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# Luxury fashion consumption and Generation Y consumers

## Self, brand consciousness, and consumption motivations

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22

### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate Generation Y consumers' luxury fashion consumption. Generation Y is becoming a very important segment for the luxury market in the USA. Specifically, this study is designed to investigate Generation Y consumers' consumption of luxury fashion products from the following perspectives: the influence of self-related personality traits on their brand consciousness; and the influence of brand consciousness on consumption behaviours in terms of consumption motivations, purchase intention, and brand loyalty.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A conceptual model was developed to represent the proposed relationships among the related variables. An online survey was conducted and 305 valid surveys were collected. The proposed hypotheses were tested using structural equation modelling (SEM) analyses.

**Findings** – From the perspective of self-concept, this research shed some light on the luxury fashion consumption behaviour of Generation Y consumers. Public self-consciousness and self-esteem were both found having significant influence on Generation Y consumers' brand consciousness and in turn their luxury consumption motivations and brand loyalty.

**Research limitations/implications** – Limitations for this study mainly come from the representativeness of the sample, which was recruited from a panel of a third party research group. Implications for luxury fashion brand managers and retailers focus on strategies that influence the social and self-motivation for luxury consumption and level of brand consciousness.

**Originality/value** – This research is unique because it focuses on luxury fashion consumption of Generation Y consumers, an emerging segment in the luxury market. Generation Y consumers' behaviour towards luxury fashion was examined in terms of their self-related personality traits, brand consciousness, motivation, and brand loyalty.

**Keywords** Self, Generation Y consumers, Luxury fashion, Brand consciousness, Consumption motivation, Brand influence

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

In the past decade, the USA luxury market has grown 32 per cent. It is now expected to grow at an annual rate of 15 per cent through 2015 (Nucifora, 2009). A major drive behind the growth and expansion of the US luxury market is the emergence of the new luxury consumers (Jackson, 2011). These “newcomers” do not fall into the traditional wealthy income segment; they start purchasing luxury at a younger age compared to their parents (Jay, 2012), spending about \$300 on each such purchase (Panteva, 2011). Before the recession, the typical older affluent luxury consumer (i.e. members of the Baby Boomer generation) comprised 10 per cent of the luxury market in terms of size



and 70 per cent in terms of spending. By 2011, however, this older segment was only responsible for 40 per cent of the spending in the luxury market, as Generation X and Generation Y consumers shared the other 60 per cent of luxury market sales (Rubin, 2011). In 2011 alone, Generation Y consumers' spending on luxury fashion goods increased 33 per cent from the previous year (Hutzler, 2012).

With these newcomers in the luxury market, no longer is luxury about wealthy older consumers and saving until you can purchase the best (Jackson, 2011; Shea, 2013; Silverstein and Fiske, 2008). Today's luxury consumer is most likely a member of the older generation (i.e. Baby Boomers) or a member of Generation Y or Generation X (Stein and Sanburn, 2013). While marketers are still interested in the affluent and powerful Baby Boomer generation, they are beginning to focus on the younger generations, especially on Generation Y consumers (Shea, 2013; Silverstein and Fiske, 2008; Stein and Sanburn, 2013). Generation Y is becoming strategically important; this group will comprise 80 per cent of the American workforce in the next three years (Stein and Sanburn, 2013).

Born between 1977 and 1994 (Levy and Weitz, 2001), the 76 million members of Generation Y comprise the second-largest generation cohort in the USA; only the Baby Boomers are a larger group (Kennedy, 2001). As its members begin to establish themselves in the workforce, Generation Y is exerting considerable economic influences, estimated at approximately \$600 billion annually (Kennedy, 2001). Generation Y consumers are a growing influential group and have reached unprecedented numbers for their purchasing power in the USA market (Noble *et al.*, 2008). Luxury sales from this segment and even younger consumers represented 36 per cent of total luxury sales (Jay, 2012). For the Baby Boomer generation, luxury was about aristocracy and high price points. Generation Y consumers, however, view luxury as a right more than a privilege (Silverstein and Fiske, 2008; Stein and Sanburn, 2013).

In their early 20s and late 30s now, Generation Y consumers span the spectrum from those who are still in college to those who are becoming established in the workforce. Despite their youth and relatively lower earnings, Generation Y consumers are highly brand conscious (Fernandez, 2009) and are willing to "trade up to higher levels of quality and taste" by investing in luxury products (Grotts and Johnson, 2012; Silverstein and Fiske, 2008). Generation Y consumers also display high levels of materialism, brand-signalling importance (Loroz and Helgeson, 2013), and status consumption (Eastman and Liu, 2012). High levels of self-monitoring and low levels of dispositional guilt and empathic concern were also found on Generation Y consumers (Loroz and Helgeson, 2013).

Generation Y consumers tend to have a high level of self-esteem (Logan, 2008). But, at the same time, Generation Y consumers are individuals with high public self-consciousness who tend to make purchasing decisions based on the influence and opinions of their peers (Fernandez, 2009). While Generation Y consumers are brand conscious (Loroz and Helgeson, 2013), they are not as brand loyal as older consumers, purchasing an assortment of brands representing a wide range of price points and prestige (Little, 2012).

The desire to purchase luxury fashion products is complex and multifaceted. Previous research has explored consumers' luxury consumption from personality (Workman and Lee, 2011), brand consciousness (Grotts and Johnson, 2012; Gurau, 2012; Liao and Wang, 2009), and self-motivation perspectives (Mittal, 2006; Panteva, 2011; Truong, 2010). While previous literature on luxury consumption focused on Baby Boomers, there is a growing interest in the luxury consumption among the Generation

Y age cohort. These young adult luxury shoppers are different than their parents' generation, not only because they are purchasing luxury at a younger age, but also are willing to splurge when they see something they want (Grotts and Johnson, 2012; Jay, 2012; Shea, 2013; Stein and Sanburn, 2013). Compared to their parents' generation, Generation Y consumers are still in the process of building self-identity and accordingly display unique characteristics such as high public self-consciousness and brand consciousness (Eastman and Liu, 2012; Gurau, 2012). Therefore, through exploring the self-concept-related personality traits, brand consciousness and luxury consumption motivations of the Generation Y consumers, it is the goal for this current research to bring an insight to the new growing market segment of the luxury fashion market.

The purpose of this study is to investigate Generation Y members' consumption for luxury fashion products, which are defined as apparel, accessories, handbags, shoes, watches, jewellery, and perfume for which mere use or display of particular branded products brings prestige to owners, apart from any functional utility (Vigernon and Johnson, 2004). Specifically, this study is designed to investigate Generation Y consumers' consumption of luxury fashion products from the following perspectives: the influence of Generation Y consumers' self-related personality traits on their brand consciousness; and the influence of brand consciousness on Generation Y consumers' luxury fashion behaviours in terms of consumption motivations, purchase intention, and brand loyalty. From the self-concept perspective, this study advances the existing theoretical understanding of luxury consumption by focusing on an under-researched, but highly influential, age cohort, and Generation Y. Findings from this study provide practical consumer insight into those consumers and the complex set of personal influences that motivate their desires for luxury brands.

### Theoretical background

Self-concept exerts an important impact on consumers' decision making and product and brand choices (Sirgy *et al.*, 2006; Sirgy, 1982). Though the self-concept has been treated from various points of view, there is a consensus regarding the existence and independent influence of two self-concept motives: self-esteem and self-consistency (Epstein, 1980). According to Sirgy's (1982) self-congruity theory, consumers prefer certain products or brands that are consistent with their self-image and therefore, can enhance their self-image. In other words, consumers purposefully choose certain products and brands to express their self-image to the public (self-consistency) and also to enhance their self-esteem through experiencing the positive reflection of themselves in the public (Aaker, 1997; Sirgy *et al.*, 2006; Sirgy, 1982).

Belk (1988) argued that the attempt to signal status and group membership or to corroborate one's self-image by means of the consumption of certain goods and services largely rests on a symbolic value that the goods and services have for those purposes (Belk, 1988). Luxury fashion goods are perfect examples of "symbolic consumption" goods with its association of high quality, exclusiveness, high price, and its social visibility.

The influence of personality traits on consumer behaviour has been widely studied. In her study of Generation Y consumers' shopping behaviour, Casidy (2012) suggested that personality traits perform an important role in affecting people's attitude towards prestige fashion brands. Gil *et al.* suggested that self-perception has a significant influence on Teens' behaviour towards luxury brands. Therefore, this study is designed to investigate the influence of two self-concept-related personality traits, public

self-consciousness and self-esteem, on Generation Y consumers brand consciousness, and their consumption behaviours towards luxury fashion products. Self-consciousness is a key ingredient in understanding self-concept (Abe *et al.*, 1996) and has been extensively studied in its impact on consumer behaviours (Peters *et al.*, 2011; Xu, 2008). Self-esteem is another self-related personality trait, which has been found having significant influence on the way people act and serve as a motivation for many of consumer behaviours (Pyszczynski *et al.*, 2004).

## Literature review and hypotheses development

### *Public self-consciousness*

Defining the attention to the self as self-consciousness, Fenigstein *et al.* (1975) identified two types of self-consciousness: private self-consciousness, and public self-consciousness. It was believed that consciousness of the self will exert a strong impact on a variety of behaviours including the acquisition and consumption of products (Fenigstein *et al.*, 1975; Duval and Wicklund, 1972). The higher the consciousness of the self, the more likely the individual will take actions to create and maintain a positive and desirable self-image.

Solomon and Schopler (1982) suggested that compared to private self-consciousness, public self-consciousness is more consistently related to the clothing variables such as fashion opinion, attitudes towards conformity, and clothing interest. Fenigstein *et al.* (1975) defined public self-consciousness as the awareness of the self as a social and public object. Public self-consciousness, when considered high in individuals, is a trait that dictates how certain individuals compose themselves in public. Individuals who have high public self-consciousness are considered to be especially concerned about their social identities and exhibiting orientations towards gaining approval and avoiding disapproval (Doherty and Schlenker, 1991).

Public self-consciousness is found to relate to a number of consumer behaviours and decision-making process including consumers' motivations for performing certain behaviours (Lee and Burns, 1993; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). Burnkrant and Page (1981) proposed that people who have high public self-consciousness would be more inclined than those with low public self-consciousness to use consumer goods to create favourable impressions. They recommended that public self-consciousness to be considered a segmentation variable for socially consumed products. With its association of high social visibility, the consumption of luxury fashion products is believed to be influenced by consumers' public self-consciousness level (Wong, 1997).

### *Self-esteem*

Self-esteem is another personality dimension that has been widely explored in consumer behaviour literature. Self-esteem is the way that one evaluates, or the opinion one has regarding him or herself (Pyszczynski *et al.*, 2004). Pyszczynski *et al.* (2004) found that self-esteem had an influence on the way people act and serves as a motivation for some of their behaviours. Self-esteem was also viewed as a level of human needs. Therefore, when an individual experiences low level of self-esteem, he/she will tend to adopt/exercise activities that can help to enhance their self-esteem level.

Leary *et al.* (1995) proposed an evolutionary function of self-esteem by relating self-esteem to social inclusion. They argued that self-esteem evolved as a system that "monitors others' reactions and alerts the individual to the possibility of social exclusion" (p. 518). When an individual experiences feelings of low self-esteem, it is a

sign of his/her reduced inclusionary status and hence s/he will be motivated to engage in behaviour that is likely to lead to social inclusion (Isaksen and Roper, 2012). In their study of British teenagers' perception and behaviour towards brands, Isaksen and Roper (2012) found that, as a result of peer pressure and the importance of conformity among adolescents, consuming the correct possessions at the right time is essential for social acceptance, gaining and maintaining friendships and thus self-esteem. Hausman (2000) also found that the self-esteem of consumers influenced consumers to purchase goods impulsively, because it is a way for consumers to gain acceptance with others and satisfaction with themselves.

*The effect of public self-consciousness and self-esteem on brand consciousness.* Brand consciousness refers to the mental orientation of consumers to purchase well-known brand-name products over other brands (Sproles and Kendall, 1986). In other words, consumers with strong brand consciousness tend to buy well-known, expensive, and heavily marketed brand products. Brand conscious consumers use brands to portray their fashion consciousness, express personality traits, and reduce risk in purchase decisions (Liao and Wang, 2009).

Brand consciousness has been studied to test its relationship to consumer behaviour (Fan and Xiao, 1998; Liao and Wang, 2009; Nelson and McLeod, 2005). Well-known brands provide consumers with a sense of familiarity, and therefore, reduce the amount of risk involved in purchasing behaviour. When consumers have a high level of brand consciousness, they are likely to believe that brands are symbols of both status and prestige (Liao and Wang, 2009). Because of this perception of brand-name products, consumers who are highly brand conscious prefer to purchase expensive, well-known products rather than lesser-known brands (Lehmann and Winer, 1997). In their study of Generation Y consumers in Iran, Teimourpour and Hanzaee (2011) found that consumers who are brand conscious have the tendency to purchase well-known and expensive products in order to relay a certain level of wealth or status. Bushman (1993) suggested that self-conscious consumers tend to accept products with national brand labels to enhance their self-image. It is hypothesized in this study that individuals with high public self-consciousness would be more likely to choose well-known product/brand to express the self-image to the public (Sirgy, 1982):

*H1a.* Generation Y consumers with high public self-consciousness will develop a high brand consciousness.

Similarly, with low self-esteem being viewed as a signal of certain degree of "social exclusion" (Leary *et al.*, 1995), well-known brands may be chosen or preferred as a way for consumers with low self-esteem to gain social approval. Therefore, the following hypothesis is regarding the relationship between self-esteem and brand consciousness is developed in this study:

*H1b.* Generation Y consumers with low self-esteem will develop a high level of brand consciousness.

*The relationship between brand consciousness and consumers' luxury motivations.* In addition to their utilitarian function, consumer products also serve as a tool for consumers to express their self-identity and to exercise their seeking of positive reflection from the public (Belk, 1988). Luxury fashion products, with the strong association of being expensive, high quality and unique, perfectly provide the self-expression, and self-image enhancement functions.

With the symbolic meaning associated with luxury products, the motivation for acquiring luxury products is traditionally regarded as the desire of “buying to impress others” because the purchase and possession of luxury brands can, to some extent, create a favourable social image, and display prominent achievements (Tsai, 2005). Consumption of luxury products is often associated with conspicuous or status consumption (O’Cass and Frost, 2002). The desire to gain social status and social prestige can be fulfilled through the conspicuous consumption of luxury products. The desire to conspicuously consume in order to obtain a certain status is not limited to those who are wealthy. Levine (1997) stated that many consumers “would rather have a Rolex than a home”.

Chaudhuri *et al.* (2011) focused on the differences in consumers’ conspicuous consumption decisions in their study. Their research attributes personality traits as well as social motivations as contributing factors to conspicuous consumption. Chaudhuri *et al.* (2011) found that conspicuous consumption behaviours are influenced by consumers’ characteristics, including individualism, social visibility, desire for uniqueness, self-esteem, and materialism.

With the symbolic value carried by luxury fashion products, it is hypothesized in this study that:

*H2a.* Generation Y consumers with high brand consciousness will have a strong conspicuous consumption motivation (motivation to impress others).

The self-oriented motivation is also of great importance in the study of luxury consumption (Tsai, 2005). Wiedmann *et al.* (2009) defined several self-oriented motivations of consumption including hedonic self-gift giving, self-directed pleasure, life enrichment, and brand self-congruency. Silverstein and Fiske (2008) found that consumers who consume luxury goods for self-aspirational reasons purchase these products because of their value and quality. Amatulli and Guido (2011) found that consumers who consider luxury products to be a personal pleasure are likely to purchase these products exclusively for their own personal needs, not for external reasons (i.e. conspicuous consumption) (Amatulli and Guido, 2011).

Consumers seek products whose lifestyles, personalities, and values match their own (Mittal, 2006). Quester *et al.* (2000) defined two key parts to brand self-congruency: the perceived self-image and the perceived brand image. Brand self-congruency refers to the motivation of consumers to seek products with which they feel a strong connection (Mittal, 2006). Sirgy (1985) concluded that brands have personality traits just as consumers do and, therefore, consumers seek out those brands to whose personality they can relate. Tsai (2005) categorized brand self-congruency as a self-motivation for the luxury consumption behaviours of consumers. Amatulli and Guido (2011) suggested that consumers desire luxury products that have a personality congruency with theirs. Luxury products provide consumers the opportunity to express their individuality.

With the unique image and personality traits carried by luxury fashion products, it is hypothesized in this study that:

*H2b.* Consumers with strong brand consciousness will have a strong brand self-congruency motivation.

*The relationship between consumer luxury motivations and luxury consumption.* Companies convey the image of their products to consumers through brand names in

hopes that consumers will develop the same appreciation and regards for the brand that the company does (Palumbo and Herbig, 2000). Brands add a certain level of value to a product through its familiarity, reliability, and risk reduction (Palumbo and Herbig, 2000). In the past, the goal of marketing was to identify new ways to attract new customers. Recently, this aim has shifted to an attempt to retain the customers that have already shown a certain level of patronage to the company/brand (Palumbo and Herbig, 2000). The repeated purchases of consumers and the preferences of consumers to a certain brand over another is brand loyalty (Palumbo and Herbig, 2000). Long–Yi (2010) defined two types of brand loyalty: affective loyalty and action loyalty. Affective loyalty refers to the recognition of consumers' satisfaction with a certain brand, with no pattern of consumption. Action loyalty is measured in terms of consumers' repeat purchase for a particular brand.

Motivation has been a very important part of consumer behaviour research since 1940. Consumers' motivations play an important role in consumers' intended and actual behaviours. In this study, two consumption-related behaviours are explored: consumers' intention to purchase luxury fashion products and consumers' brand loyalty to fashion luxury brands. The followings are hypothesized in this study:

- H3.* Generation Y consumers conspicuous consumption motivation will have a positive influence on their purchase intention (*H3a*) and brand loyalty (*H3b*) towards luxury fashion products.
- H4.* Generation Y consumers self-brand congruency consumption motivation will have a positive influence on their purchase intention (*H4a*) and brand loyalty (*H4b*).

It is also proposed in this study that, no matter what kind of motivations consumers may have (conspicuous or self-congruency), consumers with high brand consciousness will be likely to have a stronger intention to purchase luxury fashion products, and also to develop a brand loyalty to luxury fashion brands. Therefore, the following hypothesis is developed:

- H5.* Generation Y consumers with high brand consciousness will have a strong purchase intention of luxury fashion products (*H5a*) and a high level of brand loyalty (*H5b*) towards luxury fashion brands.

## Research methodology

### *Research design*

A survey was used to collect the data for this study. An online survey was created using the online survey software and questionnaire tool, SurveyMonkey®. Respondents were given a web link, which directed them to the questionnaire. SurveyMonkey® automatically recorded and stored the responses for data analysis. The data collection took place over a two-week duration in October 2011. An Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained through a university in the USA in order to conduct this survey. A third party research group was contracted to recruit subjects for this study. The desired number of complete and valid surveys was 300.

The target population for this study was Generation Y consumers, who were in the age range of 18-35 at the time of this study per Levy and Weitz's (2001) definition. There are other definitions which include those born between in early 1970s as members of Generation Y (Eastman and Liu, 2012). Therefore, roughly, Generation Y



consumers were in the age range of 20-40. However, as those at the age of 18-24 are still in college with limited income and tight budget, their behaviours will be very different from those who are already in the workforce making incomes. Therefore, this study only focuses on the Generation Y consumers who were in the range of 25-40 years of age at the time of this study. An annual household income of \$40,000 or greater was desired for single consumers, and \$75,000 for married ones. This target income was specified in order to effectively capture middle-class consumers, yet still insure that those targeted are financially able to purchase luxury fashion products. A balanced gender response was also desired in order to receive a sample of the consumers in the USA.

To achieve this target, through a third party research group, FGI, an online panel was selected and respondents from that panel were chosen based on profile data that mapped to the study specifications. A soft launch was sent to obtain a sufficient number of completes to validate accurate data capture for the survey questions. After verification of data storage, invitations began for the main field window. Invitations were sent out in small batches daily to allow for adjustments to be made to gender proportionalities as completes accumulated, to monitor for respondents outside the requested age/income categories, and also to adjust for invalid responses throughout the window. Over the course of the field window invitations were sent to 6,800 panellists, randomly selected from the subgroup of qualified panellists by age/income within the online panel. The data collection was stopped when around 300 valid surveys were obtained (due to budget concern).

### *Survey instrument*

The survey was estimated to take approximately 10-15 minutes for a thorough completion. The survey included a variety of questions. These included demographic questions, constructs that evaluated different aspects of personality and behaviour as well as open-ended questions to evaluate shopping behaviours. The demographic categorization questions were presented in either multiple choice or open-ended formats, in order to ensure that the respondent fell within the desired specifications. The survey ended with open-ended and multiple-choice questions regarding each individual's experience with luxury fashion products. These questions inquired about their past purchase behaviours, favourite luxury brands, and luxury consumption of their peers.

The research used in this study was a part of a larger consumer behaviour research study. Therefore, while a number of other constructs were measured in this survey, only a number of items on the survey pertained to this particular study. Existing scales were adopted or modified to measure the following variables: public self-consciousness (Fenigstein *et al.*, 1975), self-esteem (Richardson *et al.*, 2009), brand consciousness (Nelson and McLeod, 2005), brand self-congruency motivation (Tsai, 2005), conspicuous consumption motivation (Chaudhuri *et al.*, 2011), and brand loyalty (Bennett and Rundle-Thiele, 2001). Purchase intention was measured by asking the subjects to indicate the intention to purchase at least one luxury fashion item in the future. Each of these constructs was measured using a seven-point Likert scale, with 7 being strongly agree and 1 being strongly disagree.

### *Data analysis*

A total of 399 surveys were received through the whole process. However, through on-going screening for any incomplete surveys or invalid surveys, a total of 94 surveys

were removed, resulting in a total of 305 usable surveys. The screening was conducted periodically throughout the time period when the survey link was open. Incomplete and invalid surveys were removed to ensure the total number of surveys did not overly exceed the desired number of approximately 300 (for cost concern). The 94 cases were excluded from future analysis due to at least one of the following reasons:

- (1) answers were obviously filled out randomly (e.g. straight lining answers);
- (2) not sufficient time was spent on completing the survey (time spent was under two minutes);
- (3) inappropriate responses not pertaining to the study were given to open-ended questions; and
- (4) non-luxury brands (e.g. Nike and Abercrombie and Fitch) were considered as favourite luxury brands for some respondents.

Once the data was uploaded into an SPSS format, AMOS statistical software was used to conduct a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to check the adequacy of the measurement model. Next, a structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized relationships between the variables.

## Results

### *Sample profile*

A descriptive analysis of the results showed the general demographic information of the sample (Table I). The final sample ( $n = 305$ ) consisted of approximately an even gender ratio. The age and income specifications were also well met for the sample. With only 1.6 per cent of respondents were beyond the age range of 25-40. The sample was fairly evenly split among the three age ranges of focus (25-30, 31-35, and 36-40). With 5.6 per cent exception, all the respondents had an income of \$40,000 or above. A little more than half (61 per cent) of the respondents were married. Most of the respondents (77.4 per cent) had at least a four-year college degree. Majority of respondents indicated that they had previously purchased at least one luxury fashion item.

Descriptive analyses of the key constructs (Table II) indicated that in general the respondents had a high self-esteem (5.79), were conscious about their public self (4.41) and brand consciousness (4.29). They deemed brand self-congruency important to their purchase of luxury fashion products (4.64). Relatively, conspicuous consumption motivation was not that strong (3.73). The sample in general had a high intention (4.56) to purchase at least one luxury fashion item in the future, and the brand loyalty was relative low (3.49). The following brands were frequently mentioned as favourite luxury fashion brands: Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Ralph Lauren, and Coach.

### *Measurement model*

A CFA was conducted to test the measurement model. The initial CFA revealed several poor loaded items (standardized regression weights smaller than 0.5). Each of these items cross-loaded with other items in the model. As a result, six items were removed from the initial CFA. Two items were removed from both the initial public self-consciousness and self-esteem scales. One item was removed from both the brand loyalty and conspicuous consumption scales. After removing these items with poor loading, the CFA results revealed satisfactory goodness of fit indices ( $\chi^2(df = 259, n = 305) = 515.812, p = 0.000; RMSEA = 0.057; GFI = 0.881; CFI = 0.952$ ). Table III depicts

Answer options	Response %
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	51.8
Female	48.2
<i>Age</i>	
18-24	0.3
25-30	33.8
31-35	32.5
36-40	32.1
41	1.3
<i>Marital status</i>	
Single	38.4
Married	61.3
<i>Housing situation</i>	
Rent	25.2
Own, paying mortgage	62.3
Own, no mortgage	12.5
<i>Annual household income</i>	
< \$40,000	5.6
\$40,001-\$75,000	25.9
\$75,001-\$100,000	29.5
\$100,001-\$125,000	23.9
> \$125,000	15.1
<i>Highest level of education</i>	
High school graduate	5.9
Technical school/some college	16.7
Four-year college graduate	46.6
Graduate degree	30.8

**Table I.**  
Sample  
characteristics

Variable measured	Average rating (on a seven-point scale)
<i>Personality traits</i>	
Public self-consciousness	4.41
Self-esteem	5.79
<i>Brand consciousness</i>	
Brand consciousness	4.29
<i>Consumption motivations</i>	
Brand self-congruency	4.64
Conspicuous consumption	3.73
<i>Consumption behaviour</i>	
Purchase intention	4.56
Brand loyalty	3.49

**Table II.**  
Descriptive results  
for the key  
constructs

the standardized regression weights of the factor loadings in the final CFA. In the revised model, the standardized regression weights for the estimates were adequate. The estimates ranged from 0.521 to 0.928. While most of these estimates were above the commonly used 0.7 mark (Hair *et al.*, 2006), some did fall below this mark. These items with low factor

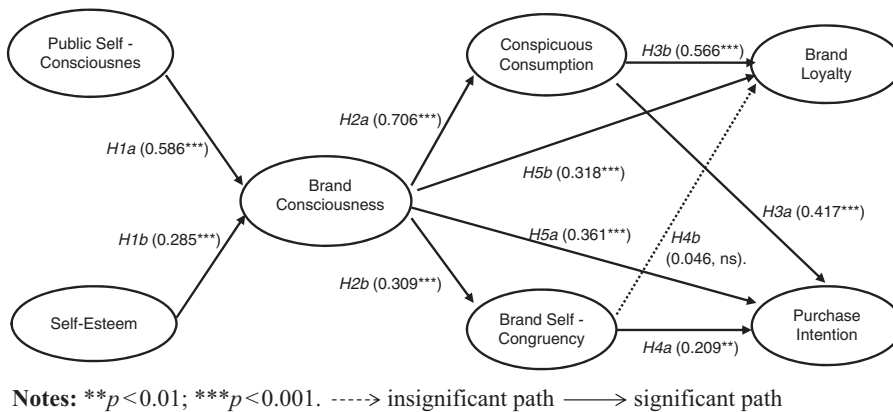
Measurement items	Factor reliability( $\alpha$ )	Item loading
<i>Public self-consciousness (PSC)</i>		
I'm concerned about my style of doing things	0.860	0.612
I'm concerned about the way I present myself		0.693
I'm self-conscious about the way I look		0.745
I usually worry about making a good impression		0.840
I'm concerned about what other people think of me		0.760
<i>Self-esteem (SE)</i>		
I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others	0.872	0.854
I feel that I have a number of good qualities		0.862
I am able to do things as well as most other people		0.692
I take a positive attitude towards myself		0.781
<i>Brand consciousness (BC)</i>		
I pay attention to the brand names of the clothes I buy	0.933	0.822
Brand names tell me something about the quality of the clothing		0.862
Brand names tell me something about how "cool" an item of clothing is		0.834
Sometimes I am willing to pay more money for clothing because of its brand name		0.867
Brand name clothes that cost a lot of money are good quality		0.788
I pay attention to the brand names of most of the products I buy		0.856
<i>Brand self-congruency (BSC)</i>		
I never buy a luxury brand inconsistent with the characteristics with which I describe myself	0.747	0.521
The luxury brands I buy must match what and who I really am		0.926
My choice of luxury brands depends on whether they reflect how I see myself, but not how others see me		0.682
<i>Conspicuous consumption (CC)</i>		
It says something to people around me when I buy a luxury fashion product	0.909	0.866
I buy luxury fashion products to match my financial status		0.857
I choose products or brands to create my own style that everybody admires		0.720
Luxury fashion products show to others that I am sophisticated		0.928
<i>Brand loyalty (BL)</i>		
I won't buy other brands if there is a luxury fashion brand offering similar products	0.896	0.810
I consider myself loyal to the luxury fashion brands that I have purchased in the past		0.914
When purchasing luxury fashion products, I usually only choose from the brands I purchased before		0.860

**Table III.**  
Measurement items  
with factors loadings  
and reliabilities

loadings were kept in the model in order to have a sufficient number of items per scale. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for each of the factors ranged from 0.747 to 0.933 as displayed in Table III, indicating good reliability of each measurement.

#### *Hypotheses testing*

A latent SEM analysis with maximum likelihood estimation followed to test the causal relationship between the constructs. As shown in Figure 1, although a  $\chi^2$  value was significant ( $\chi^2 = 20.101$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p = 0.010$ ), other fit indices indicated a reasonable fit to the data ( $\chi^2/df = 2.5$ ,  $GFI = 0.982$ ,  $CFI = 0.986$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.071$ ). Overall, all of the



**Figure 1.** SEM results with standardized estimates

parameters estimated for the structural paths were significant ( $p$  value  $< 0.05$ ) and in the hypothesized direction except for *H1b* and *H4b*. *H1b* proposed a negative relationship between Generation Y consumers' self-esteem and their brand consciousness. However, the results indicated a significant positive relationship. That is, the results showed that Generation Y consumers with high self-esteem had a high level of brand consciousness. *H4b*, which proposed a positive relationship between brand self-congruency motivation and brand loyalty, was not supported by the results of this study. No significant relationship was found between the brand self-congruency motivation and their brand loyalty.

Young consumers' consciousness of public self-image and self-esteem made them more brand conscious ( $\lambda = 0.586, p < 0.001$ ;  $\lambda = 0.285, p < 0.001$ , respectively). Consistent with *H2a* and *H2b*, consumers' brand consciousness drove them to have both conspicuous consumption and brand self-congruency consumption motivations for luxury fashion products ( $\lambda = 0.706, p < 0.001$ ;  $\lambda = 0.309, p < 0.001$ , respectively). Also as proposed by *H5a* and *H5b*, consumers' brand consciousness positively influenced their brand loyalty and purchase intention towards luxury fashion products ( $\lambda = 0.318, p < 0.001$ ;  $\lambda = 0.361, p < 0.001$ , respectively). Though purchase intention was positively influenced by both consumption motivations as stated in *H3a* and *H4a* ( $\lambda = 0.209, p = 0.003$ ;  $\lambda = 0.417, p < 0.001$ , respectively), brand loyalty was only positively influenced by their conspicuous consumption motivations ( $\lambda = 0.566, p < 0.001$ ), but not by the brand self-congruency motivation.

### Discussion/implications

With the growing purchase power and the large market size, Generation Y consumers become a very important and strategic segment for the luxury market in the USA. With significant difference from their parent generation—the baby boomers, who have been the traditional target consumers for the luxury market, Generation Y, being viewed as the new comers to the US luxury market, definitely deserves a special attention from the industry. This study, from the perspective of self-concept, provides a practical consumer insight into Generation Y consumers in terms of their luxury fashion consumption behaviour.

#### *Self-related personality traits and brand consciousness*

The results of this study indicated that the level of public self-consciousness an individual has positively impacts their brand consciousness. Therefore the more

concerned an individual is with how others see him/her, the higher level of brand conscious they are. This finding corresponds with the research by Fernandez (2009) that concluded that young consumers preferred to purchase brand name clothing because they were concerned with how their peers viewed them. Generation Y consumers are viewed as being high public self-conscious individuals. To more effectively connect with Generation Y consumers luxury brands should develop strategies that increase brand awareness by focusing on product attributes that help consumers feel confident about purchasing the brand. For example, advertising slogans that communicate the message of popularity and respect from others could be used. Since a majority of young consumers (20-40) are purchasing luxury products online (Little, 2012), luxury brands should increase their online presence through social media and fashion-oriented web sites. Providing brand information or consumer stories would encourage brand awareness and help the consumers feel confident that they had made a wise purchase decision.

Generation Y consumers with high levels of self-esteem were found to be more likely to be brand conscious when making purchase decisions. While the relationship between these two constructs was hypothesized to have the opposite direction, this contrasting direction has been identified by previous researchers (Hausman, 2000; Rook and Fisher, 1995). This curious finding provides new insight into the brand conscious behaviour of individuals with high self-esteem. Though self-esteem usually reflects a personality trait or even a state, there is an argument that it is also a consumer need, which influences consumers' product choice (Peters *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, it is the need to have high self-esteem that makes the Generation Y consumers more likely to be brand conscious. Appreciation Generation Y consumers' need for self-esteem can help the marketers to better market their brands to this group of consumers. Advertising messages that use a peer-to-peer approach, rather than celebrities, would support this strong link between high self-esteem need and brand consciousness.

#### *Brand consciousness and consumption motivations*

The relationship between the brand consciousness of consumers and consumption motivation of brand self-congruency was also supported by the results. Results indicated that a high level of brand consciousness positively influenced brand self-congruency motivations. This means that consumers with high brand conscious are more likely to have a strong motivation to purchase brands/products with which they feel a strong connection. Individuals with a high level of brand consciousness also have a high level of conspicuous consumption motivations. Understanding the complex relationship between brand consciousness and brand self-congruency and conspicuous consumption is crucial. Marketing strategies that position luxury fashion brands as status symbols that support or encourage a specific lifestyle or personal value would be useful when targeting the Generation Y consumers. This type of strategy is also supported by the research of Sirgy (1985) who determined that consumers who are driven to feel a connection with the products they purchase are likely to seek out brands that reflect their self-image.

#### *Brand consciousness and consumption behaviours*

The brand consciousness of consumers had a positive, significant relationship with both their brand loyalty and purchase intention towards luxury fashion products. The results indicated that consumers who have a high level of brand consciousness are more brand loyal. This relationship supports the research by Palumbo and Herbig (2000), which suggested that in order to be brand loyal and make repeated purchases of

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brands, consumers must first be conscious of the brands available to them. Marketing strategies that encourage and reward brand loyalty would help to foster a long-term relationship with young adult fashion luxury consumers.

#### *Consumer motivations and consumption behaviours*

The results supported the hypothesis that the social-motivation of conspicuous consumption has a positive and significant influence on the consumption behaviours in terms of brand loyalty and purchase intention. Generation Y Consumers who are motivated by conspicuous consumption are brand loyal and exhibit a high level of purchase intention for luxury fashion products. This relationship between conspicuous consumption, brand loyalty, and purchase intention supports the premise that fashion luxury brands portray a certain status.

Luxury fashion brands should appeal to the conspicuous consumption motives of Generation Y consumers. Luxury fashion brands could market their products as having a high status by offering limited edition or exclusive product lines. For example, J. Crew is not usually considered a luxury fashion brand; however, this retailer recently expanded its online merchandise mix to include exclusive and limited editions items for women and men. Their online boutique, called J. Crew Collection, offers higher priced and better quality products. For example, dresses that retail for \$500 or more and \$300 cashmere sweaters are exclusively available in limited quantities on their web site. Because these products are not available in stores, they offer exclusivity or status that is associated with luxury fashion products. There is a unique opportunity for other fashion brands to replicate the J. Crew model by offering higher quality and exclusive products online.

The self-motivation of brand self-congruency was proven to only significantly impact the consumption behaviour of purchase intention. The results supported the hypothesis that initially proposed the positive relationship between the self-motivation of brand self-congruency and consumers' purchase intention for luxury fashion products. The results are consistent with Amatulli and Guido's (2011) who found that consumers with high brand self-congruency motivations consume luxury products that are congruent with their self-image.

The influence of brand self-congruency on purchase intention is important in guiding the marketing strategies of luxury fashion brands. Luxury fashion companies could market their brands as portraying a certain symbol or meaning. These brands could also introduce limited and/or exclusive product lines to which certain consumers feel a connection (e.g. sustainability or philanthropy). By marketing a luxury brand as having a personal connection with consumers, luxury retail companies will attract consumers who are driven by self-oriented motivations. These consumers will also then have a high intent to purchase these products.

While the study did not identify a significant relationship between the brand self-congruency and brand loyalty, the other reported relationships still suggest a relationship between these two factors may exist. This non-significant relationship may be attributed to a small sample size.

#### **Conclusions**

From the perspective of self-concept, this research shed some light on the luxury fashion consumption behaviour of Generation Y consumers, which are viewed as the newcomers to the US luxury market. With its large population and growing purchase power, this market segment is of strategic importance to the luxury market, especially

in the slow economic environment. As members of Generation Y enter their prime earning years, retailers and other members of the luxury market must revise their marketing strategies to cater to these consumers' needs and behaviour patterns. Successful strategies may encourage a lifetime of loyalty to a brand.

One reason that Generation Y consumers entered into the luxury market is the emergence of "New Luxury" products (Lode, 2008; Shea, 2013; Silverstein and Fiske, 2008; Stein and Sanburn, 2013). These products are ones "that possess higher levels of quality, taste, and aspiration than other goods in the category, but are not so expensive as to be out of reach" (Silverstein and Fiske, 2008). For example, Tiffany & Co., Louis Vuitton, and Coach added lower priced items (i.e. items under \$300) to their merchandise mix in an effort to attract younger aspirational consumers. In essence, these brands made luxury more affordable and accessible (Shea, 2013). By providing luxury products at a lower entry-level price point, brands provide young adult consumers an opportunity to interact with the brand and hopefully develop a relationship that will continue when they have higher earnings (Panteva, 2011; Shea, 2013). Some luxury fashion brands such as Marc Jacobs (Lamb, 2012) are presently enhancing their product lines to appeal to younger adult consumers.

A focus of luxury fashion brands should be to position their lower priced products as gateways to conspicuous consumption and brand loyalty. Generation Y consumers are very passionate and often evangelical about the brands they like. They frequently discuss and share brand information (usually online) with friends and strangers about brands they have purchased or are considering (Stein and Sanburn, 2013; Thomas *et al.*, 2007). Historically young adult consumers, including Generation Y, have played a significant role as fashion innovators (Beaudoin *et al.*, 1998; Goldsmith and Hofacker, 1991; Gutman and Mills, 1982) with the development of a strong brand loyalty at a young age having lasting financial implications (Danziger, 2005; Grotts and Johnson, 2012; Shea, 2013).

In the past, luxury consumers have not been as brand conscious or public self-conscious as this new young adult segment of luxury consumers. Current marketing strategies that display affluence and heritage may not be the most effective way to advertise luxury products to the relatively young consumers, including Generation Y. Results from this study indicate that effectively targeting this new luxury consumer requires an understanding of their personality dimensions and consumption motivations. Luxury fashion brands should build brand awareness, prestige, and exclusivity in a novel, trendy way that appeals to a younger generation of consumers.

### **Limitations and further research**

The findings of this study contribute to the field of consumer behaviour as well as the luxury fashion market. However, as with any research study, a number of limitations exist within the context of this research. The first limitation comes from the sample of the study. Only 305 members from an online panel were recruited to represent the Generation Y consumers. This sample may not represent the population due to the possible incompleteness of panel and also the non-response bias. If the data collection could cover a longer period of time and have a larger sample size, the representativeness of the sample could be improved. Second, the influence of other aspects of purchasing experience on Generation Y consumers' luxury consumption, such as customer service, store environment, and product attributes, was not considered in this study. Lastly, luxury is a subjective concept. Future studies on luxury fashion consumption could investigate consumers' response to a set of particular named brands.



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