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Perceived Brand Image of Luxury Fashion and Vintage Fashion—An Insight into Chinese Millennials' Attitudes and Motivations

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7.1 Luxury and Vintage Fashion in China

The Chinese luxury market, the second largest market after the USA, has seen a dramatic increase in sales figures, accounting for 20% of global turnover in 2015 (Atsmon et al. 2016; Roberts 2017). The sheer purchasing power of this emerging economy makes China an attractive destination for luxury fashion brands seeking to expand their business (D'Arpozio et al. 2014). Young Chinese consumers are the key target audience for luxury fashion, as their ability to travel to the West further exposes them to fashion brands such as Hermès, Chanel and Louis Vuitton (LV). Purchasing, owning and wearing luxury fashion

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has become a statement in the Chinese market, which can be linked to motivational reasons such as value consciousness, susceptibility to normative influence and the need for uniqueness (Zhan and He 2012). Luxury fashion in this chapter follows the understanding of Phau and Prendergast (2000) and Henninger et al. (2017) and is characterised through exclusivity, well-known brands (e.g. Hermès, Chanel, and LV), increased brand awareness, good customer service quality and enhanced customer well-being.

Within the Western Hemisphere, vintage fashion has emerged as the newest must have 'it' trend, which steadily spills over to China. Vintage fashion within the literature is broadly divided into two categories, which we term: *new* and *authentic* vintage (the latter forms the focus of this chapter). Luxury fashion houses, such as Burberry or Chanel, have developed *vintage-inspired* clothing lines that emphasise the brand's heritage and fashion trends of the 1920s–1980s, which here is referred to as *new* vintage. An *authentic* vintage fashion item is a 'rare and authentic piece that represents the style of a particular couture or era' (Gerval 2008), namely the 1920s to the 1980s. *Authentic* vintage pieces can either be pre-loved secondhand garments that now gain a second lifespan, items that have been worn once, for example on a catwalk, or even have never been worn. Yet all vintage items, in order to be classified as *authentic* vintage, need to have originated between the 1920s and the 1980s. The significance of the vintage fashion market in the West is mirrored in its sales figures, which have reached £2.8bn in 2015 (Brooks 2015). In the Asian market, specifically China, purchasing vintage is still an emerging phenomenon that is popular with millennial consumers, who were born in the 1980s/1990s, are technology savvy and strive for a unique identity (Tolkien 2002; Smith 2011). Thus far, vintage stores have predominantly emerged in first tier cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, with limited uptake in second and third tier cities (Xu et al. 2014).

A reason for the relatively slow uptake of *authentic* vintage fashion can be explained through the fact that vintage fashion is linked to the secondhand movement, which had and still has (to some extent) a negative connotation in the Chinese market, as it is associated with a low social status, low financial income and unhygienic conditions

(Belk 1988; Roux and Korchia 2006; Beard 2008). This differs dramatically from the West, where *authentic* vintage fashion is perceived to be unique and trendy, and part of the luxury movement, as individual garments can achieve a high price. To explain, a secondhand 1940s vintage dress designed by Lanvin has previously been sold for £7000, whilst a secondhand 1970s dress from Yves Saint Laurent's Russian collection achieved £35,000 (Beugge 2013). With young Chinese consumers being not only exposed to, but also embrace Western culture, a question that emerges is whether the negative connotations associated with vintage fashion are fading.

This chapter contributes to knowledge by exploring millennials' perceptions and attitudes towards *authentic* vintage clothing consumption in China and compares this to luxury fashion, which thus far lacks research (Cervellon et al. 2012; Xu et al. 2014). Practically, this research contributes by providing suggestions to vintage fashion retailers on how to enhance their brand image and target millennials more successfully, whilst at the same time move into an untapped market potential: second and third tier cities.

7.2 Brand Image, Motivation and Attitudes of Chinese Consumers

Brand image as a concept can best be defined as a set of emotional responses and attitudes towards a brand/product held in the consumers' minds (Low and Lamb 2000). It is a mental creation that is subjective in nature and strongly dependent on any associations and/or beliefs a consumer holds about a brand, which may be influenced by peers and opinion leaders. We explore in how far the brand image between 'luxury items' differs by focusing on *authentic* vintage garments and "current" luxury fashion garments (those that can be seen in shopping centres now) from luxury brand houses, such as Chanel, Burberry, Louis Vuitton, Yves Saint Laurent and Hermès. A question that arises here is why consumers may have differing mental images of, for example, a 1970s Yves Saint Laurent dress and one that has recently been

showcased in an Yves Saint Laurent store in London, from the perspective of Chinese millennial consumers.

Amaldoss and Jain (2005) highlight that consumers' purchasing decisions depend not only on the products' functions, but also on their social needs and the social status these products portray to their peer groupings. This is especially of interest within this research context where saving face and virtue are of importance (Chen and Kim 2013). Fashion brands need to carefully manage their brand image and values associated with their fashion lines. Whilst fashion items designed and currently sold by luxury fashion houses have a prestigious standing in the industry and among Chinese millennial consumers, this may not necessarily be transferred to *authentic* vintage fashion as the image held by consumers still features negative connotations (Kort et al. 2006). Why this may be the case and whether this can be influenced to change is explored in this research.

Creating a coherent brand image in the mind of Chinese consumers is different from the West. Whilst luxury brands often use their values, rich heritage and strong reputation to attract customers, this may not necessarily work in China, where an attention to detail is required to build up impeccable customer service and an exclusive brand experience (De Barnier et al. 2012; Henninger et al. 2017). Thus, the image of the designer and brand's spokesperson, as well as product features and general looks are increasingly important to create a coherent image (Giovannini et al. 2015). In order to move a brand forward, it therefore needs to understand what their target audience values, which suggests that consumer attitudes towards the brand and the motivational drivers underlying their purchasing decisions become vital (Blattberg and Deighton 1996). Wang et al. (2011) identified three different types of attitudes in Chinese 'luxury' consumers: elitist, distant and democratic. The elitist attitude assumes that consumers purchasing luxury fashion belong to the upper class and interpret cultural and symbolic meaning to luxury goods, which implies that these items should not be affordable to everyone, but rather geared towards an 'elite' group in society (Chen and Lamberti 2015). Distant attitude implies that consumers believe acquiring any type of luxury item is wasteful and should not form part of inner fulfilment (Wang et al. 2011). On the other hand, the democratic attitude highlights

that luxury can form part of an inner fulfilment strategy. Unlike the elitist attitude, the democratic attitude believes that acquiring and/or owning luxury items is unrelated to social status, educational levels, or taste in fashion (McQuarrie and Philips 2014; Seo and Buchanan 2015).

In summary, the literature review indicates that Chinese consumers (millennials) may still have reservations towards acquiring vintage fashion, due to being associated with the secondhand movement. Although this way of thinking is slowly changing, it remains dominant, which is reflected in the slow uptake of vintage stores across different tier cities. Luxury in itself remains strongly linked to social status and saving face, as well as demonstrating the belonging to a specific social class.

7.3 Methodology

This research focuses on Chinese millennials and their perceptions of luxury fashion and *authentic* vintage fashion in terms of brand image. This exploratory research takes on a qualitative approach and conducted 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Chinese millennial consumers, living in Tier 1 and 2 cities. Interviews were split almost equally between male and female consumers, with a range of educational backgrounds. Participants for this research were chosen purposively with all participants having had experience of ‘entering’ luxury and vintage stores and having previously bought new luxury items, *authentic* vintage, or both (Table 7.1). On average, the interviews lasted for approximately 30 minutes, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview questions were designed based on the literature review and grouped into different themes, which allowed participants to explore new luxury and *authentic* luxury in detail.

NVivo was utilised to better manage the data set; the coding process followed Easterby-Smith et al.’s (2015) seven-step guide of familiarisation, conceptualising, cataloguing, re-coding, linking and re-evaluating, which allowed for themes and patterns to emerge organically. With multiple researchers (re)coding the data set, discrepancies were carefully looked at and discussed; the results were shown to the participants for validation purposes.

Table 7.1 Summary of data collection (authors' own)

Age	Participant number (Is)	Education level
Male		
24	2	BSc/BA
20	3	A level equivalent
24	5	BSc/BA
22	10	BSc/BA
24	12	MSc/MA/PhD
25	13	MSc/MA/PhD
Female		
24	1	BSc/BA
22	4	BSc/BA
24	6	BSc/BA
23	7	MSc/MA/PhD
23	8	MSc/MA/PhD
23	9	MSc/MA/PhD
19	11	A level equivalent
24	14	MSc/MA/PhD
23	15	MSc/MA/PhD

7.4 Findings and Discussion

7.4.1 New Luxury and Authentic Vintage for Own Use

Data indicate that participants predominantly gain their information on the newest luxury fashion trends from movies, fashion magazines, or online articles. Similar statements were made for vintage fashion: *'the first time I knew about the vintage fashion is from an article that introduced all information about the vintage fashion'* (Is8) and *'I often find those styles in the retro movie... people dress in vintage (garments) and create a unique style'* (Is10). Data suggest that *authentic* vintage fashion is associated with unique attributes geared towards people who want to create a unique identity enhanced through garments that are not commonly available on the high street. With an increasing trend to break away from the norm (Mintel 2017), vintage fashion gains momentum within the Chinese market and especially millennial consumers become increasingly aware of the trend, even though currently vintage stores only have a physical presence in Tier 1 cities (Xu et al. 2014). Opinion leaders and mass media seem to be influential

in terms of making *authentic* vintage fashion not only more prominent in the market place, but also acceptable and accessible for a broader audience.

Table 7.2 provides a summary of insights into purchasing new luxury versus *authentic* vintage that emerged from our data. When asked to discuss their new luxury and *authentic* vintage purchases, participants elaborated quite extensively on the new luxury category. A variety of brands were mentioned throughout the interview and different product categories they (participants) have recently acquired, such as dresses, wallets, shoes, accessories, and beauty products (cosmetics). Data indicate that one of the reasons why participants purchase new luxury garments is to be seen as an early adopter of fashion trends and express their love for individual designers: *'I love the designer of the luxury fashion brand so that I purchase their items'* (Is4). Findings suggest that participants were proud of their purchases and wanted to show these off to their family and friends—monetary value of the items were openly discussed, as well as where they have first seen these items, for example online through bloggers, in movies, or in magazines. Respondents highlighted that reasons for purchasing new luxury are simply because *'I can afford it'* (Is3), which highlights that being able to portray a status symbol is part of the

Table 7.2 Summary of new luxury versus authentic vintage discussions (authors' own)

New luxury			Authentic vintage		
Category	Brand	Is	Category	Brand	Is
Leather goods	Gucci, LV, Chanel	4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13	Leather goods	None mentioned	4, 8, 15
Garments	Burberry, Moschino, Vetements	5, 11, 12, 13, 15	Garments		4, 8, 8, 15
Accessories	D&G, LV, Burberry	5, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15	Accessories		8
Beauty products	D&G, Dior, YSL	1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 15	Other products (lighter, musical instruments)		5, 15

luxury experience (Amaldoss and Jain 2005). Similarly, Participant 4 insists '*I think boys will pay more attention to me*' (Is14); thus, desirability and social acceptance are key motivational drivers, which link to an elite attitude (Chen and Lamberti 2015). Other interviewees further state '*I really enjoy the service at Burberry*' (Is15) as it creates a feeling of being important (Phau and Prendergast 2000) and an opportunity '*to be dressed like the coolest girl*' (Is9). Value for money was also strongly featured: '*luxury fashion's called 'luxury' due to their high quality... they can be used for a very long time... and when you touch them, you will find the difference*' (Is6). These findings concur with extant research (Vickers and Renand 2003; Berthon et al. 2009) in that the purchase of luxury fashion is seen to be a pleasurable activity and products are associated with high quality. Data suggest the individual steps from choosing a luxury item to acquiring it is an enjoyable experience that is unique and enhances the individual's well-being, as they feel special with people taking care of their needs (e.g. Henninger et al. 2017).

Contrarily, when discussing *authentic* vintage, participants are seemingly reserved and carefully word their answers. Neither of the participants explicitly mentioned which vintage shop they have been to, how often they shop at vintage stores (online and/or offline), what they have previously bought from these stores, or what brand the purchased item was from. Data suggest that vintage fashion is still a taboo topic and whilst becoming trendier (Xu et al. 2014), it seems to have an almost negative stigma attached to it. Although a majority of interviewees highlight '*I really admire people who (are) dressed in vintage fashion*' (Is6), they personally '*rather not own it*' (Is6) or '*actually I do wanna try vintage but I still think that is not my style*' (Is10), others have a strong feeling against purchasing *authentic* vintage: '*No, I cannot accept it... I just don't like vintage fashion... Vintage fashion is too old and I do not like secondhand clothes*' (Is14). This finding may be surprising seeing as participants categorise *authentic* vintage more strongly as part of the luxury industry rather than secondhand, as '*they come from luxury fashion items... when luxury fashion items become old, then they became vintage fashion items*' (Is11). It was further suggested that *authentic* vintage garments are worth more than any new luxury item, as '*vintage fashion items have a special meaning, which cannot be measured*

in monetary terms... the story of vintage items makes vintage become a kind of luxury' (Is8). The sentiment of storytelling, heritage and having a unique history were mentioned by a variety of participants: '*items can be replaced, but the history will not*' (Is5), in this manner '*the item experienced different generations and people, it has been added various stories, which is very interesting... when the vintage item belongs to me, then I added another new story to it*' (Is9). The more the participants knew about the garment, the more comfortable they became in speaking about their purchase—the *authentic* vintage piece transformed into a little treasure that has a connection with the new owner and it almost seemed as if they were protective of it. To explain, rather than hiding the fact that the item they have recently bought is secondhand, participants do not want to state where they got the item from, as it is a treasure, a find that is special and that they want to keep for themselves. The new owners now have the opportunity to extend the garment's history through creating their own memories. This emotional attachment and sentiment is a clear distinction between new luxury and *authentic* vintage fashion and is strongly dependent on how well the garment's history is documented. Participants further indicate that clear distinctions need to be made in terms of what *authentic* vintage is, as they identified two existing types of *authentic* vintage fashion '*one is very elegant and expensive... the other is very cheap like secondhand items*' (Is5). This suggests that if *authentic* vintage is elegant and expensive, it may be more acceptable than everyday secondhand items from the same era—the latter could still be associated with low-income earners and an undesirable social status (Roux and Korchia 2006; Beard 2008). Although aspects of hygiene were not explicitly mentioned, they seemed to be part of the underlying issue, as participants highlighted that they would not purchase all leather goods secondhand, only handbags, as, for example, jackets, skirts, or other garments cannot be cleaned in the same manner as a cotton dress.

In summary, the findings thus far suggest that *authentic* vintage fashion still remains 'the underdog' in China, with participants feeling uncomfortable to discussing their purchases openly and in-depth, as the elite attitude remains dominant with the society (Chen and Lamberti 2015). Although *authentic* vintage is seen as a luxury product, findings

indicate that the shopping experience differs from new luxury, where the customer is the centre of attention. Yet, dressing in a vintage outfit allows participants to create a unique image that can be linked to self-actualisation. Data further indicate that *authentic* vintage fashion gains a different status, if the history of the garment is known, as emotional attachments can be formed and associations to prior owners made.

7.4.2 New Luxury and Authentic Vintage—Own Purchase Versus Gift Giving

When asked about luxury items (new and vintage), participants agreed that the brand name was of utter importance, as it portrays a mental image that can be either extremely favourable, trendy, elegant, or more mainstream or, in some instances negative—*‘the brand image always plays an important role when I decided to purchase from a luxury fashion brand, it adds value to every fashion item’* (Is1). Yet, the *‘brand image is not about what the brand says, it’s more about what the consumer thinks’* (Is2), which further emphasises the fact that the brand image is a subjective concept that can be different for different people (Low and Lamb 2000). Although the brand’s image is of importance, participants made clear distinctions between different types of luxury brands: *‘building a brand image is not important for classic or famous luxury fashion brands, but it is very necessary for newly (established) luxury fashion brands’* (Is5). This indicates that established brands with a rich heritage that have already been on the market for a significant amount of time may no longer need to try and create a favourable brand image, as they already seem to have one that may only need some updating over the years. Contrarily, newly emerging fashion brands within the luxury sector do need to work hard on their image, as participants pointed out that *‘sometimes the brand image cannot be understood the first time, but it can be understood as time goes on and it’s more well known’* (Is7). This implies that luxury fashion brands need to gain social acceptance before they are classified as ‘being’ luxury.

Participants have different preferences when purchasing luxury items for themselves or as a present for a third party. Whilst they may be

inclined to purchase *authentic* vintage for themselves, ‘*if I want to purchase something as a gift for someone, especially for older people, it is better to choose a luxury fashion item with a well-known brand name*’ (Is10). It is implied here that saving face plays a key role in making this decision, as participants do not want to be seen as purchasing a ‘cheap’ gift and/or something that could offend the recipient of the present—as secondhand fashion remains to have a negative connotation (Chen and Kim 2013; Chen and Lamberti 2015). This finding is important in that even though the *authentic* vintage item could be an Yves Saint Laurent handbag or Lanvin dress and thus, have been produced by a reputable brand with a positive brand image, the fact that it is vintage overshadows the brands’ brand images and creates a negative connotation. Simply the word ‘vintage’ seems to trigger the association with lower income and social status, even though some vintage garments may have been never worn or only once at a catwalk show.

The quote by Interviewee 10 implies that whilst luxury items may be purchased for ‘*older people*’, the younger generation of Chinese consumers are more acceptant of the vintage movement: ‘*different times bring different concepts for which we develop a different image*’ (Is2). Interviewee 15 further emphasises that for new luxury and *authentic* vintage, ‘*the target groups are not the same, so the brand image has changed. In that generation, vintage fashion represent a kind of fashion, and now represents a different feeling*’. This suggests that millennial consumers are more inclined to change their opinion about vintage fashion and embrace a new trend within the industry.

The findings indicate that *authentic* vintage fashion and its associated brand image is standing at a crossroad. Whilst it has a potential market value, as it can create a unique identity that moves away from mainstream fashion and thus may be seen as slightly more rebellious, the fact that saving face is a powerful cultural underpinning in the Chinese market, which can diminish this trend in the fashion industry. Data suggest that *authentic* vintage fashion has the potential to grow in China, yet it needs to be carefully marketed, by clearly highlighting the history and heritage of the garments.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter was set out to explore Chinese millennials' perceptions and attitudes towards *authentic* vintage clothing consumption in China and compares this to luxury fashion. In doing so, we found that *authentic* vintage fashion purchases are almost secretive investments. Whilst some participants are proud of the treasures they have acquired, saving face and the fear of being classified as someone from a lower social class dictate that general behaviour of talking about these items. Interestingly, the more is known about the garment's history and heritage, the more acceptable it becomes among consumers, which highlights a marketing opportunity. Rather than following the Western style of selling *authentic* vintage clothes in stores that are tight of space, it seems that being able to provide information and potentially displaying the garments history would create a unique selling proposition. In this manner, *authentic* vintage stores in China could be modified to closer align with new luxury fashion stores, in which customer service is vital.

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