

7 Indulging the Self Positive Consequences of Luxury Consumption

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7.1	Introduction.....	121
7.2	Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development	122
7.3	Study 1: Relationship between Luxury Consumption and Self-Esteem.....	125
7.3.1	Participants and Procedure	125
7.3.2	Measures	125
7.3.3	Results and Discussion	126
7.4	Study 2: Impact of Luxury Consumption on Self-Esteem	126
7.4.1	Method	126
7.4.1.1	Materials and Procedure.....	126
7.4.1.2	Participants.....	127
7.4.2	Results and Discussion	127
7.5	Study 3: Alternative Explanation of Direct Appreciation	128
7.5.1	Method	128
7.5.1.1	Materials and Procedure.....	128
7.5.1.2	Measures	129
7.5.1.3	Participants.....	129
7.5.2	Results and Discussion	129
7.6	General Discussion and Conclusions.....	130
7.7	References.....	132

7.1 Introduction

People not only purchase brands for the product behind the brand but also for what they symbolize [69]. As such, luxury brands are widely desired because – compared to their cheaper counterparts – they offer a functional, hedonic and symbolic value to their owners in addition to their utilitarian product value [20], [34], [56], [117], [122], [123]. While the functional value refers to the premium quality and the hedonic value refers to the extraordinary aesthetic components, the symbolic value of luxury brands lies in their ability to signal a consumer's success, wealth and social achievement to others [36], [86], [101], [116]. As luxury brands are associated with a premium quality, an aesthetically appealing design, exclusivity, expensiveness and rarity [20], many consumers incur debt to purchase such a premium priced luxury brands [40].

Spending resources on luxury consumption hinders individuals to spend resources on more rewarding activities, such as spending time with friends and family, work less, or spend more money on inconspicuous consumption that may enhance the quality of our lives to a greater extent [40]. In addition, both their high cost and the existence of several mechanisms that may limit their long-term impact on subjective well-being (e.g. hedonic treadmill, [42]) make it puzzling why consumers continue to spend large amounts of their income on luxury brands. We propose that that luxury consumption may have specific short-term rewards that serve as positive reinforcements for luxury consumption [26]. In particular, we argue that obtaining a luxury brand may (temporarily) enhance one's self-esteem. As the temporary satisfaction of material wants further increases the probability that such wants re-emerge after a short while [82], [118], the enhanced self-esteem may serve to reward the pursuit of luxurious possessions and reinforce this behavior.

Self-esteem is the subjective evaluation of one's self-identity and it consists of all positive and negative thoughts and feelings individuals have about themselves [19]. The need for a high self-esteem is considered to be a universally held need and a fundamental human motive [24], [38], [63]. It is already present in children and also active when lower-order needs are not fulfilled [24]. Some theorists argue that this need has a genetic basis [54], [74], while others see it as the result of learning and experience [1]. In general, self-esteem is considered to be both a stable trait and an unstable state [55], [59]. More specifically, individuals appear to have a stable baseline of self-esteem and a fluctuation of current self-appraisals around this baseline [6], [18], [60]. The current chapter focuses on these fluctuations of self-appraisals and hence, investigates how luxury consumption affects an individual's state self-esteem.

Having a positive sense of self appears to be beneficial [87], [93]. In general, high self-esteem individuals are more able to cope with adversity as they are more persistent in the face of failure, negative feedback and stress. Moreover, self-esteem is positively correlated with various measures of well-being, such as positive affect and satisfaction with life. In contrast, low self-esteem is positively linked with a number of mental health problems, such as depression or social anxiety and with various dark side consumption behaviors,

such as binge eating and compulsive spending. Not surprisingly, people are more motivated to achieve increases and avoid decreases in their self-esteem state [22].

To defend a high self-esteem against threats, various studies investigated individuals' (un)conscious cognitive, affective and behavioral strategies such as (in)direct self-affirmations, flattering downward social comparisons and mnemonic neglect (see e.g., [4], [51], [61], [111], [120]). In general, high self-esteem individuals tend to overestimate their positive qualities and the successes they achieved in their lives, while they tend to neglect their negative qualities and failures [47]. Accordingly, individuals who provide positive feedback to a high self-esteem individual are highly valued, while individuals who provide negative feedback are ignored and even considered to be incompetent [77].

However, the pursuit of self-esteem not only affects an individual's self and his/her interpersonal relationships directly, it is also a highly motivational force for many consumer decisions as consumers compensate for a bruised self-esteem by inflating the value of certain possessions [5]. More specifically, previous studies on compensatory consumption found that specific aversive states, such as powerlessness, threatened self-confidence, mortality salience and low income generate a higher preference for luxury and high status brands as a means to restore global self-worth [41], [44], [100], [107]. These luxury brands are preferred because they offer an additional symbolic value to their owners, above their utilitarian value [20], [56]. This symbolic value of a luxury brand lies in its ability to signal a consumer's success to others. In this respect, luxury brands may positively increase the sense of self by emphasizing the social value of their owners to relevant others. However, although consumers may prefer luxury brands to restore their global self-worth, it remains unclear if obtaining luxury brands actually enhances an individual's self-esteem.

The current chapter investigates the impact of obtaining luxury brands on an individual's self-esteem. In particular, a survey study shows that luxury consumption enhances an individual's self-esteem. In addition, two experimental studies provide further evidence for the directionality of the relationship between luxury consumption and self-esteem. The results of these studies suggest that acquiring a luxury branded fast-moving consumer product (i.e., chocolate or fruit juice) positively affects an individual's self-esteem level.

7.2 Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

According to *sociometer* theory, a positive sense of self – which is considered to be the evaluative component of an individual's self-identity – functions as a sociometer and serves as an indicator of an individual's social inclusion [66]. Correspondingly, self-esteem fluctuates as a function of the degree to which an individual feels valued by others [110]. Consequently, an individual's self-esteem may decrease when experiencing social rejection and increase when experiencing social appreciation and praises [25], [50], [64], [81], [110]. Individuals who experience acceptance and social inclusion appear to have a higher self-esteem compared to individuals who experience rejection by others (e.g., Leary et al. [66]). In addi-

tion, a diary study shows that on the intra-individual level, individuals appear to have a higher self-esteem on days on which they report higher quality interactions and spend more time on such interactions [25].

As people are highly motivated by the need to maintain and enhance their self-esteem [22], [99], they aim to create a favorable self-identity and project this to both oneself and others [17], [37]. Accordingly, projecting these positive self-perceptions to others may lead to a higher social approval and – as suggested by sociometer theory – these positive social appraisals may in turn enhance an individual's self-esteem [66], [110]. This positive effect on an individual's self-esteem might occur because individuals actually experience positive appraisals from others (i.e., perceived social appraisal) or because individuals expect others to evaluate them positively (i.e., imagined social appraisal). In addition, the positive effect on self-esteem might also occur because the brand meaning may rub off on the owner of these brands (e.g., Belk [11]; Park and John [90]). As such, individuals may feel better about themselves because they obtained a luxury brand that reflects success. This brand meaning may rub off on the individual who – in turn – feels successful.

An individual's self-identity consists of all the thoughts and feelings they have about themselves and individuals may use various elements to build a favorable self-identity [39], [99], [125]). In addition to these thoughts about for example their personal history, perceived traits, appearance, and accomplishments [96], individuals use their possessions to construct their identity [31]. By consuming products, an individual integrates the meaning of these products into the self-concept (i.e., Meaning Transfer Model, [76]) and accordingly, the individual shapes his/her identity [21]. Consequently, these products become part of that individual's extended self [11]. However, not all products can be used to construct one's identity. Individuals prefer those products that fit with their (desired) identity as they can fulfill their need for self-consistency [16], [69], [88], [106]. Moreover, especially products with a widely shared meaning that can be easily perceived by others are used for identity-construction [11], [15], [30], [33], [75], [96], [103].

As a consequence, especially luxury brands are used to construct one's identity because these brands are often consumed conspicuously and they have a high symbolic value that is widely known [7], [8], [10], [31], [52], [95], [117]. As such, Puntoni [92] shows that self-identity is a significant predictor of purchase intention for luxury brands. Individuals incorporate the symbolic meanings of luxury brands into their self-concept, thereby approaching an ideal self-identity.

In addition to identity construction, individuals use their luxury possessions to communicate this favorable self-identity to their reference and aspiration groups in order to gain social approval [10], [11], [12], [13], [14], [15], [30], [31], [33], [49], [67], [104], [108], [120], [121]. In this respect, people often purchase luxury brands because their peers also consume them and they *expect* that conforming to the group norms will lead to acceptance and appreciation [29], [68], which, in turn, can positively affect self-esteem. Secondly, owners of luxury brands may demonstrate that they are better off than their peers, which might provide them with a higher status, not only within their own reference groups, but also within their aspiration groups [70]. As a higher perceived status position is positively correlated

with self-esteem [62], [114], owners of luxury brands may gain prestige and consequently, achieve a more positive sense of self. As such, luxury brands function as indicators of social affiliation and distinction and – as sociometer theory suggests – this may enhance an individual's self-esteem when he/she holds an imaginary external perspective [5], [23], [44], [105].

Moreover, a study of Sivanathan and Pettit [107] shows that the possession of high status goods might provide psychological benefits and protect individuals against self-threats suggesting that consuming luxuries might enhance an individual's self-esteem. More specifically, their study shows that individuals who ruminated about owning a high-status car were threatened less by negative feedback compared to individuals who ruminated about owning a low-status car. Following this and considering the fact that luxury brands are often used to create and communicate a favorable self-identity to others and that these positive self-perceptions may lead, in turn, to an increased self-esteem, the current chapter proposes that luxury consumption may lead to an enhanced self-esteem. This leads to the first hypothesis that luxury consumption might be used as a self-enhancement strategy:

H1: Obtaining luxury brands has a positive impact on an individual's self-esteem

In addition, the current chapter wants to clarify whether the positive effect of obtaining a luxury brand on self-esteem is affected by the direct appreciation experienced from the experimenter, as sociometer theory suggests that self-esteem is driven by perceived or imagined social appraisal [66]. The fact that respondents in the experimental studies did not have to pay to acquire the (non-) luxuries and the experimenter handed out the luxuries/non-luxuries to the respondents in the experiments may imply that the positive effects of acquiring a luxury brand on an individual's self-esteem is to be moderated by the perceived appreciation of the experimenter who handed out the (non-)luxury brand to the respondent.

Therefore, the main aim of the second experimental study is to test if the positive effect on self-esteem remains significant if the luxury brand is obtained by luck and is thus not related to immediate social appraisal. To disentangle luck versus appreciation, an additional manipulation (i.e., lottery condition versus selection by researcher) is introduced. If self-esteem is boosted because individuals experience a higher appreciation from others, the effect on self-esteem should be moderated by manipulating the appreciation of the choosing agent (i.e., lottery condition, cf. no appreciation but luck versus selection by experimenter, cf. appreciation, instead of luck). However, if immediate social appraisal is not crucial, the self-esteem boost must also occur when there is no direct link to immediate appreciation from others (i.e., in the lottery condition):

H2: Both individuals for whom the luxury brand reflects direct appreciation by others and individuals for whom the luxury brand reflects no direct appreciation by others will have a higher self-esteem compared to individuals who obtained the non-luxury brand

7.3 Study 1: Relationship between Luxury Consumption and Self-Esteem

The main purpose of this exploratory study is to explore the relationship between luxury consumption and self-esteem. Given the fact that self-esteem may depend on the degree to which an individual feels valued by others and that luxury brands have a high symbolic value which reflects success and social achievement, consuming luxuries may lead to a higher self-esteem.

7.3.1 Participants and Procedure

We conducted a large scale survey in the Flemish part of Belgium to investigate the relationship between luxury consumption and self-esteem. Our survey was collected by 327 students in exchange for course credit. Each student filled in the questionnaire and distributed the questionnaire to three other (non-student) people. We strived for a proportional representation in terms of gender and age. 1308 respondents participated in this survey. To check for outliers, we first conducted a multivariate outlier analysis. We calculated the Mahalanobis Distance for the responses on the two central variables in our dataset, namely luxury consumption and self-esteem. On the basis of this analysis we identified 4 outliers for which the observed Mahalanobis distance exceeded the 99.99 % quantile. The remaining data set consists of 1304 valid cases (654 males, $M_{age} = 41.08$, $SD = 17.57$).

7.3.2 Measures

Luxury consumption. Previous scales which are related to luxury consumption and ownership do not measure consumers' tendency to purchase luxury brands, regardless of the underlying motives for this behavior [35], [117]. More objective measures of luxury ownership [34] do not account for the fact that products or brands are not inherently luxurious but are perceived as more or less luxurious by an individual. Accordingly, the subjective character may be more important in shaping self-esteem than objective features.

To measure self-perceived luxury consumption, we used the scale of Hudders & Pandelaere [53] that measures consumers' tendency to choose luxury brands (i.e., brands that are perceived as luxurious by an individual) in various product categories.

Self-esteem. To measure self-esteem, we used the self-esteem scale of Rosenberg [98]. This scale consists of ten items that measure people's feelings of self-worth and has a high reliability score ($\alpha = .877$).

Materialism. As materialism is positively related to luxury consumption [53] and negatively related to self-esteem [91], this might produce a spurious negative relationship between luxury consumption and self-esteem. Therefore, we added materialism to the model in order to exclude materialism as a factor. We used the eighteen item material values scale of Richins and Dawson ($\alpha = .83$) [97].

7.3.3 Results and Discussion

The results of a linear regression analysis ($R^2 = 1.0\%$; $F(1, 1275) = 14.06$; $p < .001$) show that luxury consumption predicts self-esteem positively ($\beta = .104$, $p < .001$). These results confirm the first hypothesis. Adding materialism to the model improves the model (R^2 -change = 7.0% , $F(1, 1274) = 82.77$, $p < .001$) and strengthens the positive relationship between luxury consumption and self-esteem ($\beta = .185$, $p < .001$), while materialism is negatively related to self-esteem ($\beta = -.258$, $p < .001$). This provides further evidence for the directionality of the relationship.

These results imply that high luxury consumers appear to have a higher self-esteem compared to low luxury consumers. However, the results of this survey study are only correlational in nature. To investigate the directionality of this positive relationship, we conducted an experimental study.

7.4 Study 2: Impact of Luxury Consumption on Self-Esteem

The main aim of this experimental study is to investigate the impact of obtaining a luxury brand on an individual's self-esteem. As consumers derive their self-esteem from positive evaluations of others [66] and they expect luxury consumption to provide them with praise and higher status ([56], we suggest that respondents who obtain a luxury brand will report a higher self-esteem compared to respondents who obtain a non-luxury brand. This study uses a between-subjects single factor experimental design with two conditions (i.e., luxury and non-luxury condition) to test if consumption of luxury brands enhances an individual's self-esteem (cf. hypothesis 1).

7.4.1 Method

7.4.1.1 Materials and Procedure

All respondents received an identical chocolate bar from the Belgian (luxury) chocolate brand *Belcolade*. *Belcolade* sells its chocolate to the wholesale business, where it is further processed in luxury preparations, such as enrobed pralines or pastries. Consequently, most end consumers do not know this brand. Respondents who recognized the brand are excluded from the analyses in order to avoid confounding effects of brand knowledge and preferences. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the conditions. Although they all received an identical chocolate, respondents in the two conditions received a different, written description of the chocolate bar.

In the luxury condition, the chocolate bar was presented as a very luxurious, refined, high quality, expensive (i.e., 25 Euros per kilogram) and an exclusive piece of chocolate. In the non-luxury condition, the chocolate bar was presented as an ordinary piece of chocolate

which is mass-produced and not expensive (i.e., 3.95 Euros per kilogram). Subsequently, respondents filled in another questionnaire (which was presented as being part of another study), in which respondents' self-esteem level was measured along with some filler questions. To measure self-esteem, the self-esteem scale of Rosenberg [98] was used. This scale consists of ten items that measure people's feelings of self-worth and has a high reliability score ($\alpha = .88$). At the end of the experimental session, respondents had to indicate how satisfied they were with the chocolate (measured with one item) and had to rate its luxuriousness (measured with one item; manipulation check). To control for materialism, we used the eighteen item material values scale of Richins and Dawson ($\alpha = .81$) [97]. We measured participants materialism level before they participated in this experiment.

7.4.1.2 Participants

127 respondents participated in this experiment in exchange for 7 Euros. However, eight respondents are excluded because they knew the brand *Belcolade*. 119 valid cases remained (60 males, $M_{age} = 21.75$, $SD = 1.09$).

7.4.2 Results and Discussion

Respondents report no significant differences in satisfaction level between the two conditions ($M_{lux} = 5.64$, $M_{nonlux} = 5.37$, $t(116) = -1.48$, $p = .142$). However, respondents in the luxury condition ($M = 4.98$) rate the chocolate as more luxurious than respondents in the non-luxury condition ($M = 4.32$; $t(113) = 2.66$, $p = .009$). In addition, respondents in the luxury condition ($M = 4.28$) report higher self-esteem scores compared to respondents in the non-luxury condition ($M = 3.95$, $t(116) = 2.00$, $p = .048$). These results confirm the first hypothesis. Moreover, when controlling for materialism, the positive impact of luxury consumption on self-esteem slightly increased: $F(1, 114) = 4.74$, $p = .032$.

However, while these results may be attributed to ownership of a luxury (versus non-luxury) brand, it is also possible that participants in the luxury condition felt better about themselves because they had received something relatively expensive from the experimenter. As such, participants' increase in self-esteem might be due to the perceived social appraisal rather than to ownership of the luxury brand. After all, to the extent that self-esteem is based on perceived value to others [66], it may be directly affected by the direct appreciation experienced from the experimenter (i.e. the chocolate they received). Therefore, the main aim of study 3 is to test if the positive effect on self-esteem remains significant if the luxury brand is obtained by luck and is thus not related to immediate social appraisal. To disentangle luck versus appreciation, an additional manipulation (i.e., lottery condition versus selection by researcher) is introduced.

7.5 Study 3: Alternative Explanation of Direct Appreciation

The aim of this third experimental study is to extend the results of the previous studies by using another product category (i.e., fruit juice instead of chocolate). Secondly, this study wants to test whether direct social appraisal moderates the positive effect of obtaining a luxury brand on an individual's self-esteem. Therefore, an additional manipulation is introduced in which either the experimenter or a lottery determined whether respondents received the luxury or non-luxury brand. In this respect, this study investigates if the effect of luxury consumption on self-esteem depends on the mode in which people receive the luxury brand (i.e., choosing agent) and thus the immediate social appraisal an individual experiences.

7.5.1 Method

7.5.1.1 Materials and Procedure

This study uses a two (i.e., luxury condition: luxury versus non-luxury condition) by two (i.e., choosing agent: selection by lottery versus selection by experimenter condition) between-subjects experimental design to investigate if direct social appraisal moderates the impact of obtaining a luxury brand on self-esteem. All respondents received a glass of fruit juice and they were first instructed to evaluate the juice without tasting it. Next, they had to complete the self-esteem and positive and negative affect scales that are presented as being part of another study. Finally, respondents were instructed to evaluate the taste of the juice (this is only to avoid suspiciousness about the real goal of the experiment).

At the start of the experimental session, two different brands of fruit juice were presented to all respondents, that is, *Pure Fruit* and *Ethno Bar*. Respondents first received some brief information about both brands. *Pure Fruit* was presented as a cheap fruit mix sold in a well-known hard discounter, while *Ethno Bar* was presented as a more exclusive, luxurious and exotic fruit mix available in a well-known upscale store. Next, participants were instructed to evaluate one of both brands, either *Pure Fruit* or *Ethno Bar*. These brands are new in the market and consequently, to emphasize the importance of their evaluation, we told participants that their evaluations would determine whether these brands would be maintained in the store assortments. Next, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the conditions.

As both juices are displayed to all respondents (in contrast to the previous study, where respondents were exposed to either the luxury or non-luxury chocolate and they did not know that others received a (non-)luxury chocolate), the juices were actually different (in contrast to the second study, where respondents received the same chocolate in both conditions) and had different prices.

In the lottery condition, respondents had to pick a lottery ticket (out of a bag with several tickets) that determined if they had to taste either the *Ethno Bar* or the *Pure Fruit* juice. In the

experimenter condition, the experimenter decided conspicuously ('I want you to evaluate the luxury fruit juice/ non-luxury fruit juice') whether respondents had to taste either the *Ethno Bar* or the *Pure Fruit* juice.

In the luxury condition, respondents received the *Ethno Bar* fruit mix and a written description of this juice (i.e., expensive and unique mix of exotic fruits (e.g., litchi), spices and flowers (e.g., lotus) with a limited availability (only available at the end of the year) and excellent quality). In the non-luxury condition, respondents received the *Pure Fruit* fruit mix and a written description of this juice (i.e., cheap mix of ordinary fruits (e.g., apple, orange, pear) which is diluted with sugar water and produced on a large scale).

7.5.1.2 Measures

The Rosenberg's self-esteem scale measures respondents' self-esteem level ($\alpha = .91$). As manipulation check, respondents had to rate the fruit juice on luxuriousness, expensiveness, and mass production before tasting the fruit juice and on liking and willingness to pay after tasting the juice. These items are measured with a seven-point likert scale ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree. To control for materialism, we used the eighteen item material values scale of Richins and Dawson ($\alpha = .90$) [97]. As affective well-being and self-esteem are positively related [27], [78], it is possible that respondents in the luxury condition experience a higher self-esteem, because they feel better after receiving a luxurious chocolate. To control for this alternative account related to happiness and self-esteem, respondents completed the PANAS-scale ($\alpha_{PA} = .89$; $\alpha_{NA} = .83$; Watson et al.) [119] and the life satisfaction scale ([28]; $\alpha = .79$).

7.5.1.3 Participants

151 respondents participated in this experiment in exchange for 7 Euros (52 males, $M_{age} = 22.83$, $SD = 5.67$).

7.5.2 Results and Discussion

Respondents in the luxury condition rate the juice as more luxurious ($M = 4.91$) compared to respondents in the non-luxury condition ($M = 2.53$; $F(1, 135) = 129.17$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, respondents in the non-luxury condition ($M_{cheap} = 5.53$; $M_{mass} = 6.07$) are more convinced that the juice is cheap and mass-produced than respondents in the luxury condition ($M_{cheap} = 2.24$, $F(1, 135) = 329.59$, $p < .001$; $M_{mass} = 4.38$, $F(1, 135) = 55.06$, $p < .001$). After tasting the fruit juice, respondents in the luxury condition liked the juice more ($M = 4.71$) and are willing to pay more for the juice ($M = 1.29$) compared to respondents in the non-luxury condition ($M_{liking} = 2.24$, $F(1, 146) = 119.94$, $p < .001$; $M_{pay} = .80$, $F(1, 144) = 14.92$, $p < .001$). There are no main effects of choosing agent (luck vs. experimenter) and there are no interaction effects.

A two-way ANOVA analysis revealed that there is a main effect of luxury condition on self-esteem ($F(1, 147) = 9.35$, $p = .003$). Respondents who acquired the luxurious *Ethno Bar* juice

($M = 5.29$) reported higher self-esteem scores than respondents who acquired the non-luxurious *Pure Fruit* juice ($M = 4.93$). These results again confirm the first hypothesis. Furthermore, there is a main effect of choosing agent on self-esteem ($F(1, 147) = 5.12, p = .025$). Respondents who had to pick a lottery ticket ($M = 4.93$) have a lower self-esteem compared to respondents for whom the researcher decided which juice they had to evaluate ($M = 5.24$). The main effect of luxury condition ($F(1, 136) = 4.06, p = .046$) on self-esteem remains significant when controlling for the alternative accounts of materialism and subjective well-being by including materialism, positive and negative affect and life satisfaction as covariates in the model. Hence, variations in materialism and well-being cannot fully account for this positive effect of acquiring luxuries on self-esteem. On the contrary, the main effect of choosing agent ($F(1, 136) = 1.83, p = .179$) condition becomes insignificant after controlling for materialism, life satisfaction and mood.

Finally, the interaction effect between luxury condition and choosing agent on self-esteem is not significant ($F(1, 147) = .039, p = .844$). This implies that respondents in the luxury condition experience higher self-esteem compared to respondents in the non-luxury condition, regardless whether the luxury brand reflects direct appreciation from others or not. As such, respondents who obtained a luxury brand that reflects social appraisal ($M = 5.46$) appear to have a higher self-esteem compared to respondents who obtained a non-luxury brand that reflects social appraisal ($M = 5.02, t(63) = -2.31, p = .024$). Similarly, respondents who obtained the luxury fruit juice by luck ($M = 5.12$) appear to have a higher self-esteem compared to respondents who obtained the non-luxury fruit juice by luck ($M = 4.74, t(57) = -1.95, p = .056$), however, this effect is only marginally significant. These results confirm the second hypothesis.

7.6 General Discussion and Conclusions

Scholars from various disciplines conducted research on self-esteem because it has a strong impact on several aspects of human behavior [65],[87]. While low self-esteem appears to be linked to negative behaviors, such as delinquency and antisocial behavior [32], high self-esteem appears to be linked to positive behavioral aspects. High self-esteem individuals appear to be more resistant against self-image threats [109], perceive negative feedback as a challenge rather than a threat [102] and are more capable to savor positive affect [124]. Humans have an innate drive to strive for more positive self feelings and they developed several strategies to restore a negative sense of self. In this respect, several studies found that people with a bruised self-esteem showed to have a higher preference for luxury and high status goods (e.g., Sivanathan and Pettit [107]). The current chapter investigated whether acquiring luxury brands would effectively raise self-esteem.

The results of three studies indicate that this may be the case. In a first study, luxury consumption appears to be positively related to self-esteem. In a second study, participants who acquired a luxury brand reported higher self-esteem compared to respondents who acquired a non-luxury brand. In study 3, this chapter showed that linking a brand to direct appreciation does not moderate the effect on self-esteem. Individuals who obtained a luxu-

ry brand reported higher self-esteem ratings compared to respondents who obtained a non-luxury brand, regardless whether this luxury brand reflected immediate social appraisal or not. This may imply that imagined social appraisals may be more important. As such, the positive effect of luxury consumption on self-esteem may be the result of an expected reward due to social appraisal.

In addition, this chapter builds on previous research that shows that brand meanings may rub off on the owners of these brands (e.g., [11], [46], [90]) and this might cause the positive effect on self-esteem. These studies show that consumers not only prefer brands that fit with their sense of self and with their personality, they also enhance their self-identity in line with the brand's meaning. This process can be explained by the Meaning Transfer Model [76] which states that while meaning arises in culture, this meaning can be transferred to brands through advertising and the use of endorsements. Hence, by obtaining these brands, meaning may be transferred to the individual consumer.

This chapter provides further evidence for this meaning transfer of brands to the owners of these brands. However, the occurrence of this meaning transfer might depend on the personality of the owner. In this respect, Park and John [90] show that, while individuals who believe that their personal qualities are invariable (i.e., entity theorists) are influenced by using a brand with an appealing personality, individuals who believe that they can improve their personal qualities (i.e., incremental theorists) are not. In future research, it would be interesting to investigate if the positive effect of owning luxury brands on self-esteem may be moderated by these implicit self-beliefs.

Moreover, future research should investigate if these positive effects of acquiring luxury brands on self-esteem are stronger for materialistic consumers. As such, the negative relationship between materialism and self-esteem may be diminished by materialists' preference for luxurious possessions [97], [115]. As materialists consider luxury possessions as a path to personal happiness, they might experience a stronger effect on their self-esteem compared to low materialistic consumers. However, these positive effects on their self-esteem may reinforce materialistic consumers in their pursuit for luxurious possessions, which might, in turn, hinder them to invest resources in activities that are more rewarding for their self-esteem (e.g., spending time on close friends and family).

The current chapter also has several limitations. First, in the experimental studies, respondents did not have to pay for the fruit juice or the chocolate. In future research, it would be interesting to let respondents actually pay for the luxury good. Furthermore, the hedonic value of the luxuries used in these studies prevails over the status value. The effects on self-esteem might be stronger when choosing a luxury where the status value prevails over the hedonic value. Moreover, the experimental studies only investigated the effect of obtaining a luxurious fast-moving consumer good on self-esteem. In future research, it would be interesting to focus on durable luxury goods, because such durables may enhance self-esteem to a greater extent. Finally, future research should benefit from incorporating the factor public/private luxury consumption. As consumers' self-esteem depends on the evaluation of others, consuming luxury brands in a public setting might enhance self-esteem more than consuming the same brands in a private setting.

The positive effect of owning luxury brands on an individual's self-worth might reinforce one's pursuit of luxurious possessions. However, this does not imply that luxury consumption is beneficial for an individual's self-esteem in the long run. Furthermore, the enhanced self-esteem by status consumption may be illusory. In this respect, many individuals are envious of individuals consuming luxury brands (e.g., many individuals are unfavorably disposed towards men who are showing off their Porsche). Hence, this chapter merely claims that some aspect of owning luxury brands may reinforce buying luxury products but *not* that it is a fruitful way to strive for enduring high self-esteem.

7.7 References

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