

# **The Malleable Self-Concept - Relationships between Young Adolescents' Self-Concept and Bandwagon Luxury Consumption**

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*Due to far-reaching relay in the world, a window into bandwagon luxury consumption has opened which doesn't leave luxuries synonymous to materialism but acts as a signal for affiliation or differentiation. This research analyzes how young adolescents' interdependent and independent self-concept relates to personality traits which impacts bandwagon luxury consumption. The results from Structural Equation Modeling reveal that status consumption is not of significance to the 13 - 15-year-old children and bandwagon luxuries are consumed primarily inspired by aspirational and current social in-groups and popular culture. A mix of hypothesized results give interesting insights on how young individual makes choices.*

*Keywords: Adolescents, Self-Concept, Luxury Consumption, Susceptibility, Status-Seeking, Uniqueness*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Through openness of trade, large-scale internet availability and easy accessibility of smart phones the world has become a universal marketplace (Vigneron & Johnson, 2017; Park et. al., 2008). Contemporary luxury consumption has evolved as a phenomenon no longer solely catering to the rich and nonpareil (Kapferer & Laurent, 2016) but using open innovation to target a number of market segments by developing certain product lines which are economically viable for the masses to purchase (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003).

This led Kastanakis & Balabanis (2012) to discuss phenomenon of mass-customization and mass-purchase of popular luxuries adding to the literature of bandwagon luxury consumption and the self-concept (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004, Leibenstein, 1950). However, this research cannot be generalized to the motivations of adolescents' in their formative years who are at the stage of developing their self-concept (Gil., et. al, 2012; Park., et. al. 2018).

Adolescents' are at a pivotal age where their formation of the self-concept takes place through congruence of underlying genetic disposition paired with values derived from the cultural variables and the social environment (Ahuvia, 2005; Claiborne & Sirgy, 2015). Whereas research has focused on adults (Han, et. al., 2010), teenagers (Gil., et al, 2012) and branded babies (Linn, 2004), not much has been spoken about a stratum of individuals that are at the crossroads of entering adulthood and rely on luxury consumption to define and explicate their identity.

Brand managers are now including teenagers as an important market segment for consumption of goods and services as research shows these young individuals are tech-savvy and globalized leading them to be a source of informed individuals for their families and friends (Gil et al., 2017). Prior research

(Belk, 1988) uncovered that young individuals have multi-faceted goals for indulging in mass-customization of luxury. These goals can range from an aspiration to harness social admiration, to be part of an in-group (Brewer, 1991; Brewer & Gardner, 1996) or to provide signals of wealth by a custom-made purchase (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004).

The purpose of this research is to explore the motivations of a strata of a population that neither categorizes as adults or children but are rather at a stage where they are still developing their identity to analyze what personality traits are most eminent in the formation of the self-concept with reference to the bandwagon luxury consumption. We use empirical research to investigate how the interdependent and independent self-concept relates to personality traits which include susceptibility to normative influence, need for uniqueness and status-seeking which in turn impact consumption of bandwagon luxuries for young adolescents. Structural equation modeling is used to analyze a particular model of luxury consumption described next and provide note-worthy managerial implication.

## **BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES**

The self-concept has been a widely studied phenomenon in consumer behavior (Belk, 1988) that includes self-perceptions, outlook, attitudes and personality traits (Claiborne and Sirgy, 2015). The personality traits develop from individual differences (Markus & Kunda, 1986) and proclivity to be motivated from within for distinctive self-related goals paired with extraneous variables from society, popular-culture and susceptibility towards opinion leaders (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975).

It is a multidimensional variable (Ahuvia, 2005) which includes the actual self and the ideal self (Linville, 1987) and also the interdependent as well as independent self (Singelis, 1994). For each individual the interdependent and independent self-concept can and does co-exist at varying degrees (Reed, 2002). Therefore, exploring and examining the self-concept for young adolescents can give insights to understand how these individuals perceive themselves at this malleable age and what are the factors that inspire them to indulge in luxury consumption to develop and express their self-concept (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998).

### **NEED FOR UNIQUENESS**

Tian, et. al., (2001) define a consumer's need for uniqueness as “the trait of pursuing differentness relative to others through the acquisition, utilization, and disposition of consumer goods for the purpose of developing and enhancing one's self image and social image”. Consumers aspire for differentness in a way that their consumption whispers instead of being discreet. This is to boost their individuality and self-confidence alongside an aim to gain social prestige as the luxury brands have an indelible value which supports them to achieve their need for self-expression (Kauppinen-Räsänen, et. al, 2018).

All that a person owns summarizes an individual's identity (Belk, 1988), thus, many a time, people purchase different luxury brands to define their personality and to develop a unique identity (Gil., et al., 2017; Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). We hypothesize that young adolescents who seek to elucidate their individuality will purchase unique luxury commodities to enhance their independent self-concept. On the contrary, teenagers with an interdependent self-concept feel their identity is boosted by being part of social group and consume popular luxury products. Hence, consumers' need for uniqueness is attributed to an independent self-concept and the hypotheses are:

***H1a:*** *Young adolescents' interdependent self-concept associates negatively with their need for uniqueness.*

***H1b:*** *Young adolescents' independent self-concept associates positively with their need for uniqueness.*

***H1c:*** *Need for uniqueness associates negatively with bandwagon luxury consumption.*

*H1d: Young adolescents' need for uniqueness mediates the relationship between interdependent self-concept and bandwagon luxury consumption.*

*H1e: Young adolescents' need for uniqueness mediates the relationship between independent self-concept and bandwagon luxury consumption.*

## **STATUS-SEEKING**

With modern communication, online networks and e-webstores, fast paced dissemination of information from across the globe leads to status-seeking and conspicuousness to illustrate prestige and elitism (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Research on social-comparison theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how external environment a critical factor for bandwagon luxury consumption is to illustrate the implicit value they personify to others (Jain, 2018). Furthermore, this behavior is widely observed in adolescents who buy luxury commodities for the display of taste, class and veneration (Wooten, 2006).

According to Eastman et al., (1999) status-seeking defines people who “strive to improve their social standing through the conspicuous consumption of consumer products that confer and symbolize status both for the individual and surrounding significant others.” Luxury commodities elucidate status (Millan, & Mittal, 2017; Han et al., 2010) and acquisition for the usage and display of these products is to exhibit the actual or ideal self-concept to attain an eclectic range of social goals ((Sirgy, 1985; Gil, et. al., 2017). Hence, the intercontinental brands that enjoy popularity strategically signal the connotations of wealth, glorification and vogue (Berger & Ward, 2010). Therefore, young adolescents' status-seeking is primarily motivated by an interdependent self-concept and the hypotheses are:

*H2a: Young adolescents' interdependent self-concept associates positively with status seeking.*

*H2b: Young adolescents' independent self-concept associates negatively with status seeking.*

*H2c: Status-seeking associates positively with bandwagon luxury consumption.*

*H2d: Young adolescents' status-seeking mediates the relationship between interdependent self-concept and bandwagon luxury consumption.*

*H2e: Young adolescents' status-seeking mediates the relationship between independent self-concept and bandwagon luxury consumption.*

## **SUSCEPTIBILITY TO NORMATIVE INFLUENCE**

Susceptibility to normative influence refers to modification of human perceptions and behavior to align it with that of others in aspirational or current social groups (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). This phenomenon is more evident in the purchase of public goods over private goods, particularly for luxury products as they are visible to make a statement about the personal self-concept (Swaminathan & Gürhan-Canli, 2007; Kurman, 2001).

Conformity to social norms works as a double-edged sword: whilst it enhances personal schemas and self-image to be part of aspirational social groups (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006), it also serves an extrinsic motive for adhering to what is expected by significant others to fulfill a need for belonging in the social context (Leipämaa-Leskinen, et. al., 2012; Lascu & Zinkhan, 1999). Consumption of luxuries leads to utilitarian and desirability efficacy (Baumgartner, 2002); therefore, the interdependent self-concept is positively associated with bandwagon luxury consumption (Fournier, 1998; Han et. al., 2010) and the hypotheses are:

**H3a:** Young adolescents' interdependent self-concept associates positively with susceptibility to normative influence.

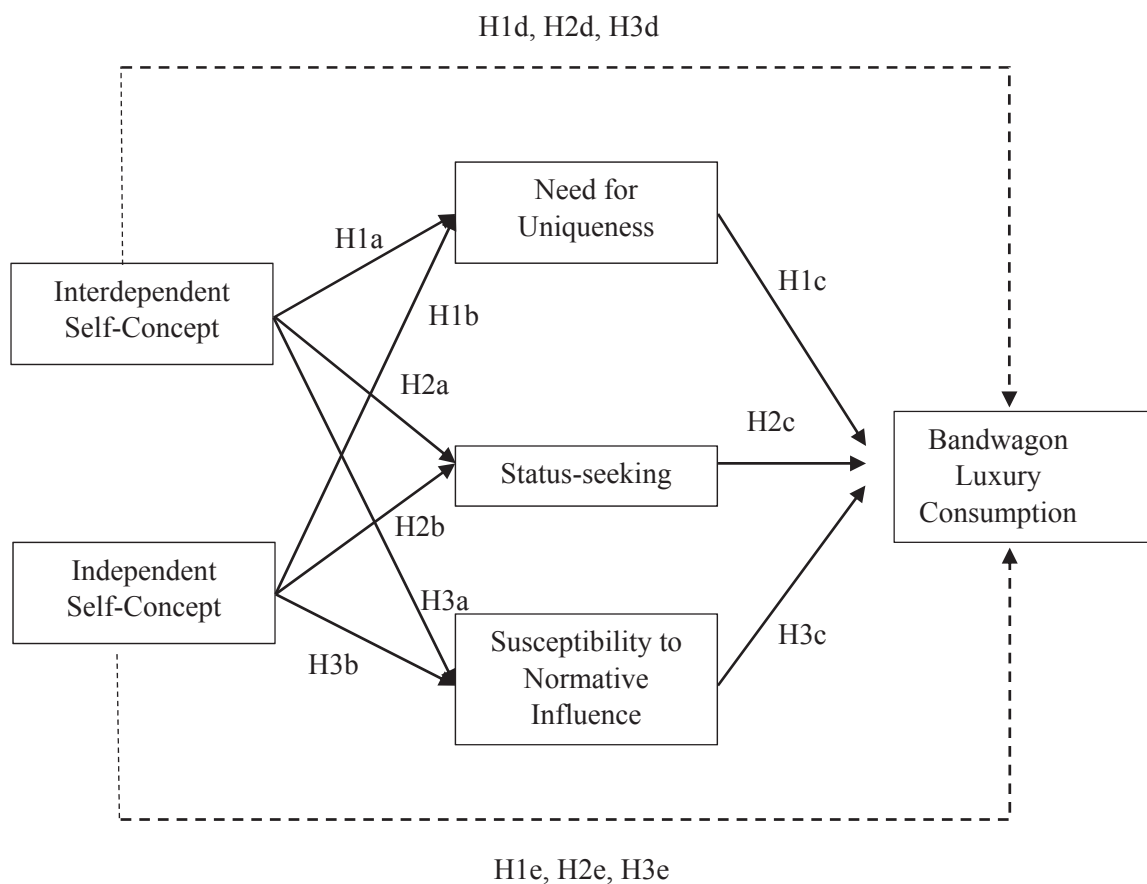
**H3b:** Young adolescents' independent self-concept associates negatively with susceptibility to normative influence.

**H3c:** Susceptibility to normative influence associates positively with bandwagon luxury consumption.

**H3d:** Young adolescents' susceptibility to normative influence mediates the relationship between interdependent self-concept and bandwagon luxury consumption.

**H3e:** Young adolescents' susceptibility to normative influence mediates the relationship between independent self-concept and bandwagon luxury consumption.

**FIGURE 1  
CONCEPTUAL MODEL**



**METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE**

A purposive sampling technique was used to collect data from 421 children aged 13 to 15 studying in four different private schools of Lahore, Pakistan. Pen and paper surveys were filled by students of grade 7 to 10 in classroom setting. The tuition fees of these schools was an indicator to establish that they cater to Socio-Economic Class A of Pakistan.

As per the World Bank, the GDP of Pakistan's population is divided into five quintiles where the top twenty percent of the population owns over 42% of the total national income. This stratum has an inelastic income and the wealthiest people earn in 2 days what a person in the lowest quintile would earn in a year. Therefore, there is a limited number of individuals who control most of the resources leading to financial agility for indulging in luxury consumption (Shaikh et. al., 2017). Within this top 2% of the population there is an emergent market of young adolescents who are impacted by the attitudes and behavior of the adults and reference groups to take cues from their surroundings to consume luxury commodities (Shaikh et. al., 2017).

For data collection, the head of the respective schools gave full consent and the students were informed that the participation was completely voluntary and anonymous. The questionnaire initially stated that all questions should be answered in context of the participant's favorite luxury brand for wrist watches. Watches were chosen for the surveys as they are worn by both genders, popular with the sample and widely associated with luxury consumption.

## **MEASURES**

All the constructs in the scale have been adapted from the literature. The items on the scale were pre-tested by administering it to forty children to see which questions are clear and coherent and four items from each scale were chosen which were easily understood by all participants.

The interdependent and independent self-concept was measured using Singelis's (1994) scale. Examples for items measuring the interdependent and independent self-concept are, "It is important to maintain harmony within my group" (interdependent self-concept) and "I am comfortable with being singled out for praise or reward" (independent self-concept). Need for individualism was measured with Tian et al.'s (2001) need for uniqueness scale with questions that include, "I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects" and status-seeking was assessed with Eastman et al.'s (1999) scale with items such as, "I would pay more for a product if it had status". Susceptibility to normative influence was evaluated with Bearden et al.'s (1989) scale with items that include "It is important that others like the products and brands I buy". Lastly, mass-customized luxury consumption was measured using the scale developed by Kastanakis and Balabanis (2012) of which one item is, "I like to buy products that are very fashionable".

## **ANALYSIS**

SPSS AMOS 24 has been used for analysis through Structural Equation Modeling to develop a measurement model and a structural model to analyze the hypotheses (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). First the constructs are analyzed using a measurement model to validate them for psychometric properties followed by an analysis of the relationships between the proposed hypotheses in a structural model.

## **MEASUREMENT MODEL**

The measurement model fit indices ( $\chi^2 = 398.956$  with  $df=237$ ,  $\chi^2/df=1.683$ ,  $GFI=0.924$ ,  $AGFI=0.903$ ,  $CFI=0.968$ ,  $TLI=0.963$ , and  $RMSEA=0.042$ ) meet the minimum acceptance level for each measure to illustrate that the model fits adequately with the data. In the next step, the psychometric properties of the scales have been assessed for reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha > 0.7$ ) and composite reliability ( $\rho > 0.07$ ) measures are used to validate the reliability of the scale. All of the construct have internal consistency and composite reliability above 0.7 which is the minimum level (Nunnally 1978) and the average variance extracted for each construct is greater than 0.5 which suffices the convergent validity of the scale (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Lastly, discriminant validity of the scales is measured by comparing the average variance extracted for each construct with shared variances between the constructs in (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and the AVE for

each construct is greater than the shared variance between the constructs to suffice discriminant validity for each construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

**TABLE 1  
MEASUREMENT MODEL**

<b>Constructs</b>	<b>Internal Consistency</b>	<b>Composite Reliability</b>	<b>Average Variance Extracted</b>
Interdependent Self-concept	0.835	0.819	0.560
Independent Self-concept	0.848	0.815	0.584
Need for Uniqueness	0.861	0.860	0.607
Status seeking	0.909	0.904	0.720
Susceptibility to Normative Influence	0.865	0.857	0.619
Bandwagon Luxury Consumption	0.858	0.852	0.590

### **COMMON METHOD BIAS**

To test the potential common method bias, Harman’s single factor test has been used (Podsakoff, et. al., 2003). An un-rotated factor analysis showed that the first factor accounted for 21% and that all items in the scale resulted in six factors accounting for 74% of the variance proving lack of common method bias in the dataset.

### **STRUCTURAL MODEL**

The structural model assessed the causal relationships in the conceptual model and to measure the direct and indirect effects, bootstrapping with maximum likelihood estimation has been used. The fit indices of the structural model ( $\chi^2 = 491.040$  with  $df = 240$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.046$ ,  $GFI = 0.907$ ,  $CFI = 0.951$ ,  $TLI = 0.943$  and  $RMSEA = 0.051$ ) reveal an acceptable model fit. Table II represents standardized path coefficients with the respective p-values, t-values and the results for all the hypothesized relationships in the model.

**TABLE 2**  
**STRUCTURAL MODEL DIRECT EFFECTS**

Hypotheses	Direct effect	Std. Est	T-value	Result
H1a	Interdependent Self-Concept → Need for Uniqueness	0.040	1.646	Not Supported
H1b	Independent Self-Concept → Need for Uniqueness	0.287***	4.180	Supported
H1c	Need for Uniqueness → Bandwagon Luxury Consumption	0.402***	4.813	Not Supported
H2a	Interdependent Self-Concept → Status-seeking	-0.093*	-2.051	Not Supported
H2b	Independent Self-Concept → Status-seeking	0.023	0.859	Not Supported
H2c	Status-seeking → Bandwagon Luxury Consumption	0.720***	6.557	Supported
H3a	Interdependent Self-Concept → Susceptibility to Normative Influence	0.208**	3.131	Supported
H3b	Independent Self-Concept → Susceptibility to Normative Influence	-0.169***	-3.339	Supported
H3c	Susceptibility to Normative Influence → Bandwagon Luxury Consumption	0.351***	4.468	Supported

**INDIRECT (MEDIATED) EFFECTS**

**Interdependent Self-concept and Bandwagon Luxury Consumption**

Following the Phantom model approach proposed by Macho and Ledermann (2011), multi-mediation analysis using AMOS 24 has been employed to test the significance of indirect effects. In H1d, H2d and H3d, it is hypothesized that the relationship between interdependent self-concept and bandwagon luxury consumption is mediated by need for uniqueness, status-seeking and susceptibility to normative influence. By evaluating the direct and indirect effects along with bias-corrected confidence intervals for this and it can be seen that the indirect effect of interdependent self-concept on bandwagon luxury consumption through each of the mediators is significant and so is the total indirect effect (0.160,  $p < 0.01$ ).

**TABLE 3**  
**INDIRECT EFFECT OF INTERDEPENDENT SELF-CONCEPT AND BANDWAGON LUXURY CONSUMPTION**

Mediators	Direct Effects		Indirect Effects ( $a*b$ )	BCCI	
	<i>a:</i> INT→MED	<i>b:</i> MED→BLC		Lower	Upper
Need for Uniqueness	0.009	0.362***	0.003**	0.004	0.062
Status-seeking	-0.086*	0.715***	-0.018*	-0.021	-0.116
Susceptibility to Normative Influence	0.240**	0.334***	0.080*	0.039	0.136
<b>Total Indirect Effect</b>			0.160**	0.096	0.248
<b>Direct Effect of INT on MLC</b>			0.108	-0.006	0.205

### Interdependent Self-concept on Bandwagon Luxury Consumption

In H1e, H2e and H3e, the relationship between independent self-concept and bandwagon luxury brand consumption has been hypothesized to be mediated by need for uniqueness, status-seeking and susceptibility to normative influence. The direct and indirect effects along with bias-corrected confidence intervals for the relationship between independent self-concept and bandwagon luxury consumption have been analyzed and indicate that the indirect effect of independent self-concept on bandwagon luxury consumption through each of the mediators is significant and so is the total indirect effect (0.045,  $p < 0.05$ ). This confirms that need for uniqueness, status consumption and conformity mediate the relationship between independent self-concept and bandwagon luxury brand consumption.

**TABLE 4**  
**INDIRECT EFFECT OF INDEPENDENT SELF-CONCEPT AND**  
**BANDWAGON LUXURY CONSUMPTION**

Mediators	Direct Effects		Indirect Effects ( <i>a*b</i> )	BCCI	
	<i>a:</i> IND→MED	<i>b:</i> MED→BLC		Lower	Upper
Need for Uniqueness	0.240***	0.362***	0.086*	0.047	0.165
Status-seeking	0.014	0.715***	0.010**	0.066	0.081
Susceptibility to Normative Influence	-0.154*	0.334***	-0.051*	-0.092	-0.017
<b>Total Indirect Effect</b>			0.045*	0.01	0.216
<b>Direct Effect of IND on MLC</b>			0.087	-0.004	0.197

### RESULTS

The negative relationship between need for uniqueness and bandwagon luxury consumption is congruent with the results of the adult population of previous research conducted in Asia (Shaikh et. al., 2017) and the same explanation extends to clarify the insignificant positive relationship between the interdependent self-concept and need for uniqueness.

On the other hand, an insignificant positive relationship between the independent self-concept and status seeking and a negative relationship between the interdependent self-concept and status seeking reveals that adolescents have not mapped an understanding of status at a malleable age of 13 to 15 with luxury and these children purchase well-liked luxuries primarily due to normative influence. This is supported by the results of Park et. al., (2008).

The standardized path coefficients for all the direct paths are significant except for the relationship between interdependent self-concept and need for uniqueness and independent self-concept and status seeking. Thus, all hypotheses are supported except H1a, H1c, H2a and H2b.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research is the first to evaluate the antecedents of motivation towards bandwagon luxury consumption for young adolescents' aged 12-15 in Asia. It clarifies that in different countries and societies the youth has different incentives to consume luxury. Whereas Brazilian youth primarily focuses on conspicuousness and materialism when consuming luxury goods (Gil et. al., 2012), normative influence is the primary reason for consumption of luxuries for adolescents of Asia (Park et. al., 2008). The dissimilarity in findings can be attributed to individual differences in buying behavior across cultures and societies to purchase luxuries.

The hypothesized relationship for the inverse relationship between need for uniqueness and bandwagon luxury consumption is resonant to prior literature (Corneo & Jeanne, 1997); however, the result turned out to be negative for the hypothesized relationship. The reason for the inverse relationship



is that luxury consumption is not homogenous and what may serve to be unique for one country or population may not be unique for individuals in another part of the world. These results for the young teenagers are aligned with earlier research conducted with participants of different parts of Asia (Phau & Prendergast, 2000; Shaikh et. al., 2017).

Research by Phau and Prendergast, (2000) explains that need for uniqueness is analogous to earlier awareness of a particular brand. The limited awareness accomplishes the goal for substantiating uniqueness amongst relevant others. Hence, this explains why the interdependent self-concept has a positive relationship with need for uniqueness and need for uniqueness has a positive relationship with bandwagon luxury consumption.

Furthermore, the rarity principle discussed by Dubois and Paternault (1995) points out that brand engagement declines with an increase in its popularity as its up-market premium appeal depreciates. However, this phenomenon is only true for Western consumer sample for luxury consumption. Research from Singapore and Hong Kong (Phau & Prendergast, 2000) negate this principle illustrating that luxury brand preference increases with an increase in its favorability, thus, further explaining the results for H1a and H1c.

The hypotheses for status-seeking and self-concept have largely been similar to earlier studies on the emergent market of the youth (Gil et. al., 2017). Whereas, one of the principle reasons for consumers to purchase luxury commodities is for status-seeking and conspicuousness, research on consumption of global luxury brand by young consumers of Korea by Park et. al., (2008) provides an explanation to justify the inverse relationship in the results between the hypothesized relationship of the interdependent and independent self-concept with status seeking (H2a and H2b). The findings by Gil, et. al., (2012) support these results to reveals that the youth consumes sought-after foreign luxuries not for vanity which has connotations of materialism that can be linked to status-seeking but rather for conformity and social recognition.

## **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Brand managers targeting teenagers can use the knowledge that young adolescents' become luxury bandwagoners for assimilation with friends and to associate with opinion leaders from popular culture (Wiedmann et. al., 2009). Changing trends in fashion fuels consumption by the youth for whom purchasing patterns of the relevant social groups is a major determinant in formation of likes and dislikes (Tynan et. al., 2010). Along with suggestions of conspicuousness, marketers can corroborate a range of variables that can include affiliations with contemporary lifestyle for social approval to tap into this market segment (Brewer, 1991).

Proficient use of digital marketing can target this potential clientele by developing marketspaces for mass consumption by adolescents through efficient e-commerce (Park, et. al., 2011). Also, video blogs can be used to manifest the benefits of utilitarian and hedonic benefits to the consumer to enhance the self-concept (Kurman, 2001).

Price discrimination within a product-line for different connotations of style can lead to an effective market differentiation strategy with collections constantly evolving as 'Most Popular', 'Bestseller', and 'Special-Edition' to cater to and enhance normative needs (Lastovicka, 1982). At present some brands like Adidas are strategically using this understanding to target teenagers with their Superstar trainers through conventional advertising that includes TVCs as well as streamlined video blogs by YouTube child celebrity Jessalyn Grace who advocates and endorses the Adidas line. This type of marketing is cost-effective and can successfully gain market share from competitors (Castronovo & Huang, 2012; Keller, et. al., 2009).

Although brand houses can gain exponential benefits with their state-of-the-art marketing strategies, it is important to note that they have a social responsibility that comes with being an influencer to teenagers. Active strategies to shape the minds of young adolescents should be of equal significance to these organizations to leave a positive impact on the society at large. A suggestion could be offering a special discount to customers if a certain amount of contribution is made bi-monthly to a social cause. The

respective brand can share project information and collaborator Non-Profit Organization's information in detail to make that part of the popular culture for the adolescents to be holistically informed of the world beyond luxury consumption for a better tomorrow.

This paper adds to the literature of bandwagon consumption and demonstrates that Western theoretical models cannot be generalized to all parts of the global world to interpret behavioral sciences. Consumers with different cultures and sub-cultures perceive and process information in a different manner. Additionally, within the international market for luxury there are different market segments that consume luxury with varying underlying motivations and an understanding of this strengthens the literature for consumer analysts, marketers and brand managers.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research has a number of limitations. To begin with, other personality traits can be analyzed to add to the literature for bandwagon luxury phenomenon. Other product categories like apparel can also be used to further the analysis to understand adolescent luxury consumption.

Gender differences can yield different results as research indicates there are different motives for purchasing luxury between genders (Roux et. al., 2017) and it would be interesting to find out the role of gender and intentions for luxury consumption for young adolescents transitioning into adults.

Although these limitations exist, this research contributes to the contemporary literature of luxury by opening a window into exploring how individuals in their formative years associate with and consume luxury. It aids in evaluating the intricate mental and emotional mechanisms and their relationship to a person's self-concept to widen the horizon for understanding of this phenomenon.

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