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Antecedents and outcomes of brand prominence on willingness to buy luxury brands

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the influence of brand prominence on willingness to buy luxury brands. It also aims to investigate the direct and moderating roles of luxury brand values, social influence and vanity on willingness to buy luxury brands.

Design/methodology/approach – A convenience sampling method was employed. Survey questionnaires were distributed by mall intercept to quasi-random samples in downtown Perth, Western Australia for completion and return. The return yielded 779 usable questionnaires, the data from which were analysed using SPSS 22.

Findings – The findings support the influence of brand prominence on purchase intention for luxury brands. It has also been found that social influence has a significant influence on physical vanity and willingness to buy luxury brands. However, some relationships with and isolations from the earlier studies have been identified.

Practical implications – This study provides some meaningful insights for marketing managers regarding brands prominence that they can use in better understanding the consumers' intention to buy luxury products. A luxury goods manufacturer may want to be cautious to not over popularize its trademark for short-term gains. There must be a delicate balance between the uses of prominent and subtle signals in luxury branding in order to maintain value as a prestigious label.

Originality/value – Previous studies have mainly focused on the antecedents of willingness to buy luxury brands, whereas this paper incorporates the construct of brand prominence, adding new insights into the construct.

Keywords Luxury brands, Brand prominence, Vanity, Willingness to buy

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Marketing scholars often investigate the purchase intention for brands from cultural, social, psychological and economic perspectives (Son *et al.*, 2013; Liu *et al.*, 2012; Bian and Forsythe, 2012; Wong and Ahuvia, 1998; Sirgy *et al.*, 1997; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). The underlying notions for these constructs mostly concentrate on the area of trust, satisfaction, loyalty and commitment towards the brand (Kim and Ko 2010; Martinez and Kim, 2012). However, the luxury brand category in this aspect has received special attention as it involves strong identity, high awareness, emotional attachment, exclusivity and premium pricing (Okonkwo, 2009; Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Hung *et al.*, 2011).

The overall luxury market exceeded \$965 billion in the year 2014 (Bain & Co., 2014) and in recent years, there has been increasing interest by researchers in the area of luxury brand purchase intention. Although the inherent traits of luxury brands such as distinctiveness, high transaction value, superior quality, inimitability and craftsmanship (Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Radon, 2012) signify the emotional connection that the consumers develop towards the category (Fionda and Moore, 2009), the earlier researches (Bian and Forsythe, 2012; Hung *et al.*, 2011; Kim and Ko, 2010) in this premise did not emphasize much on the consumer's brand-related thoughts and memories.



According to Bain & Co. (2005), consumers emphasize more on emotional benefits than on the physical attributes for the purchase of luxury brand products. Choo *et al.* (2012) suggest that the emotional benefits create a comprehensive and memorable experience in terms of ownership and consumption. Therefore, luxury brand marketers are capitalizing more on emotional attachment to build a long-term and sustainable customer relationship (Orth *et al.*, 2010). Hence, Berger and Ward (2010) and Han *et al.* (2008) focus on another key characteristic of luxury brands; conspicuousness, which indicates the extent to which a brand is visibly marked by other people. This notion of visibility as well as the cognitive and affective bond that connect the brand to the consumers has been defined as brand prominence (Park *et al.*, 2010). Considering the significance of social visibility and emotional connection for luxury brand, it is imperative that we incorporate brand prominence in investigating the willingness to buy luxury brands.

The literature provides little understanding of the luxury brand purchase intention on subtle vs prominent branding (Summers *et al.*, 2006; Hung *et al.*, 2011). As a result, there exists a gap regarding conceptualization of brand prominence in the luxury brand purchase intention and development of alternative branding strategies. To revisit consumer's willingness to purchase luxury brands, this study replicates and extends a conceptual model developed by Hung *et al.* (2011). First, this study investigates the influence of the three antecedents namely luxury brand value, social influence and vanity on willingness to buy luxury brands. Second, it investigates the relationship between consumer's need for brand prominence and consumer's willingness to buy luxury brands. Third, it investigates the moderating effect of physical and achievement vanity traits on the relationship between luxury brand values and social influence towards willingness to buy luxury brands.

This paper will first examine the relevant literature pertaining to the key constructs. Next, the theoretical underpinnings leading towards the development of the hypotheses will be presented. This is followed by the methodology, data analysis and discussion of the findings. Finally concluding comments will present the conceptual and managerial implications of the study.

2. Theoretical underpinning and hypotheses development

Brand prominence, a construct that reflects the conspicuousness of a brand logo (Han *et al.*, 2008), plays an important role in the consumption of luxury brands as the consumers seek to display the brand name to others (Thwaites and Ferguson, 2012). Such conspicuous consumption is explained by the need for uniqueness theory which focuses on the consumers' attempt to differentiate themselves from others through material goods (Knight and Kim, 2007; Tian *et al.*, 2001). Hence, to inspect the relationship among people, products and brands, Berthon *et al.* (2009) utilize the "three world hypotheses" of Popper (1979) that consists of functional, experiential and symbolic dimension of the products. The functionality of luxury brands revolves around superiority, performance, craftsmanship and such other physical manifestations and accoutrements. Ervynck *et al.* (2003) interpret functionality as the quality of the products. It has also been apparent that the functional value of luxury brands is prominent though sometime a signalling motivation can be inferred mistakenly (Han *et al.*, 2010). Based on the significance of functional value for luxury brand, it is hypothesized that:

H1a. Functional value of luxury brands positively influences brand prominence.

The experiential dimension of the product has been explained as symbolic, hedonic and aesthetic nature of consumption (Holbrooks and Hirschman, 1982) which is relevant to the consumer's subjective norm and product's hedonic value. Berthon *et al.* (2009) support that product attributes, quality, style, design and such other brand-related stimuli can evoke consumer's cognitive and behavioural responses and therefore marketing scholars have been paying special attention to the experiential nature of the brands. Building on the existing literature, the study investigates the relationship between conspicuousness attribute and experiential dimension of the luxury brands. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H1b. Experiential value of luxury brands positively influences brand prominence.

Often consumers try to relate their self-concept with the prestige, exclusivity, and trendiness of a brand and the symbolic benefits are quite relevant for socially visible, "badge" products (Soloman, 2012). This proposition is very relevant to the features and prominence of luxury brands. In support of this social visibility concept, Keller (1993) explains the symbolic benefits as the extrinsic advantages of a brand that matches with social approval and outer-directed self-esteem of the consumers. Although Hung *et al.* (2011) clinically criticizes the application of existing definition of "symbolic value" among diversified culture, for common understanding we may stick to the similarities among cultural values and rely on the explanations from Berthon *et al.* (2009) who define symbol as a constructed and evolved narrative, myth or dream-world and symbolic dimension as the realm of the social togetherness. So, it is hypothesized that:

H1c. Symbolic value of luxury brands positively influences brand prominence.

It has been evident that consumers in various cultures across the world seek personal and social gratification by purchasing and using luxury brands (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Based on Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimension theory, Bian and Forsythe (2012) state that consumers in the collectivist society share common norm, values and understanding and so they buy luxury brands to display their delicacy and status to the other members of the society. By contrast, in the individualist society consumers do so to portray their emotional independence and personal gratification. This proposition has also been supported earlier by Wilcox *et al.* (2009) who emphasize on self-expression attitude, self-presentation attitude, need for uniqueness and self-monitoring factors as the key drivers for luxury brand consumption. It is also obvious that some consumers buy luxury products to create self-differentiation (in individualist society) whereas some others seek social conformity (in collectivist society), however in both cases the purchase decision is highly influenced by the specific needs set by the society (Amaldoss and Jain, 2005). Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H2. Social influence of luxury brands positively influences brand prominence.

Solomon (1983) mentions that to express their social self-image, consumers make special efforts on purchasing appearance-related products. In the case of luxury brand purchase, consumers are also driven by similar motives whereby they want to enhance their physical attractiveness and social acceptance. Netemeyer *et al.* (1995) categorize this phenomenon as physical vanity and achievement vanity which are defined as excessive concerns for physical appearance and personal achievements, respectively. By accentuating the significance of vanity constructs, Wang and Waller (2006) state that many productTs including luxury items are associated with consumer vanity

through marketing images. Based on the distinct characteristics of and the vanity that consumers seek from luxury brands, it is hypothesized that:

H3. (a) Achievement vanity and (b) physical vanity of luxury brands positively influence brand prominence.

Social norms and values play important role in the consumption of luxury brand. Wong and Ahuvia (1998) find that in the western culture conspicuous consumption is highly influenced by consumer's personal choices whereas in East Asian market social norm is the key driver behind purchase of luxury brands. A similar conclusion is also drawn by Lee and Green (1991) who studied American and Korean consumers subsequently. In both cases, the willingness to buy luxury brands has been shaped by consumer's inner thoughts and feelings regarding the expected benefits from the brand which ultimately indicate the relevance of brand prominence. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H4. Brand prominence positively influences the willingness to buy luxury brands.

The purchase intention of a brand is highly influenced by the specific needs of the consumers. Hence, consumers seek functional, symbolic and experiential benefits that are attached to the attributes of the brand (Keller, 2003). This proposition is also supported by Hung *et al.* (2011) who find experiential and symbolic values have heavy influence on the purchase intention for luxury brands. Although symbolic and functional value may vary according to consumers' perception (Berthon *et al.*, 2009), consumers around the world buy luxury brands not only for utilitarian values but also for social, symbolic, self-expressive and relational values (Doss and Robinson (2013); Smith and Colgate, 2007; Tynan *et al.*, 2010). So, it is hypothesized that:

H5. (a) Functional value, (b) experiential value and (c) symbolic value positively influence the willingness to buy luxury brands.

As discussed earlier, social factors highly influence the consumption process for luxury brands. Otnes *et al.* (1993) highlight that social class, community, ethnicity and such other institutional structures systematically influence consumption and thus consumers are conceived as enactors of social roles and positions. Other studies also indicate that consumers purchase products not only for their self-congruence but also for social conformity (Brewer, 1991; Worchel *et al.*, 1975). Martinez and Kim (2012) agree that in the societies where social visibility is prominent, consumers buy goods and services to feel comfortable in the social groups. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H6. Social influence positively influences the willingness to buy luxury brands.

The traits and features of luxury brands have strong power of providing physical and achievement vanity to the consumers (Durvasula *et al.*, 2001). Netemeyer *et al.* (1995) discuss two aspects of physical vanity that consumers look for are concern for physical appearance and positive view of personality. Workman and Lee (2011) investigate the vanity and public self-consciousness and find that consumers buy fashion products to show higher physical appearance concern and professional achievement concern. Moreover, vanity becomes a prevalent motivation for consumers in case of luxury brand consumption (Grilo *et al.*, 2001). As vanity and luxury brand consumption are linked together, it is hypothesized that:

H7. (a) Physical vanity and (b) achievement vanity positively influence the willingness to buy luxury brands.

Further to the above mentioned hypotheses, we would also like to test the moderating effects that vanity might have on consumer perception and the willingness to buy luxury brands. Although similar tests have been performed by Hung *et al.* (2011) for consumers in Taiwan, following is hypothesized to recheck the influences in the Australian market:

H8. Achievement vanity moderates the relationship between (a) functional value (b) experiential value (c) symbolic value and the willingness to buy luxury brands.

H9. Physical vanity moderates the relationship between (a) functional value (b) experiential value (c) symbolic value and the willingness to buy luxury brands.

Moreover, this study examines the subtle vs prominent branding of luxury products. To investigate the moderating effect of vanity on social influence and the willingness to buy luxury brands, it is hypothesized that:

H10. (a) Achievement vanity and (b) physical vanity moderate the relationship between social influence and the willingness to buy luxury brands (Figure 1).

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection

Data were collected using a mall intercept method in downtown Perth, Western Australia. Trained interviewers were given instructions to approach every fifth shopper to cross a designated spot to participate in a self-administered questionnaire. The collection occur across three weeks, covering both weekdays and weekends. Interviewers were also instructed to include respondents from different demographic profiles. This study replicates data collection procedures from other studies (Han *et al.*, 2010; Hung *et al.*, 2011) on luxury brand purchase intention.

3.2 Survey instrument

The survey instrument consists of four sections and was developed using established scales. The questionnaire is made up of four sections and the description of the scale

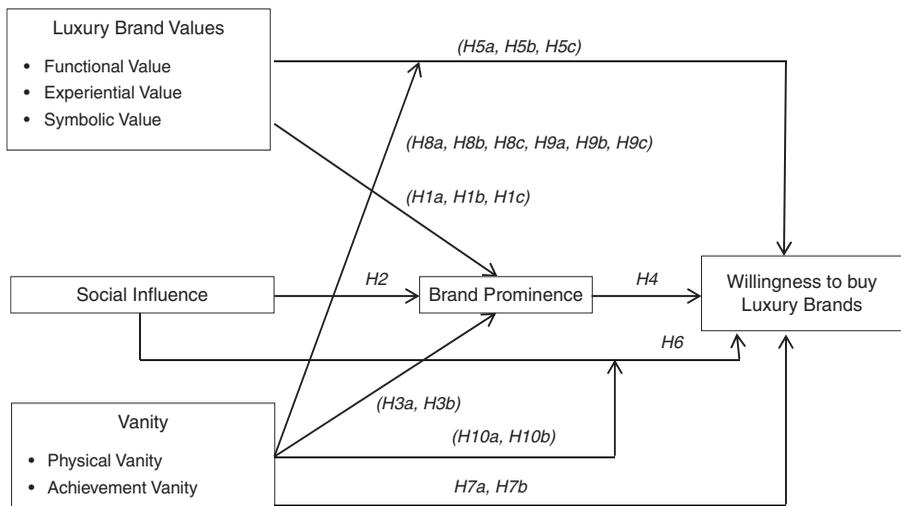


Figure 1. Proposed framework linking luxury brand perception, social influence, vanity and brand prominence to purchase intention

reliabilities and sources are detailed in Table I. Section A measured participant's susceptibility towards social influence, vanity and subtle/prominent brand prominence. Section B measured the functional, experiential and symbolic value that consumers associate with luxury brands. Section C measured participants' purchase intention towards luxury brands. Lastly, Section D comprised demographic questions of respondents. All items are measured on a seven-point Likert scale with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 7 representing "strongly agree".

3.3 Sample

A total of 800 questionnaires (400 for each set of questionnaire) were collected. Only 779 useable responses were retained and analysed using SPSS 22. Based on Table II, 51.3 per cent of the participants age between 21 and 34. Furthermore, 53.9 per cent of the participants are females. The majority of the participants (61.5 per cent) earn AUD14,999 and below per annum. 31.7 per cent of the respondents hold a bachelor degree, followed by 27.2 per cent of the respondents hold a college diploma. While the sample distribution has a higher majority of respondents belonging to the younger age groups, according to previous studies, it was found that there is a growth in luxury brand purchase by individuals in younger age groups, e.g. 20-30 (Hung *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, this is representative of the possible drift in the ages of consumers in the market for luxury brand purchase (Han *et al.*, 2010).

4. Analysis of the findings

The results of this study are presented into two parts titled studies 1 and 2. To investigate the interaction that brand prominence has on the willingness to buy luxury brands, and its antecedents, we used two different sets of questionnaire; one with subtle stimuli and the other with prominent stimuli. The rationale behind using two different types of stimuli was to identify significant differences in consumers' perception and the willingness to buy luxury brands when shown either a prominent or subtle stimuli.

4.1 Study 1

An exploratory factor analyses was conducted to further purify each of the scale items used in the questionnaire. The resulting varimax rotation has produced eight factors and are labelled functional value, experiential value, symbolic value, social influence, achievement vanity, physical vanity, brand prominence and finally the willingness to buy luxury brands. These factors explain up to 61.6 per cent of the variance. The Cronbach's coefficient (α) was relatively high which means the current factor structure of the model is supported for reliability.

Scale measure	Source	Number of items	α coefficient
Functional, experiential and symbolic value	Berthon <i>et al.</i> (2009), Vigneron and Johnson (2004)	12	0.849
Social influence	Weidmann <i>et al.</i> (2009)	7	0.842
Vanity	Netemeyer <i>et al.</i> (1995), Wang and Waller (2006)	7	0.578
Willingness to buy	Pierre <i>et al.</i> (2005)	4	0.777

Note: All scales rated on a seven-point Likert scale

Table I.
Source and
scale items

Characteristics	Categories	Sample	
		Frequency	Valid %
Age	Under 20 years	173	22.2
	21-34 years	400	51.3
	35-44 years	116	14.9
	45-54 years	65	8.3
	55-64 years	22	2.8
	65 years and above	2	0.3
Gender	Male	359	46.1
	Female	420	53.9
Income	Under \$14,999	479	61.5
	\$15,000-\$29,999	118	15.1
	\$30,000-\$49,999	112	14.4
	\$50,000-\$99,999	40	6.5
	\$100,000-\$199,999	11	1.4
	\$200,000 and above	6	0.8
Education	Secondary/high school	229	29.4
	Diploma/certificate	212	27.2
	Undergraduate degree	247	31.7
	Postgraduate	83	10.7
Occupation	Manager	60	7.7
	Professional	111	14.2
	Community and personal service worker	20	2.6
	Clerical and administrative worker	98	12.6
	Sales worker	64	8.2
	Labourer	48	8.7
	Student	333	42.7

Table II.
Profile of
respondents

4.1.1 Influence of luxury brand value and social influence on the willingness to buy luxury brands. Multiple linear regression was conducted between the willingness to buy luxury brands and the luxury brand value for *H5* and social influence for *H6*. It has been found that consumers with higher functional and experiential brand value perceptions towards luxury brands have a higher the willingness to buy, which indicates that the “prominent” data set *H5a* and *H5b* is supported ($\beta = 0.158$, $p < 0.05$, $\beta = 0.397$, $p < 0.001$). The result for symbolic value is negatively correlated ($\beta = -0.426$, $p < 0.001$ for *H5c*) which means the hypothesis is not supported. This result is consistent with the findings of Hung *et al.* (2011), though our finding contradicts other studies conducted by Vigneron and Johnson (2004) and Berthon *et al.* (2009). Our study also finds that there is a positive correlation between functional and experiential values which support *H5a* and *H5b*. However, for *H5c* the symbolic value is found to have a negative correlation. As for the effect of social influence on the willingness to buy luxury brands (*H6*), there exists a positive correlation ($\beta = 0.270$, $p < 0.001$) between social influence and the willingness to buy luxury brands.

4.1.2 Influence of vanity on the willingness to buy luxury brands. The responses from the participants do not support the effect of physical vanity ($\beta = -0.036$, $p > 0.05$) for *H7a* and achievement vanity ($\beta = 0.038$, $p > 0.05$) for *H7b* vanity towards the willingness to buy luxury brands. Therefore, we conclude that there is no significant correlation between vanity and the willingness to buy luxury brands (Table III).

4.1.3 *Influence of brand prominence on the willingness to buy luxury brands.* The findings in our study show that brand prominence (prominent) is positive correlated (H4) with the willingness to buy luxury brands ($\beta = -0.319, p < 0.001$). There is a positive correlation for experiential value, social influence and achievement vanity ($\beta = 0.147, p < 0.05$ for H1b; $\beta = 0.241, p < 0.001$ for H2; $\beta = 0.307, p < 0.001$ for H3a) and symbolic value has a negative correlation $\beta = -0.129, p < 0.05$ which means H1c is not supported. Functional value and physical vanity are non-significant and so H1a and H3b are not supported.

4.1.4 *Moderating effects of vanity on the influence of luxury brand value and social influence.* We have also investigated the moderating of effects of vanity on the influence of both luxury brand purchase intention and social influence. Hence, the predictor variables were centred in order to avoid the effects of multicollinearity. By following the recommendations of Baron and Kenny (1986), we conducted a series of multiple regression and the first step involved creating the interactions of the multiplication of luxury dimensions and vanity. Second step involved using multiple regression for these interactions and analysing the effect on the willingness to buy luxury brands.

The study finds that all three dimensions (functional, symbolic and experiential) of the luxury brand values, are affected by physical and achievement vanity moderating effects, which indicates that interaction among them are significant ($\beta = 0.100, p < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.102, p < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.104, p < 0.05$ for H8b-1, H8b-2 and H8b-3). Achievement vanity is also significant on both functional and experiential dimensions ($\beta = 0.174, p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.175, p < 0.001$ for H8a-1 and H8a-2), but not significant for the symbolic dimension ($\beta = 0.095, p > 0.05$ for H8a-3).

We followed the similar procedure, used with H8, for testing H9 regarding the interaction between social influence and physical or achievement vanity. Hence, the multiple regression produced a non-significant interaction between social influence and physical or achievement vanity ($\beta = 0.070, p > 0.1$ for H9a; $\beta = 0.061, p > 0.1$ for H9b). Therefore, we conclude that the moderating effects of physical and achievement vanity on social influence are non-existent.

4.2 Study 2

This part will explain the results for the “subtle” data set which was run through the same process as of study 1. The analysis of the “subtle” data set revealed that 65.7

	B-values	SE	β	Adjusted R ²	t-Value	Sig.
<i>Luxury brand values</i>						
Functional value	0.594	0.080	0.024	0.239	0.431	0.666
Experiential value	0.221	0.084	0.147	0.239	2.521	0.012
Symbolic value	-0.189	0.072	-0.129	0.239	-2.624	0.009
<i>Social influence</i>	0.241	0.067	0.307	0.239	4.792	0.000*
<i>Vanity</i>						
Physical	0.018	0.065	0.14	0.239	0.284	0.776
Achievement	0.419	0.067	0.307	0.239	6.294	0.000*

Note: Dependent variable: willingness to buy luxury brands (*Significant at < 0.05)

Table III. Multiple regression results on the antecedents of willingness to buy luxury brands for prominent branding

per cent of the variance is contributed by eight factors similar to the study 1. As before the hypothesis test is conducted using multiple regression. The items for each independent variable are also averaged out before being entered for analysis.

4.2.1 *Influence of luxury brand value and social influence on the willingness to buy luxury brands.* During analysis, experiential value and the willingness to buy luxury brands has a positive relationship ($\beta = 0.318, p < 0.001$) which supports *H5b*. Functional value was non-significant ($\beta = 0.104, p > 0.05$) and symbolic value still results in a negative correlation ($\beta = 0.323, p < 0.001$) which meant *H5a* and *H5c* are not supported. In terms of social influences correlation with the willingness to buy luxury brands (*H6*), we find a strong effect with $\beta = 0.126, p < 0.05$ for the “subtle” data set and thus *H6* is supported.

4.2.2 *Influence of vanity on the willingness to buy luxury brands.* As for *H7*, the participants’ responses to the subtle data set supported the effect of both physical ($\beta = -0.254, p < 0.001$ for *H7a*) and achievement vanity on the willingness to buy luxury brands ($\beta = 0.124, p < 0.05$ for *H7b*) (Table IV).

4.2.3 *Influence of brand prominence on the willingness to buy luxury brands.* When testing *H1-H4*, the results show that the relationship between brand prominence and the willingness to buy luxury brands was not significant $\beta = -0.079, p > 0.05$ for *H4*. There was a positive correlation for experiential value, symbolic value, social influence and achievement vanity ($\beta = 0.146, p < 0.05$ for *H1b*; $\beta = 0.221, p < 0.001$ for *H1c*; $\beta = 0.195, p < 0.001$ for *H2*) and both functional value and physical vanity have a negative correlation $\beta = -0.163, p < 0.05$ for *H1a* and $\beta = -0.203, p < 0.001$ for *H3b*. Vanity achievement was not significant with $\beta = 0.055, p > 0.05$, and thus *H3a* is not supported. Moreover, functional value and physical vanity are both negatively correlated.

4.2.4 *Moderating effects of vanity on the influence of luxury brand value and social influence.* Similar to study 1, the moderating effects have been tested in *H8* and *H9* by keeping the predictor variables in centre for avoiding multicollinearity. To test *H8*, multiple regressions were used and the interactions for all three of the luxury brand value dimensions and both types of vanity were added. Contrary to the results in study 1, hence physical vanity does not have an influence on the three luxury brand values since the interactions between the functional, experiential, symbolic dimensions are non-significant ($\beta = -0.084, p > 0.05$; $\beta = -0.011, p > 0.05$; and $\beta = -0.036, p > 0.05$).

Table IV. Multiple regression results on the antecedents of willingness to buy luxury brands for the subtle branding

	B-values	SE	β	Adjusted R^2	t-value	Sig.
<i>Luxury brand values</i>						
Functional value	0.145	0.85	0.126	0.156	1.702	0.90
Experiential value	0.409	0.82	-0.239	0.156	4.969	0.000*
Symbolic value	-0.378	0.070	-0.323	0.156	-5.431	0.000*
<i>Social influence</i>						
	0.158	0.071	0.126	0.156	2.230	0.026
<i>Vanity</i>						
Physical	-0.254	0.059	-0.239	0.156	-4.315	0.000*
Achievement	0.124	0.044	0.139	0.156	2.795	0.005

Note: Dependent variable: willingness to buy luxury brands (*Significant at < 0.05)

Our study finds no significant interaction between achievement vanity and both functional and symbolic dimension ($\beta = -0.070$, $p > 0.05$; $\beta = -0.011$, $p > 0.05$). However, there is an interaction between the experiential dimension and achievement vanity, but with a negative correlation ($\beta = -0.219$, $p < 0.05$) for *H8a-2*. For *H9*, the results show that there is a significant interaction between social influence and physical vanity ($\beta = -0.147$, $p < 0.05$ for *H9a*). On the other hand there is no interactions with social influence and achievement vanity ($\beta = -0.072$, $p > 0.05$ for *H9b*).

5. Discussion

Based on the exploratory study of Hung *et al.* (2011), the present study expands the luxury brand purchase intention model by taking brand prominence into consideration. The results indicate that our framework is noteworthy in investigating luxury brand purchase intention with brand perception, vanity, social influence and brand prominence.

Previous studies found that perception, social context and vanity influence consumers' intention for luxury brand purchase. According to Hung *et al.* (2011) and Özsoy and Altaras (2008) an individual's ideal self must be constantly validated by their external environment in exploring the purchase intention. This indicates that if the external environment promotes the consumption of luxury brand, consumers are more likely to accept the social norm and motivated to purchase luxury items.

Although Wang and Waller (2006) indicate that some consumers prefer apparel that had subtle branding rather prominent, with regards to vanity, our study 2 finds that there is a direct influence of vanity on the willingness to buy luxury brands. The trait of vanity produced a moderating effect between luxury brand value and the willingness to buy luxury brands for the "prominent" data, but it was opposite for the "subtle" data. Contrary to this result, vanity did not have a moderating effect between social influence and the willingness to buy luxury brands. A good number of the findings in our study are similar to that of Hung *et al.* (2011) and Sedikides *et al.* (2007). However, this study provides few additional insights. In our study, 42.7 per cent participants are students and are financially less independent. Thus, their purchase intention for luxury brands is highly influenced by their financial means.

Looking back into vanity, it is well documented that consumers try to recreate their self-image through possessions (Ahuvia, 2005; Sedikides *et al.*, 2007). In this study, the relationship between the willingness to buy luxury brands and brand values was further enhanced by achievement vanity. It indicates that individuals who seek physical attractiveness and approval from others are more likely to purchase luxury brands that put an emphasis on the value. This could explain why some studies have not suggested that luxury brands create a feeling of physical attractiveness for individuals. The results for brand prominence in this study vary in studies 1 and 2. We find that brand prominence has a direct effect on the willingness to buy luxury brands for the "prominent" data, but not for the "subtle" data.

Furthermore consumers who are prone to their own vanity are more likely to purchase luxury products that have prominent branding. This supports the Sedikides *et al.*'s (2007) claim that vanity plays a role in luxury branding and this is evident in the results with achievement vanity being correlated with brand prominence. Social influence also affects brand prominence and this is not surprising when reference groups or culture dictates what a persons should wear (Ahuvia, 2005; Nueno and Quelch, 1998). Therefore, a consumer's preference for either "prominent" or "subtle" brand can sometimes be decided by social influence.

6. Implications

This study results a number of conceptual, methodological and managerial contributions that includes comparison to previous works that were either supported or contradicted. Further, it provides insights on luxury brand purchase intention that are either unavailable or have not been covered by earlier studies. This study not only contributes to the literature on luxury brand purchase intention and brand prominence but also develops an important individual-level construct for the better understanding of brand prominence in the luxury industry. This study shows that consumers, when driven by social influence and vanity, are more likely purchase luxury products for both prominent and subtle branding. The most significant methodological contribution of this paper is the validation of the brand prominence scale. The instruments have a sound methodology and are predominantly developed from previous works when applied to manipulated luxury brand purchase intention. The four-item scale used for brand prominence is quite stable, even though initial analysis shows that only a single item was unreliable. The empirical results shows brand prominence did indeed influence the framework, but further scale development could help improve the scales reliability.

This study provides some meaningful insights for marketing managers regarding brands prominence that they can use in better understanding the consumers' intention to buy luxury products. As our study finds that brand prominence has a positive relationship with the willingness to buy luxury brands, marketers can design the promotional campaigns and advertisement appeals with prominent sign and symbols. Also, different communication strategies can be formulated and executed for the consumers who are influenced by subtle branding. Although marketers traditionally recommend that firms focus their advertising on their target market, luxury goods manufactures must consider advertising to the masses. In doing so, a luxury goods manufacturer may want to be cautious to not over popularize its trademark for short-term gains. There must be a delicate balance between the uses of prominent and subtle signals in luxury branding in order to maintain value as a prestigious label. Furthermore, our study suggests that when advertising to the masses, it is important that the message must be aspirational (e.g. highlighting experiential and or symbolic values) rather than functional. Luxury advertisements and campaigns should focus on promoting the brand, rather than any specific product. The brand should be promoted using themes such as heritage, country of origin and ingredient branding in order to educate and cater appropriately to a wider audience. To this end, marketing managers can utilize psychographic, behavioural, social and such other variables for segmenting and effectively targeting the consumers who look for vanity and symbolic values from luxury brands.

7. Limitations and future research

In this study, our respondent sample was only from Perth a city from the Western Australia which may not represent the general consumers around the country. Moreover, about 43 per cent of our respondents were students whose purchasing power, attitude and perception might not represent the psychological and socio-economic pattern of the market, and so we suspect biasness in our sampling design. In addition, this study has used shoe as the stimulus, however it may not represent other products from the luxury category and thus the findings might be different if the stimulus is changes as the results have been different for Han *et al.* (2010) and Hung *et al.* (2011) who used handbags as a stimuli.

Considering the above mentioned limitations, future research might be undertaken with diversified consumer groups and brands not only from product categories but also from luxury services. The influence of functional, experiential and symbolic value might be tested separately across the luxury product categories. Finally, it is also possible to incorporate the role of marketing characteristics (product, price, place, promotion, service) as the mediator into the relationship among vanity, brand perception, brand prominence and the willingness to buy luxury brands.

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