3d. These results are indicative of the complex structure that exists between personality, social, and luxury brand traits. Not as assumed in hypothesis 5c Finns do not long for high degree of brand prominence.

Based on the significant paths, an aggregated visual model is shown in Fig. 2. It shows how the need for uniqueness and self-monitoring influence the respondents' use of luxury brands for self-expression and self-presentation. These findings indicate that consumers in social situations engage in status consumption triggered by their personality traits (need for uniqueness and self-monitoring), and they use brand logos to enhance their originality and self-image.

The level of creative choice counter conformity (H3b) has a positive effect and self-monitoring has a negative effect (H3d) on the degree of brand prominence or the choice between loud or discrete products. Still to be noticed is that the preference for low brand prominence goes up when both the need for uniqueness and self-monitoring increases. As assumed, the need for uniqueness affects self-expression (H1a), and self-

Table 6
Estimates of the measurement model parameters.

	Original sample	Sample mean	STD	T-statistics	AVE	CR
NFUCC					0.575	0.842
NFU 1	0.650	0.644	0.076	8.569		
NFU 2	0.692	0.678	0.074	9.308		
NFU 3	0.881	0.881	0.026	33.498		
NFU 4	0.789	0.784	0.036	21.714		
SM					0.494	0.825
SM 1	0.738	0.730	0.040	18.242		
SM 2	0.848	0.845	0.024	36.057		
SM 3	0.772	0.774	0.047	16.520		
SM 5	0.629	0.614	0.076	8.266		
SM 7	0.462	0.450	0.097	4768		
SE					0.842	0.955
SE 1	0.874	0.876	0.019	44.817		
SE 2	0.946	0.946	0.008	108.376		
SE 3	0.940	0.941	0.008	107.149		
SE 4	0.909	0.909	0.012	74.946		
SP					0.629	0.869
SP 1	0.568	0.569	0.040	13.929		
SP 2	0.807	0.808	0.019	42.036		
SP 3	0.896	0.896	0.012	74,435		
SP 4	0.861	0.859	0.015	54.853		
NFUUC					0.466	0.763
NFU 5	0.501	0.501	0.188	2.105		
NFU 6	0.602	0.583	0.188	3.189		
NFU 7	0.689	0.671	0.167	4.116		
NFU 8	0.932	0.905	0.063	14.757		
SM					0.494	0.825
SM 1	0.738	0.738	0.037	19.464		
SM 2	0.848	0.839	0.023	35.658		
SM 3	0.772	0.762	0.049	15.700		
SM 5	0.628	0.618	0.082	7.635		
SM 7	0.501	0.501	0.114	4.029		
SE					0.842	0.955
SE 1	0.875	0.874	0.018	47.723		
SE 2	0.944	0.944	0.009	101.622		
SE 3	0.939	0.939	0.009	98.077		
SE 4	0.909	0.909	0.012	71.448		
SP					0.630	0.869
SP 1	0.569	0.574	0.037	15.306		
SP 2	0.806	0.805	0.023	34.954		
SP 3	0.895	0.895	0.010	82.543		
SP 4	0.860	0.860	0.013	62.236		
NFUAS					0.749	0.922
NFU 9	0.868	0.848	0.074	11.660		
NFU 10	0.867	0.844	0.090	9.539		
NFU 11	0.837	0.821	0.122	6.837		
NFU 12	0.887	0.867	0.094	9.388		
SM					0.494	0.825
SM 1	0.738	0.732	0.037	19.436		
SM 2	0.848	0.839	0.024	34.672		
SM 3	0.771	0.767	0.042	18.158		
SM 5	0.628	0.619	0.088	7.121		
SM 7	0.501	0.501	0.111	4.136		
SE					0.842	0.955
SE 1	0.875	0.873	0.017	49.128		
SE 2	0.945	0.944	0.008	112.640		
SE 3	0.940	0.938	0.009	102.960		
SE 4	0.908	0.908	0.010	84.236		
SP					0.629	0.868
SP 1	0.568	0.571	0.037	15.281		
SP 2	0.806	0.806	0.020	39.818		
SP 3	0.895	0.893	0.010	85.424		
SP 4	0.861	0.861	0.014	61.127		

Table 7
Hypotheses testing.

No.	Hypotheses		Path and test statistics
1a	High need for uniqueness is positively related to self-expression.	✓	NFUCC - 0.216** - SE NFUUC - 0.181** - SE NFUAS - 0.084* - SE
1b	High self-monitoring is negatively related to self-expression.	✗(R)	SM - 0.103** - SE (NFUCC) SM - 0.098* - SE (NFUUC) SM - 0.120** - SE (NFUAS)
2a	High self-monitoring is positively related to self-presentation.	✓	SM - 0.162** - SP (NFUCC) SM - 0.154** - SP (NFUUC) SM - 0.169** - SP (NFUAS)
2b	High need for uniqueness is negatively related to self-presentation.	✗	NFUCC - 0.009 - SP NFUUC - 0.054 - SP NFUAS - − 0.053 - SP
3a	Self-expression is positively related to a preference for low brand prominence.	✗	SE - 0.067 - BP (NFUCC) SE - 0.042 - BP (NFUUC) SE - 0.042 - BP (NFUAS)
3b	Need for uniqueness affects positively preference for low brand prominence.	✓/✗	NFUCC - 0.162** - BP NFUUC - 0.076 - BP NFUAS - 0.061 - BP
3c	Self-presentation is positively related to a preference for high brand prominence.	✗	SP - 0.078 - BP (NFUCC) SP - 0.077 - BP (NFUUC) SP - 0.090 - BP (NFUAS)
3d	Self-monitoring affects positively a preference for high brand prominence.	✗(R)	SM - − 0.161** - BP (NFUCC) SM - − 0.153** - BP (NFUUC) SM - − 0.149** - BP (NFUAS)
4a	Men are higher in self-monitoring than women (personality trait).	✓	Gender (t = − 3.741**)
4b	Men are higher in self-presentation than women (social trait).	✓	Gender (t = − 3.504**)
4c	Men give more importance to high degree of brand prominence than women (luxury trait).	✗	Gender - − 0.030 - BP (NFUCC) Gender - − 0.048 - BP (NFUUC) Gender - − 0.049 - BP (NFUAS)
5a	Finns are higher in self-monitoring than French and Italians (personality trait).	✗	Nat. (F = 3.745*)
5b	Finns are higher in self-presentation than French and Italians (social trait).	✗	Nat. (F = 0.649)
5c	Finns give more importance to high degree of brand prominence than French and Italians (luxury trait).	✗(R)	Nat. - − 0.215** - BP (NFUCC) Nat. - − 0.218** - BP (NFUUC) Nat. - − 0.224** - BP (NFUAS)

✓ = confirmed, ✗ = rejected, ✗(R) = rejected (significant with a reversed effect).
** Sig < 0.001.
* Sig < 0.005.

monitoring affects self-presentation (H2a), indicating that personality traits influence social traits; however, social traits do not influence brand prominence (H3a, H3c). One key feature of this structure is that as against the assumption H1b, how the respondents' level of self-monitoring has a positive effect on self-expression indicates that young consumers are reflexive and choose to use luxury brands as per the social situation. A significant link between need for uniqueness and self-presentation was not found in this study (H2b). No gender differences were found in terms of brand prominence (H4c); however, Finns, compared to the French and Italians, were found to be more connoisseur than fashion consumers, which is in reverse direction to the postulated hypothesis (H5c).

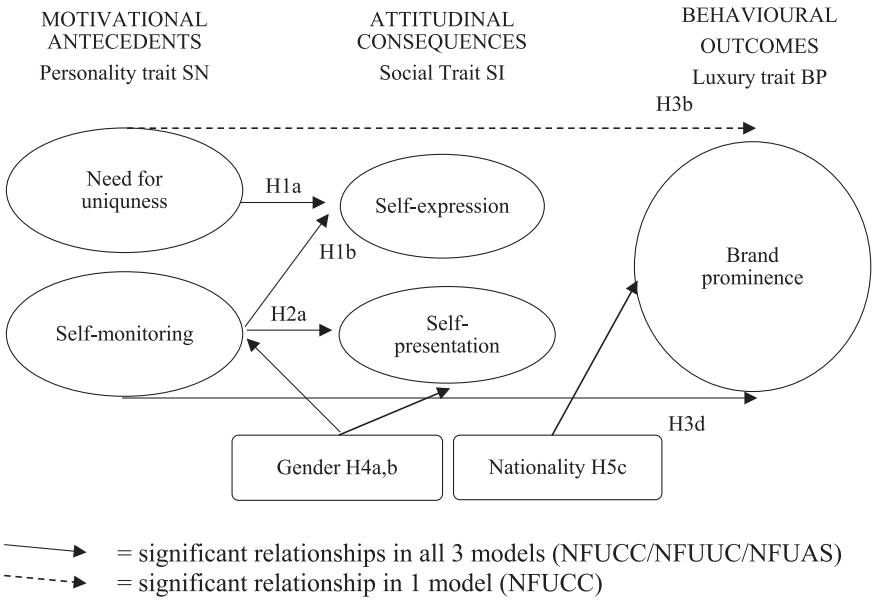

Fig. 2. Results of the PLS analysis—an aggregated model.

With regard to social identity and social norms, the findings showed that more men than women used luxury brands for self-expression and self-presentation (H4b) and were more adaptive to social norms (H4a). Finally, some differences exist in social norms (H5a), as the French respondents adjusted significantly more to social norms than the Italian respondents. Finally, hypothesis 5b testing if Finns are higher in self-presentation than French and Italians, was rejected.

5. Conclusions

This study examined the effects of social norms and social identity on consumers' preferences regarding brand prominence among high-end luxury products. It also explored the mediating effects of culture and gender on the same. Previous studies have classified consumers according to their preference for either loud or discreet products based on their need for status (Han et al., 2010; Wilcox et al., 2009). However, they have not explicitly analyzed how luxury brand consumers' need for uniqueness and self-monitoring affects their choices between luxury brands that shout versus those that whisper, i.e., vary in terms of brand prominence.

This study contributes to luxury research by finding that the need for uniqueness affects self-expression and self-monitoring affects self-presentation. In the case of luxury brands, this indicates how consumers' social needs impacts their use of luxury brands as an extension of their social identity or social traits. This means that consumers with a high need for uniqueness use luxury brands to express their personal style in social settings, whereas those with high self-monitoring prefer using luxury brands as a way to modify their self-presentation to better fit into their social context. In line with past research, the findings reveal significant differences between self-monitoring and the social identity function (e.g., Bian & Forsythe, 2012). Further, although not predicted at the outset, this study suggests that luxury brand consumers with a high need for self-monitoring use these brands as a means of self-presentation as well as self-expression. These findings, along with those of Bian and Forsythe (2012), who found that self-expression and self-presentation are not two discrete features but rather together form the single entity of the social identity function, have implications for the functional theory of attitudes. Therefore, the findings suggest that generational changes may have occurred since the functional theory of attitudes was first introduced and that young adults do not distinguish between their self-image and social image to the extent that previous theory has suggested. The findings show that young people who self-monitor are rather reflexive—informed and conscious—and may use luxury brands as a means of self-presentation or self-expression depending on the social situation. Contemporary Western societies are individualistic and self-oriented, a feature seen in today's trend of capturing “selfies.” Selfies have a meaning only when they are shared among one's peers, whether friends or strangers, to provide instant gratification. This means that those who self-monitor may need cues from others on how to blend in. However, blending in does not only mean being similar to others but also being different in ways perceived acceptable by society. It thus appears that contemporary luxury consumers' behavior is transforming and becoming rather multifaceted. Young luxury consumers evidently share some traits. However, they deserve to be acknowledged as consumers distinguished by a unique set of traits. Therefore, segmenting them on the basis of age alone is too limiting. Further studies are needed to completely validate these findings.

This study also contributes by analyzing brand prominence and finding that consumers in social situations engage in status consumption triggered by their personality traits serving social needs (need for uniqueness and self-monitoring), whereby they use brand logos to enhance their uniqueness and self-image. In this study, most consumers appeared to be connoisseurs who preferred luxury brands that whisper, potentially as a means of private status. Nonetheless, personality traits drive consumers to seek such brands out for different reasons. Those consumers having a high need for uniqueness and who seek approved social dissimilarity prefer discreet brand logos because they have a need for originality. In contrast, those who self-monitor to a high degree tend to prefer brands that whisper because it enhances their self-image in social situations.

The present study is one of the few with cross-cultural evidence (e.g. Bian & Forsythe, 2012), and it contributes by showing that differences exist between nationalities in terms of self-monitoring. This implies that cultural norms influence the need to control one's image in the social context. The findings show that the French are more motivated than Italians to alter their use of luxury brands according to their social setting, whereas Italians would rather remain true to their values. With a focus on national differences in preferences around brand prominence, this study also contributes to theory by showing that nationality influences brand prominence and is a key dimension in the context of luxury behavior. The results show that Finns prefer, more than both the French and Italians, discrete visible markings on products. This suggests that nationality could serve as a determining factor in preferences around brand prominence and that cultural norms affect luxury brand choice. However, this study could not construct a theoretical framework of social needs and the function of social identity that determines the preferred degree of brand prominence. Therefore, what really influences the choice between loud and quiet brands remains unknown, and further studies are required on this topic.

This study also explored differences between genders in brand prominence and the way in which gender affects a consumer's preferred design. Gender differences were found in self-monitoring, self-expression, and self-presentation. This study found that more men than women link luxury brands to self-expression and self-presentation; this has implications for marketing theory in terms of segmentation and brand management. In addition, the results suggest that no differences exist between men and women and their way of choosing between loud and quiet brands. However, the group sizes may have been too different from each other or too small overall to spot significant differences.

5.1. Managerial implications

The fact that discreet products were favored over products with visible brand markings has managerial implications. It is possible that the high prevalence of counterfeits and democratization of the luxury market with new products have made luxury brands less exclusive. The fact that loud luxury appears cheaper than its quiet version implies that consumers care about prices and do not mind spending a little bit more once they have decided to invest in a luxury product (Kapferer, 2010). For luxury brand managers, this could mean that pricing has to be reconsidered for loud luxury products, as lowering prices to gain more market share may affect the future of luxury brands and the exclusivity so closely associated with them. Loud luxury may also be considered too trendy and may be very sensitive to seasonal changes in style. While timelessness is considered one of the core pillars of luxury, luxury consumers likely prefer luxury as a long-term investment. Therefore, managers have to focus on subtle branding, for example, the brand story, heritage, and use of materials.

Because this study revealed differences among nationalities in the preference for brand prominence, brand managers can consider segmentation strategies in creating different product lines for different markets. Further, a distinction could be made between mature and emerging markets in terms of brands' product lines. In mature markets where luxury brands have been available for a long time, consumers may prefer discreet products as they may have learned to distinguish between brands even in the absence of visible markings. The countries included in this study are all mature luxury markets, and the respondents did tend to choose discreet products, showing that segmentation is justified. In emerging markets where new stores are constantly being opened, luxury brands still have a certain novelty factor. This could result in a craving for visible logos that help consumers show

themselves as pioneer owners of a specific luxury brand. Although past research showed that luxury brands do not need to target luxury consumers, the results of this study indicate that such a need exists after all. If countries and markets differ from each other in their preferences for brand prominence, targeting is needed to reach the right customers. In addition, managers of luxury brands must contemplate whether it is necessary to divide their brands into parent brands with smaller lines of products to a much larger extent than earlier.

5.2. Limitations and future research

This study has limitations that should be compensated for by future researchers. First, the sample only included students, who do not necessarily represent the larger population of luxury consumers. Second, the study's research tool included accessible luxury products only (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). Perhaps accessible luxury goods are too accessible, resulting in the desire for discreet products that are not as easily recognizable. Future research could investigate the link between access and brand prominence. For example, Louis Vuitton and Goyard seem similar in terms of product lines, country of origin, and history, but vary in accessibility. What is the effect of the Goyard pattern—recognizable to connoisseur consumers—and the globally recognized Louis Vuitton monogram on consumer behavior? Third, this study only considered three nationalities that all represent mature markets. For a better generalization of the findings, consumers of other nationalities could be included in a follow-up study. How young men and women in emerging markets use brand prominence for conspicuous consumption remains unexplored.

As few significant results showing what really influences the choice between loud and quiet brands were obtained in this study, brand prominence is a fruitful area of study for future research. The current study could be replicated but in another setting and by using other scales and another way for testing the preferred degree of brand prominence. Also, future research could focus on social pressure and for that use scales measuring dependence and interdependence self-constructs and constructs related to materialistic traits. Other brands and products could be tested, as differences in brand prominence exist in other product categories too. For inspiration, the theoretical framework used in this study could be combined with that used by Cheach et al. (2015) to explain the willingness to buy luxury brands. In this manner, a more comprehensive testing model could be developed.

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