The Impostor Syndrome From Luxury Consumption

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While luxury consumption can yield benefits for consumers, it can also make consumers feel inauthentic, producing "the impostor syndrome from luxury consumption." This phenomenon is explained by the perceived gap between consumers' true and projected selves, predicted by consumers' psychological entitlement, and moderated by detectability and malleability of the gap.

Luxury brands symbolize cultural ideals and desirable qualities such as power, influence, and success, which embody individuals' aspirations and vision of their ideal selves (Belk 1988). Projecting an ideal self by wearing luxury can yield certain benefits such as economic rewards, preferential treatment, and recognition from others (Lee, Ko, and Megehee 2015), but we argue that it can also highlight a discrepancy between consumers' actual self and their self projected through luxury. Specifically, when individuals experience a mismatch between their external (projected) and internal (true) selves, they may feel inauthentic and like impostors. Self-authenticity is important because it impacts individuals' physical and psychological well-being (Sheldon et al, 1997). But, the prior marketing literature has understudied consumers' pursuit of self-authenticity, focusing instead on consumers' pursuit of authentic products (Grayson and Martinec 2004), rather than an authentic *self*, and on the link of self-authenticity to counterfeit products (Gino, Norton and Ariely 2010), overlooking its potential link to authentic products.

We propose that, although consuming luxury products may garner external benefits, it may also make consumers feel like impostors, producing what we call the "impostor syndrome from luxury consumption." This effect emerges due to consumers' self-brand discrepancy – the gap that consumers perceive between their true self and the self projected through luxury. We propose that the impostor syndrome from luxury consumption is more pronounced among consumers with low psychological entitlement, who perceive a large discrepancy between their (deflated) view of their true self and projected self, than among those with high entitlement, who perceive a small discrepancy between their (inflated) view of their true self and projected self. This effect is moderated by the detectability and malleability of the self-brand discrepancy.

Six laboratory and field studies tested our hypotheses using different operationalizations of luxury (price, brand, personal experience), measured and manipulated psychological entitlement, contexts (when luxury is the norm vs. when it is not), and income levels.

In the pilot study, we surveyed female patrons (N=78) of the Metropolitan Opera in New York City to examine the relevance of the phenomenon for a target market of luxury brands. Participants imagined they were shopping for a dress to wear to the opera and they were considering two suitable options – a luxury dress and a non-luxury dress. They were asked to choose which dress would yield greater social recognition and which dress would make them feel more authentic. The choice of dress differed across the recognition vs. authenticity indexes (χ^2=85.85, p<.001). The luxury dress was perceived as being *more* likely to garner participants social recognition (30% chose the luxury dress vs. 12% chose the non-luxury dress), but as being *less* likely to make participants feel authentic (6% chose luxury vs. 55% chose non-luxury).

Studies 1-3 tested the effect of psychological entitlement on the impostor syndrome from luxury consumption and the process underlying this effect.

In Study 1, participants (N=385) recalled a situation in which they wore a luxury or non-luxury product and indicated how authentic they felt wearing it. We measured psychological entitlement (Campbell et al. 2004), and self-brand discrepancy by reversing the self-brand connection scale, which captures how connected consumers think the brand (and the self projected through the brand) is to their true self and identity (Escalas and Bettman 2003). There was a significant luxury × entitlement interaction (b=-.33, t=-3.33, p=.001): luxury increased inauthenticity feelings over non-luxury among *unentitled* individuals (who scored 4.24 or lower on the 1-7 entitlement scale, t=1.97, p=.05). Self-brand discrepancy mediated this effect (Model 8: a=-.12, SE=.06, 95% CI=[-.23,-.01]).

Study 2 (N=553) examined the phenomenon among panelists with wide-ranging income levels. Although income weakly negatively affected consumers' general feelings of inauthenticity (b=-.11, t=-1.80, p=.072; interactions of income with other variables: p's > .11), psychological entitlement, not income, drove their impostor syndrome from luxury (vs. non-luxury) consumption (luxury × entitlement interaction: b=-.39, t=-3.66, p<.001; unentitled people who scored 5.6 or lower felt more inauthentic wearing luxury vs. non-luxury, t=1.96, p=.05).

Study 3 replicated the phenomenon and process using a manipulation, rather than a measure, of psychological entitlement (effect of entitlement on inauthenticity from wearing luxury: F(1,113)=10.14, p=.002; mediation via self-brand discrepancy: a=.54, SE=.17, 95% CI=[.21,.89]). Furthermore, it showed that the impostor syndrome results in negative consequences for consumers' luxury experience (i.e. it lowers consumers' confidence, empowerment, success, sophistication, fitting-in, comfort, and happiness when wearing luxury).

Studies 4-5 tested the boundary conditions of the phenomenon.

Study 4 tested moderating role of the detectability of the self-brand discrepancy. Female participants (N=208) read that they were going to a wedding wearing a Versace dress. Participants read that the wedding was attended by familiar others (to whom the gap between participants' true and projected selves was detectable) or strangers (to whom the gap was undetectable), and they completed the entitlement scale. As expected, there was a social environment × entitlement interaction (b=.42, t=2.09, p=.038). The effect of entitlement on inauthenticity feelings emerged when self-brand discrepancy was *undetectable* among strangers (p=.003), but not when self-brand discrepancy was *detectable* among friends (p=.94).

Study 5 (N=151) tested the moderating role of the malleability of the self-brand discrepancy by manipulating individuals' perceptions of cultural capital (i.e. ability to appreciate cultural, artistic, and luxury goods) as fixed or malleable. Framing cultural capital as malleable should lead people to perceive the gap between their true and ideal selves to be surmountable (vs. insurmountable when the cultural capital is framed as fixed). There was a significant cultural capital × entitlement interaction (b=.72, t=3.30, p=.001): the effect of entitlement on inauthenticity feelings persisted when cultural capital (and hence self-brand discrepancy) was fixed (p<.001), but not when cultural capital was malleable (p=.44). Framing cultural capital as malleable (vs. fixed) reduced inauthenticity feelings of unentitled individuals (2.22 or lower on the entitlement scale, t=-1.98, p=.05), and it increased inauthenticity feelings of entitled individuals (3.74 or higher on the entitlement scale, t=1.98, p=.05).

Our work adds to theory and practice by uncovering the impostor syndrome from luxury consumption, showing how consumption behaviors impact self-authenticity, and illustrating the role of psychological entitlement in driving consumer experiences.

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