

Snobbish Bandwagoners: Ambiguity of Luxury Goods' Perception¹

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Abstract

Purpose: The article explores the grounds of possible interrelations of snob and bandwagon consumers' inclinations in the luxury fashion sector. The reason to investigate this comes from the growth of inconsistent evidence among analyses of this subject. Consumers' perception of luxury goods seems not only compound but also quite ambiguous at the same time. One of its reasons may be the wrong assumption that snob and bandwagon inclinations are opposite trends that cannot co-exist among individual motives of luxury purchases.

Methodology and findings: The mixed method research – in the form of international consumers' e-survey and semi-structured interviews with affluent consumers – reveals that mutual relations of these two trends are clearly visible and can both motivate purchase at the same time.

Keywords: customer value perception, luxury goods sector, luxury fashion, snob effect, bandwagon effect, prestige-seeking behavior, new luxury markets

JEL: M31, D11, D12, D46

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Introduction

Consumer attitudes towards luxury reveal both complexity and ambivalence (Dubois, Laurent and Czellar, 2001). The complexity stems from the compound nature of value associated with products or services. Traditionally, people associated luxury goods with their excellent quality, high price, uniqueness, polysensuality, and scarcity (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Okonkwo, 2007; O’Cass and Frost, 2002; Dubois et al., 2001; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999; Dubois and Duquesne, 1993; Leibenstein, 1950). For a long time, many treated the functional features of these products as the most valuable. However, the last twenty years of quickly growing research elucidate that other (non-functional) value categories of luxury goods can have a decisive impact on the purchase of these goods. Luxury goods bring pleasure, increase self-confidence, or improve social status, and these emotional and social features nowadays to make people around the world buy them and desire them (Cristini et al., 2017; Chandon et al., 2016; Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2008; Tsai, 2005; Wong and Zaichkowsky, 1999; Bernstein, 1999; Dubois and Paternault, 1997; Berry, 1994). Moreover, sheer products do not necessarily embody these values but are created by, e.g., retailers, brand owners, and other luxury goods’ users.

Despite the fact, that both practitioners and academics have thoroughly examined the emotional and social value of luxury goods and its impact on purchase decisions, as well as the impact of particular value chain actors on boosting the purchase willingness among consumers, we are still far away from the answer why there are so many inconsistencies in self-reported consumers’ attitudes towards luxury (Dubois, Laurent and Czellar, 2001)? What is the reason for this ambivalence? Maybe, we use inadequate (i.e., mainly quantitative, too shallow, too general) methods to measure luxury goods perception? Maybe, we wrongly assume that consumers are aware of the whole palette of antecedents that incline them to purchase certain goods? Alternatively, maybe, we should redefine and re-examine the assumptions we had so far that, e.g., love and hate towards luxury goods or snob and bandwagon inclinations cannot co-exist in consumers’ minds and equally drive them (or push them away from) the purchase of luxury goods?

This paper offers some answers to these questions but mostly concentrates on researching the grounds of bandwagon and snob interconnectedness; so far, scholars have analyzed both effects as opposite in consumer behavioral tendencies. The area of exploration is the consumer perception of luxury goods (CVPL). In order to explore and discuss these two tendencies and their possible connections, the author used two different methods. The first was quantitative, an international e-survey among 1193

consumers, while the second – which allowed for a more in-depth exploration of findings – a qualitative semi-structured interview with affluent consumers.

The first section of this paper provides theoretical insights into luxury goods' value categories and some of the anomalies they represent. Then, the author describes the bandwagon and snob behavioral tendencies in luxury goods' consumption by examining their possible sociological and psychological sources. The subsequent part is a conceptual framework, which briefly demonstrates the link between the theoretical sources and propositions. Next follows a description of procedures of the two empirical studies. The discussion of findings takes the largest part of this paper and examines the conspicuous consumption patterns with either their snob or bandwagon characteristics to show the areas of their interconnectedness and the underlying reasons. The paper concludes with some answers to the analyzed problem. These answers will prove useful both in academic reflection (the study of the perception of luxury goods) and the daily jobs of luxury brand managers (the content and structure of value offered to different target groups).

Theoretical background: Luxury goods (traits, anomalies, pyramid tiers)

The perception of luxury goods and their purchase and usage presents some economic anomalies. Firstly, luxury goods are superfluous yet highly desired (Kapferer and Valette-Florence, 2018; Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2008; Berry, 1994). Although their functional value stems from superior quality, this is not the sole or even a major reason for their purchase (Wong and Zaichkowsky, 1999; Bernstein, 1999; Dubois and Paternault, 1997; Berry, 1994; Stępień et al., 2016). Secondly, the price of a luxury item is not the result of a demand/supply market game, but a far subtler ratio of the interplay of a wide variety of benefits and costs, as well as the indicator of “the social value” of its owner (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Okonkwo, 2007; O’Cass and Frost, 2002). Luxury goods serve as signals of membership in the affluent class; their public exposure is to evoke both envy and appreciation of the lower classes which, therefore, improves the self-image of the luxury owners. Indeed, the social and hedonic values that luxury goods encompass and transmit are one of the most important reasons for which people buy and publicly expose them.

Luxury brand owners usually have a well-defined core group of consumers which they target in marketing strategies. Not all luxury brand owners seek the same group of customers simultaneously; the luxury goods differ in accessibility and form a “pyra-

mid of luxury goods.” The pyramid reflects not only the positioning of particular brands – along with their respective target groups and the distribution strategies – but also indicates different categories of value composition on each level.

At the highest level of the pyramid appears “materialized perfection” (Kapferer, 2008, p. 98); very rare products produced for a small number of ultra-affluent buyers. Top luxury items position a little lower and clearly stand out from the mass products because of exceptional quality, usability, durability, price, and rarity. These goods embody high functional, aesthetic, and emotional values and epitomize the traditional perception of luxury. The middle level of the pyramid encompasses both mainstream and accessible luxury; the latter comprises semi-mass products for global demand with carefully selected marketing communication that foregrounds the unique, luxurious features of the goods. The lower the level of the pyramid, the more “powdered” the media messages that aim to create illusions of true luxury and the more diverse and extensive the distribution strategies. Although the brands from the lowest tiers highlight the uniqueness of their design or style, they essentially belong to the category of mass products. The lower the tier, the more marketers’ effort is necessary to offer a mix of value components. When it is no longer legitimate nor credible to maintain the image of uniqueness and high quality, other value components must accompany them to cover for the lack of traditionally-perceived luxury traits. Therefore, the factors of experience, fun, and creativity – which sometimes balances shock and disgust – must appeal to the social desire for the brand.

Luxury pyramids come in many varieties, not only when it comes to the number of tiers (see Chevalier and Gutsatz, 2012; Rambourg, 2014) but also the position of the brands on the respective levels (Kemp, 1998; Christodoulides et al., 2009).

Bandwagon and snob effects and their socio-psychological sources

In 1899, T. Veblen depicted upper-class formation in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) with the analysis of its consumption patterns and classified them as conspicuous. The main reason for this type of consumption, he wrote, is not to satisfy needs but display luxury items publicly, hence signal the material affluence of their owners.

In microeconomic consumer theory, “Veblen goods” are those that contradict one of the basic economic rules; instead of decreasing, the demand for luxuries increases with price. The price serves here as the indicator of wealth; the fewer can afford

something, the more people desire such a scarcely accessible item. Veblenian conspicuous consumption of luxury goods was delimited at the individual consumer level into two distinctive behavioral patterns: conformism (the bandwagon effect) and distinction (the snob effect; Leibenstein, 1950; Corneo and Jeanne, 1997).

The bandwagon effect occurs when consumer demand increases while other people purchase the same kind of goods/services. The snob effect is when the willingness to purchase publicly-desired goods decreases. It means that consumers who consider themselves unique, different, and distinct tend to buy the items considered as not desired (or purchased) by the masses. Even though both groups fall into the category of Veblenian conspicuous consumption behavior, they seem to purchase luxury goods for different reasons.

Scholars have explored the bandwagon behavior in-depth in political science to explain, e.g., election biases (see, e.g., Simon, 1954; Nadeau, Cloutier and Guay, 1993). Academics have furthermore analyzed the effect in economics; as one of the anomalies of consumer behavioral patterns, which mainly stems from the lack of sufficient information about the product price-quality ratio. However, this explanation seems highly inadequate because it abstracts from the sociological and psychological antecedents of the purchase decisions of such goods.

According to Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, humans tend to evaluate their opinions, abilities, or social status and prefer to compare themselves with similar others. Especially the Western societies are characterized by a "unidirectional drive upward" and, therefore, feel pressured to improve continuously. The need to compare leads to affiliation, the need to conform motivates uniformity, while the unidirectional drive upward enhances competition. Even though Festinger emphasized accurate self-evaluation as the purpose of social comparison, many sociological and psychological studies question this assumption (see, e.g., Wood, 1989 for the analysis of the amplifications and replenishments of Festinger's theory).

Firstly, self-evaluation may serve different goals; people compare with others either to self-improve or self-enhance. While self-improvement inclines towards upward comparisons – with people perceived as superior (Wheeler, 1966) – self-enhancement prompts downward comparisons with those who are perceived as inferior (Wills, 1981). Secondly, even though humans strive for accuracy in their self-evaluation process, social comparison may occur automatically and, therefore, be biased because the objects of comparison may be random; namely, people may as well compare themselves with a stranger passer-by (Brickman and Bulman, 1977; Allen and Wilder, 1977; Guiot,

1978). Thirdly, there may be various multiple reference groups used as the basis for self-evaluation. One may be under pressure of implicit requirements of one's group but, at the same time, be attracted by the standards or way of life of another (Holt 1995).

The global rise of aspiring consumers: are they mostly bandwagoners?

Today, the traditional image of the perception and consumption of luxuries undergoes substantial redefinition due to the continuous and dynamic growth in demand for these goods from aspiring consumers in developing and increasing luxury markets (see, e.g., BCG, 2017). Currently, 50% of global purchases in luxury fashion apparel come from middle-income, online Chinese consumers (see, Cardamenis, 2016b). The dynamic economic growth of many countries results in the growth of groups of new customers willing to join the "happy few" of the affluent meritocracy. Luxury consumption seems especially appealing because it permits the transition between modern classes, constituted largely by wealth accumulation (see Kapferer and Bastien, 2009). At the same time, a new wealth-based social stratification globally breaks the traditional social classes.

Due to "luxury democratization," luxury brand extensions became the norm. The sale volume of mass prestige products drastically increased with production shifted to low-cost offshore countries. The griffe level of the luxury pyramid thinned while its lowest level vastly swelled. However, this happens for a reason: the perception of value heavily depends on environmental settings. What is an ordinary popular good in a developed country may well be considered a luxury in a developing country partly due to differences in disposable income. In this sense, a brand perceived as *masstige* in a developed economy (luxury homebase) may be regarded as high luxury in a developing country (luxury rising), because its relatively high price maintains its image of scarcity and exclusivity.

Leibenstein (1950) defined the bandwagon effect as typical for the lower-end luxury brand extensions, which scholars further conceptualized as the antecedent of the snob effect (Miller, McIntyre and Mantrala, 1993; Berry, 1994). This may suggest that bandwagoners would rather buy *masstige* luxuries, while the snobs would rather purchase brands from a higher tier of the luxury pyramid. This may further imply that there are more bandwagon-prone consumers in the new luxury markets than in the old "luxury" homebase countries.

The formation of propositions

While bandwagoners want to conform to the public image of the upper class by virtually copying their purchase behavior, the snobs tend to publicly manifest their individual sophistication and superior taste. The aim of the luxury purchases and their public exposure in both groups is the same: the quest for prestige and social recognition, which seems to be one of the most important value categories in CVPL. Both groups want to differentiate themselves from the groups that they perceive as inferior, but their methods to achieve this are different. While bandwagon behavior is a mere copycatting strategy of the “wannabe” class, the snobbish strategy is to positively bewilder the public by non-conformist activities or appearances. The desire to differ is to express individuality which seems to be highly valued by such consumers. Thus, the reason behind snob behavior is to gain public applause that would come from the self-evaluation of the snob's individual superiority. Social recognition seems to be a necessary, even if auxiliary condition, for the snob to enjoy their good public image of oneself.

Even though bandwagoners follow the higher reference group in their consumption patterns with the aspiration to a higher social class, they refer to superior groups in their quest for self-improvement. Snobs are distinct from the crowd in their purchases, so their goal rather is self-enhancement, with self-evaluation as grounds for downward comparison; they orient themselves to groups that they perceive as inferior or their own.

The bandwagon effect was further conceptualized as the antecedent of the snob effect (Miller, McIntyre and Mantrala, 1993; Berry, 1994). However, as many reports indicate, even the ultra-rich consumers buy masstige goods more frequently than higher-tier luxury brands. The simple answer to that is that the brands from lower tiers of the luxury ladder are cheaper than griffe, so that they can be bought more frequently, and snobs no longer consider them as luxury items but as workaday purchases. However, as they are still labeled luxurious, these objects continually signal status on the everyday basis. The goods from the upper tiers communicate status far more discretely; they allow this social recognition only to those who are “insiders” and can recognize the symbolic value.

Many studies indicate that the bandwagon effect is a purchase behavior that strives to conform to an affluent lifestyle and distinguish from a non-affluent lifestyle (French and Raven, 1959; Sirgy, 1985; Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1994). However, snobs do exactly the same; they want to distinguish themselves with their purchases from both non-affluent classes and their own group.

As relativity is the distinctive feature of luxury perception, the same luxury goods may be perceived as either ordinary brands or high luxuries. What may strongly influence this perception is both the individual disposable income level and the level of economic growth of the consumers' home country.

Proposition 1. Both snobs and bandwagoners value prestige consumption higher than the consumers that do not demonstrate either behavior.

Proposition 2. Both snobs and bandwagoners want to differentiate themselves from their own peer groups with luxury purchases.

Proposition 3. Both snob and bandwagon inclinations will be stronger in luxury rising countries than the old luxury homebase markets.

Proposition 4. Both snobs and bandwagoners may buy the same luxury goods due to the relativity of luxury perception and the variety of reference groups in the process of social self-evaluation.

Proposition 5. Consumers can exhibit both bandwagon and snob inclinations in their attitudes to luxury goods and purchase decisions; bandwagoners can perceive themselves as distinct from the crowd while snobs can aspire to a small group of "sophisticated, affluent individuals."

Proposition 6. Highly affluent consumers mostly show the snob inclination, although they feel pressured to conform to the lifestyle of their own peer group at the same time.

The method

In order to reach the research goal – to explore the interrelatedness of both snob and bandwagon effects in consumer perception of luxury goods – the author applied mixed methodology with a combination of international quantitative e-survey and in-depth interviews with affluent consumers. The international e-questionnaire was conducted among 1193 respondents in five countries (Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Germany, Portugal, and Poland) with the use of adopted and modified scales (from Wiedmann et al., 2009; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Holbrook, 1999; 2006). The survey examines consumers' value perception of luxury goods; luxury fashion, jewelry, and cars.

The second phase of empirical research aimed at deepening the explanatory value of the findings. The author conducted fourteen open semi-structured interviews with affluent, luxury consumers of both sexes with a disposable income above 8000 EUR per month of Polish, German, Turkish, French, and Swiss nationalities. The interviews asked about the categories of luxury good values that they consider the most important

and encouraged them to freely talk about their purchase motivations. Table 1 presents the sample characteristics from the international e-survey.

Table 1. Sample structure: international consumers' e-survey

| | | Total sample | Saudi Arabia | Germany | Poland | Turkey | Portugal |
|-------------------|--------------------|--------------|--------------|---------|--------|--------|----------|
| Sex | women | 558 | 48 | 71 | 299 | 18 | 69 |
| | Men | 635 | 224 | 85 | 135 | 88 | 51 |
| Generation | X (born 1966–1976) | 443 | 30 | 15 | 233 | 53 | 54 |
| | Y (born 1977–1994) | 750 | 242 | 141 | 201 | 53 | 66 |

Source: own elaboration.

The data comes from 2015. As the author used an e-questionnaire, the sample unsurprisingly consists mostly of generation Y: highly active consumers considered a globally homogenous cohort. Table 2 describes the respondents in the interview panel made in November 2016–January 2018.

Table 2. Respondents of the interview panel. Subject: luxury goods perception; snob and bandwagon inclinations

| Sex | Age | Profession | Monthly disposable income | Nationality |
|---------------|-----|---|---------------------------|-------------|
| Male | 57 | Businessman, own company | more than 20,000 EUR | Polish |
| Male | 51 | Businessman, own company | more than 20,000 EUR | Polish |
| Male | 46 | CEO, insurance sector | around 13,000 EUR | Polish |
| Male | 45 | CEO, banking sector | around 11,000 EUR | Polish |
| Male | 41 | Freelancer, IT programmer in the finance sector | around 15,000 EUR | Polish |
| Female | 50 | CEO, marketing | around 8,000 EUR | Polish |
| Female | 43 | CEO, finance | around 8,000 EUR | Polish |
| Female | 47 | Designer, own business | around 10,000 EUR | Polish |
| Female | 48 | Does not work, family business | more than 15,000 EUR | Polish |

| | | | | |
|---------------|----|---|----------------------|---------|
| Female | 40 | Own trading company | around 10,000 EUR | Polish |
| Male | 42 | Own trading company | more than 15,000 EUR | French |
| Male | 46 | CEO in a multinational corporation | around 20,000 EUR | French |
| Male | 43 | CEO, IT department, private banking | around 12,000 EUR | Swiss |
| Female | 34 | Does not work; wife of a restaurant owner | around 5,000 EUR | Turkish |
| Male | 56 | The restaurant owner | data not available | Turkish |
| Male | 61 | Photographer, freelancer | Around 10,000 EUR | German |

Source: own elaboration.

This paper considers only a small portion of total data. The findings below refer only to the bandwagon and snob perceptions and inclinations.

Findings and discussion: the international e-survey

The data obtained from an international e-survey show substantial differences in CVPL between the investigated countries. Data analysis of bandwagon and snob effects (see Table 3) shows that consumers from all rising luxury markets in the sample (Poland, Portugal, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia) regard the social component of luxury goods' value as important and evaluate it higher than Germans. Only Saudis demonstrate the positive snob effect and bandwagon effect with Germans scoring the lowest in the whole sample, but all consumers from rising luxury markets demonstrate higher snob and bandwagons effects than the Germans who represent a mature luxury market.

However, these findings cannot lead to the simplistic conclusion that consumers from aspiring countries are more bandwagon- and snob-prone than those from the old luxury markets. Although, it implies that these aspiring consumers more frequently express either their snob or bandwagon inclinations (or both simultaneously).

This difference may be explained by the level of novelty and social approval for luxury demonstration in public.

The data also reveal that respondents from the whole sample, irrespective of their home country, show a slightly larger inclination towards snobbish than bandwagon behavior, which may be explained by the natural human tendency to perceive themselves better than they actually are in order to maintain their self-esteem.

Table 3. Social value, snob and bandwagon components of CVPL: comparison of the sample countries' mean

| | Total | Saudi Arabia | Germany | Poland | Turkey | Portugal |
|--|-------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Social component | 3.28 | 3.54 | 2.90 | 3.30 | 3.38 | 3.51 |
| Luxury products are the symbol of high social status | 3.56 | 3.88 | 3.42 | 3.58 | 3.87 | 4.13 |
| Luxury products make good impression on others | 3.46 | 3.40 | 2.83 | 3.61 | 3.62 | 3.75 |
| Luxury products are highly desirable | 3.88 | 3.96 | 3.69 | 3.93 | 3.84 | 4.01 |
| Buying luxury products is essential since people judge others on the basis of what they have | 2.49 | 3.05 | 2.32 | 2.29 | 2.48 | 2.63 |
| Buying and having luxury products gives me a better position in the eyes of others | 3.01 | 3.40 | 2.25 | 3.10 | 3.07 | 3.05 |
| Snob effect | 2.94 | 3.29 | 2.35 | 3.07 | 2.54 | 2.93 |
| I prefer buying luxury products that are rare and not popular | 3.09 | 3.49 | 2.24 | 3.24 | 2.39 | 3.56 |
| I do not like it when many, even well-known people, have what I bought | 2.80 | 3.09 | 2.45 | 2.90 | 2.69 | 2.30 |
| Bandwagon effect | 2.48 | 3.19 | 1.93 | 2.45 | 2.18 | 2.62 |
| I prefer buying luxury products that are already used by people I appreciate and admire | 2.57 | 3.34 | 1.83 | 2.51 | 2.24 | 2.88 |
| I love to have the same things that well-known people have | 2.38 | 3.03 | 2.02 | 2.38 | 2.12 | 2.37 |

Source: own elaboration.

The respondents who show the snob inclination generally value all components of luxury value higher than those who do not demonstrate such tendency. The most valued component is of social nature, with positive hedonic facets, while these data are below average in the whole sample (less than 3). The most striking difference is reflected in the “fun factor” – a very important driver for respondents with the snobbish attitude – while less than important for the rest. Interestingly, respondents with a snobbish tendency consider luxury purchases more snobbish than other respondents, which may imply that they do not value it negatively.

Table 4. The characteristics of respondents who show the snob effect

| CVP component | Statement | Total | I do not like it when many, even well-known people have what I bought | | I prefer buying luxury products that are rare, not popular | |
|---------------|---|-------|---|----------------|--|----------------|
| | | | Answers 1–3 | Answers 4 or 5 | Answers 1–3 | Answers 4 or 5 |
| S | Luxury products are the symbol of high social status | 3.56 | 3.47 | 3.78 | 3.45 | 3.74 |
| S | Luxury products make a good impression on others | 3.46 | 3.41 | 3.59 | 3.28 | 3.76 |
| S | Luxury products are highly desirable | 3.88 | 3.8 | 4.08 | 3.73 | 4.13 |
| S | Buying and having luxury products gives me a better position in the eyes of others | 3.01 | 2.84 | 3.38 | 2.67 | 3.47 |
| F | Luxury products are characterized by high-class craftsmanship/design | 3.42 | 3.39 | 3.52 | 3.31 | 3.63 |
| A | Luxury products are the symbol of elegance | 3.31 | 3.26 | 3.43 | 3.17 | 3.55 |
| E | Buying luxury products is snobbish | 3.19 | 3.14 | 3.31 | 3.15 | 3.25 |
| H | Buying luxury products gives a lot of fun | 3.23 | 3.05 | 3.62 | 2.92 | 3.64 |
| H | Buying luxury products is a proof that I care about myself | 2.78 | 2.67 | 3.02 | 2.55 | 3.09 |
| H | Buying luxury products makes me more self-confident | 2.79 | 2.6 | 3.19 | 2.42 | 3.27 |
| H | Buying luxury products is very exciting; I feel like a queen/king | 2.67 | 2.5 | 3.04 | 2.33 | 3.13 |
| B | I prefer buying luxury products that are already used by people I appreciate and admire | 2.57 | 2.45 | 2.83 | 2.29 | 2.95 |
| B | I love to have the same things that well-known people have | 2.38 | 2.33 | 2.49 | 2.2 | 2.62 |
| pr | The price of luxury product is representative of the prestige that brings their ownership | 2.85 | 2.74 | 3.1 | 2.65 | 3.13 |
| pr | The price of the luxury product reflects the power of consumer desire for this item | 3.7 | 3.6 | 3.91 | 3.51 | 3.95 |

Legend: P – prestige. F – functional. A – aesthetic. E – ethical. H – hedonic. B – bandwagon inclination. Pr – price perception.

Source: own elaboration.

Table 5. CVPL of respondents showing the bandwagon effect

| CVP component | Statements | Total | I love to have the same things that well-known people have | | I prefer buying luxury products that are already used by people I appreciate and admire | |
|---------------|--|-------|--|----------------|---|----------------|
| | | | Answers 1–3 | Answers 4 or 5 | Answers 1–3 | Answers 4 or 5 |
| S | Luxury products are the symbol of high social status | 3.56 | 3.52 | 3.72 | 3.51 | 3.71 |
| S | Luxury products make a good impression on others | 3.46 | 3.38 | 3.88 | 3.33 | 3.88 |
| S | Luxury products are highly desirable | 3.88 | 3.83 | 4.13 | 3.8 | 4.13 |
| S | Buying and having luxury products gives me better standing in the eyes of others | 3.01 | 2.86 | 3.71 | 2.76 | 3.73 |
| F | Luxury products are characterized by high class craftsmanship/design | 3.42 | 3.36 | 3.75 | 3.31 | 3.8 |
| A | Luxury products are the symbol of elegance | 3.31 | 3.23 | 3.7 | 3.19 | 3.71 |
| E | Buying luxury products is snobbish | 3.19 | 3.16 | 3.33 | 3.2 | 3.18 |
| H | Buying luxury products gives a lot of pleasure | 3.23 | 3.15 | 3.6 | 3.07 | 3.67 |
| H | Buying luxury products is proof that I care about myself | 2.78 | 2.63 | 3.45 | 2.56 | 3.4 |
| H | Buying luxury products makes me more self-confident | 2.79 | 2.61 | 3.61 | 2.5 | 3.57 |
| H | Buying luxury products is very exciting; I feel like a queen/king | 2.67 | 2.47 | 3.56 | 2.4 | 3.43 |
| Sn | I prefer buying luxury products that are rare, not popular | 3.09 | 2.97 | 3.64 | 2.9 | 3.63 |
| Sn | I do not like it when many, even well-known people, have what I bought | 2.80 | 2.72 | 3.13 | 2.66 | 3.18 |
| pr | The price of the luxury product is adequate to the prestige that owning it brings | 2.85 | 2.69 | 3.59 | 2.63 | 3.47 |
| pr | The price of the luxury product reflects the power of consume desire for this item | 3.7 | 3.62 | 4.05 | 3.6 | 3.97 |

Legend: S – social, F – functional, A – aesthetic, E – ethical, H – hedonic, Sn – snob inclination; Pr – price perception.

Source: own elaboration.

The findings also demonstrate the interconnectedness of the snob and bandwagon tendency. The respondents who want to “stand out from the crowd” more often declare that – in their decisions on luxury purchases – they prefer luxury products that are already used by people they appreciate and admire, and they “love to have the same things that well-known people have.” Even though the means for the bandwagon effect in the snob group are still below 3, the data clearly indicate that famous, well-known, and socially respected members of society form the higher level reference group, whose lifestyle the snobbish respondents want to copy more frequently. This is a visible sign of the upward self-evaluation related far more to the bandwagon than the snob tendency.

The data in Table 5 present the value perception of luxury goods of the respondents that may be classified as bandwagon-prone. Similarly to snobbish respondents, bandwagon-prone respondents value all components of luxury goods higher than those who do not show such inclination. For the bandwagoners, buying luxury items seems more entertaining than for the snobs. The interconnectedness between the snob and bandwagon tendency is even more visible here; the bandwagoners declare that snobbish inclinations are important in their purchase decisions of luxury goods. Buying things that are rare, not popular, seems crucial to their luxury purchases and may be explained with perception bias: even masstige goods are still labeled as luxuries, and aspiring consumers do not consider them to be mass products. Self-evaluation with their own peer group probably leads the bandwagoners to the conclusion that some luxuries (irrespective of the tier) are recognized, respected, and considered as desirable. These data demonstrate that bandwagoners perceive themselves distinct from their peer groups and declare that they do not like it when many, even well-known people, have what they bought (means above 3, see the Sn component in Table 5).

Hence, the e-survey findings positively tested the hypotheses 1, 2, 3, and 5, which nevertheless still need more verification in different settings.

Interviews with affluent consumers

This part of empirical evidence comes from the informal semi-structured individual interviews with fourteen affluent consumers of both sexes. The author asked the individuals to comment freely on their own and their friends’ attitudes towards luxury goods. See below for a choice of excerpts regarding their bandwagon or snob inclinations. The findings generally illustrate a strong tendency to conform with own peer group, despite individual statements. All the interviewed individuals may be categorized as snob-prone because they admit that they would rather opt for something unique,

very rare, than a popular luxury label and they do not like others – even celebrities or stars – to have the same things that they possess. At the same time, they admit that they buy certain luxury brands as it is “considered improper not to have them” (female, 43, Polish) In this sense, the statements about difference need to be interpreted from the point of view of the preservation of self-esteem rather than through a real search for uniqueness.

Many utterances elaborated about the pressure to conform to the informal rules of their own peer group. This pressure is object-identified and either comes from externally oriented loved ones (see statement 1), the media (see statement 2), or a general, unspecified pressure to fall into line with the group (statements 1, 2, 3, 4). Such pronouncements shed new light on the bandwagon effect: for the affluent consumers, it is not anymore about following the upper-class lifestyle but conforming to their own peer group by replicating purchases, dress code, and behavior “considered appropriate for this society” (female, 56, Polish; male, 56, and female, 34, both Turkish).

Statement 1: male (57); evidence of conformity within the peer group: “I do not understand fashion at all, but I know some luxury fashion brands because my wife makes me wear them. She thinks it's simply improper to be illiterate in this area. As far as I know from my male friends, they do the same; just dress as they are expected (of course, to certain limits; I will never wear these pastel jumpers or torn jeans). They also have quite a limited knowledge about fashion and if you asked them to recognize brands from patterns or design, most of them would simply burst out... They know only these that we all wear.”

Statement 2: female (50), pressure to conform from the peer group: “Now I enjoy fashion much more than five years ago. My husband was sort of a VIP then and – as part of his job – we had to attend many public events. Before that, I had considered myself fashion-conscious and thought that I can dress myself nicely and elegantly. But then my photo was published in some gossip magazine with the tag “how not to dress.” It was a pretty devastating experience. I had to quickly learn how to conform to this “dress code” and even consulted a stylist... But I was always a bit stressed and uncomfortable before these parties... Now, I feel much more at ease but, at the same time, I must admit that these years taught me a lot. I think I know more about fashion now and can better judge upfront how to dress for certain occasions to fit in but still stay myself.”

Statement 3: female, (43), need to conform to own peer group: “As I manage a group of mostly women now, I have to pay more attention to how I dress for work than pre-

viously. This is a German MNC and we have to conform to a quite strict dress code, so I wear mainly dress-suits and costumes, but as I noticed that Hugo Boss [a German brand] is more respected here than Italian (which I prefer), I started to buy more of this brand.”

Statement 4: male (46), conformance within the peer group: “To be honest, when we meet, we all look like clones; especially our spouses. They try so hard to find something unique for these social occasions and, eventually, they all come dressed pretty much the same; either in beige suede or navy-blue wool... My wife says that it is absurd, but I just see straightened blond hair and big or small bags presented as some kind of weapon or the most advanced technical novelty.”

But there are not only conformance statements. All respondents highlight their need for “unique” purchases with the fun factor being the ground for them. There is a sort of rivalry in searching the “best items” within the membership group and the strive to stand out from the own group, yet be positively perceived and moderately followed (see statements 5 and 6).

Statement 5: male (45), evidence for upward comparison (snob effect) within the peer group: “Well, as I am not interested in fashion, I find shopping for clothes either boring or frustrating. I ask either my wife or my assistant to do that for me. But as I do cycle, run, and ski quite actively, I find it pretty relaxing and fun to search through the web for some outstanding, unique pieces. I do not always buy them for the full price, sometimes I wait till they have some sale, because a new carbon bicycle can be pretty expensive... My friends do the same and, sometimes, they get pretty nice stuff. So, I admit, it might be a sort of competition and show-off between us. For an outsider, we may look a bit like boys bragging in the sandpit, but at least our devices are useful and technical... compared to these ridiculous bags.”

Statement 6: female (47), snob inclination, need to stand out from the peer group: “I think that I have my own recognizable style, although not everybody may like it. I noticed that some ladies even try to copy it, which I find ... ok, as it is both flattering and a bit annoying. But I think, as we all observe other people and look for inspiration for how to express ourselves through fashion, we either set or (even subconsciously) follow the trends.”

During the interviews, a differentiated approach to the assessment of own consumer attitude by other members of society was clearly visible. The Swiss and German respondents (both male) clearly stressed that the exhibition of consumption is in their

circles (and countries) considered to be a manifestation of bad taste and exaltation. One should not flaunt wealth publicly, but having an expensive (preferably German brand) car or second home in the mountains is not considered as a sign of snobbish extravagance. The areas of spending for luxuries are (for both respondents) mainly travel, watches, jewelry, works of art, or technically advanced home appliances. Most of these expenditures are treated as investments; either in family and friends' relationship, comfort, or as a traditional form of monies' location. For the Turkish respondents (male 56, female, 34, couple, restaurant's owner and his wife), the assessment of their wealth by the community was also very important, but the nature of the perception of luxury by the community seems radically different.

Statement 7: male (56), female (34), Turkish: "Manifesting affluence by possessing luxury goods in our society is a proof of success: being resourceful, enterprising and, therefore, more respectable. But you must be careful with this manifestation: on the one hand, people respect you, but on the other hand, they envy you (because they probably would like the same) and probably think that you have gained this property by fraud, corruption, or other unclean methods."

Considering the above, it may be plausible – albeit with the cautiousness of qualitative research for a small sample – to state that the hypotheses 4 and 6 are justified.

Conclusions

The two phenomena – the bandwagon (to conform) and snob effect (to stand out from the crowd) – may be expressed by the same individuals in their attitude towards luxury goods and purchase preferences. There can be several reasons for this ambivalence and interconnectedness.

Firstly, both snob- and bandwagon-prone consumers seek differentiation within their own peer groups and want to conform to other superior groups. The difference in snobs and bandwagon behavior lies in the different group as the basis of comparison. For bandwagoners, the upper reference group is defined mainly through the prism of their affluence while, for snobs, the basis of comparison will be other snobs; that is, loosely formed sets of individuals, who can recognize and appreciate a superior taste in other snob-prone consumers.

The next difference lies in the motivation. While bandwagoners want to be affiliated with higher social classes, snobs want to be socially recognized as superior and unique,

not affiliated with any specific group, although still recognized as both affluent and socially influential. The reason behind snobbish behavior can be more of a hedonic nature than for bandwagoners; so the primary motive cannot be of social but individual hedonic nature.

Thirdly, both groups value social recognition highly; although snobs may perceive it as an auxiliary condition to fulfill their hedonic needs. Even though the findings do not support the claim that snobs would value hedonic facets more than bandwagoners, the reason for this can be the reverse relationship between the social and hedonic value categories for these two types of consumers. While the social recognition can give joy to bandwagoners, snobs find joy in self-pampering and social recognition of what they perceive as unique taste. Moreover, as Kastanakis and Balabanis (2012; 2014) report in their research, the creative counter-conformity factor positively relates to the bandwagon effect. This factor refers to consumers who seek social distinction but still strive for social approval (Tian et al., 2001). In this sense, the snobbish behavior can simultaneously satisfy uniqueness and social affiliation (Brewer, 1991; Brewer and Gardner, 1996). Festinger's social comparison theory – and its development in Brewer's optimal distinctiveness theory – explain the findings of the co-existence of both snob and peer conformance tendency among highly affluent consumers.

The next reason for the interconnectedness and ambivalence of snob and bandwagon behavior appears in the highly subjective – and, therefore, hard to precisely estimate – term of “masses” in luxury goods' consumption. The popularity of any luxury brand rarely leads to its massive consumption, which would lead to lower appreciation among its target clients. Such brands can still maintain the image of luxurious in countries either characterized by lower economic development (like Poland, Portugal, or Turkey) or constrained by other socio-cultural traits (such as Saudi Arabia). In the first case, these goods are simply not consumed by the masses because only a small percentage of society can afford them. In the second case, the consumption of popular luxury brands manifests a “Western” and (somewhat) prohibited lifestyle. This explains why newly rising luxury markets still recognize some masstige goods as upper-level brands, desirable by both snobs and bandwagoners.

The search for the areas of snob and bandwagon interconnectedness reveal that quantitative methods of CVPL exploration, even though informative and full with data vital to statistical analysis, do not offer much insight into the reasons for and nature of their interconnectedness. Interviews, although here only used supportive evidence, shed much more light on the subtle relations between snob and bandwagon inclinations. Both e-survey findings and interviews also imply that consumers are not neces-

sarily fully aware of the whole palette of motives that makes them purchase and use luxury goods.

The discrepancy of consumer attitudes to luxury is evident but still hard for academics to explain (Otnes, Lowrey and Shrum, 1997) and managers to make business sense. The data suggest that highlighting exceptional functional features that build a unique and highly desired image of luxury products along with positive emotions forms the winning communication strategy, regardless the market. Moreover, even the bandwagoners feel that distinct from the crowd.

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