

[Original Article]

Sustainable Luxury Fashion Consumption and the Moderating Role of Guilt

Chungwha Ki and Youn-Kyung Kim[†]

Dept. of Retail, Hospitality, and Tourism Management, The University of Tennessee, USA

Abstract

This study explores whether consumers' *sustainable luxury purchase (SLP)*, which refers to luxury consumers' conscientious purchase behavior of "buying luxury for its timeless style and durable quality that leads to extended product usage and less waste," leads to *luxury consumer pleasure (LCP)*. Furthermore, the current study examines whether LCP leads to positive post-purchase behavior reflected by *sustainable divestment intention (SDI)* and *repurchase intention (RI)*. In addition, by building on Coping Theory, we explore whether *luxury consumer guilt (LCG)* positively moderates the relationship between LCP and SDI. Our empirical findings of the SEM analysis based on 452 valid responses demonstrate the significant relationships between SLP and LCP, between LCP and SDI, and between LCP and RI. This implies the importance of SLP in creating a favorable consumer response, which further leads to consumers' intentions to make a sustainable divestment and to repurchase luxury. Furthermore, the critical moderating role LCG plays in the relationship between LCP and SDI was supported, stressing the importance of guilt as a trigger of consumers' sustainable divestment behavior.

Keywords: Sustainable luxury purchase, luxury consumer pleasure, luxury consumer guilt, sustainable divestment intention, and repurchase intention

I. Introduction

With the growing concern on sustainable development, which refers to development that meets the needs of the present generation while sustaining the needs of future generations (WCED, 1987), consumer behavior has gained attention because all the actions consumers take and the choices they make today affect the future (UNEP, 2011). As the decisions consumers make on whether to buy a product or not lead to a less or more sustainable pattern of consumption, many researchers propose that sustainable development can be most effectively achieved by the changes in consumers' lifestyles towards more sustainable choices and behavior (i.e., *sustainable consumption*) (Bolderdijk & Steg, 2015; Cho, Gupta, & Kim, 2015; Jackson, 2014; Ki

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[†]Corresponding author

(ykim13@utk.edu)

ORCIDChungwha Ki
<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1372-1686>Youn-Kyung Kim
<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5507-5152>

& Kim, 2016). Sustainable consumption implies consuming in a different and efficient way that involves reducing purchase, extending product usage, and promoting shared use so as not to harm the needs of future generations (Jackson, 2014). The significant role *sustainable consumption* plays in the pursuit of sustainable development is not an exception in the fashion business. Fashion retailers, fast fashion retailers in particular, have been blamed for promoting consumers' impulsive- and over-consumption that generate excessive waste (Markkula & Moisander, 2012). To respond to the negative impacts of the fashion industry on the environment and to tackle consumers' unsustainable behavior, there are rising voices that *luxury fashion retailers* can and should play the leading role in promoting sustainable consumption by encouraging consumers to buy their luxury goods that can be worn for more than one season and reduce the frequency of consumption (Simkus, 2010).

While fast fashion retailers, such as H&M and Zara, lead the trend of excessive- and disposable-consumption by inducing consumers to buy their new items that are introduced at low-cost on a weekly basis (Fletcher, 2008; Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang, & Chan, 2012), luxury fashion retailers, such as Chanel and Louis Vuitton, lead the trend of sustainable consumption by upholding their own *signature style* over short-lived fashion and offering *long-lasting quality* over excessive quantity, which allows luxury consumers to choose well and buy less, ultimately leading to minimizing ecological footprint (Kapferer, 2010; Simkus, 2010). In fact, Ki and Kim (2016) empirically demonstrate that many luxury consumers have evolved in their values and behavior to display a relatively new purchase behavior of "sustainable luxury purchase (SLP)," which refers to consumers' "luxury purchase for its timeless style and durable quality that leads to extended product usage and less waste," so as to reflect their social concerns. Furthermore, it is proposed that luxury fashion retailers, beyond promoting SLP, can contribute to sustainable development by influencing consumers' post-consumption behavior such as their sustainable divestment behavior (Lee, Ko, Lee, & Kim, 2015). Sustainable divestment refers to reusing old products for other purposes or finding ways to keep the used products remain in the consumption system for others to use, rather than simply throwing them away (Cho *et al.*, 2015).

In addition to the leading role luxury fashion retailers can play in encouraging sustainable consumption, consumer emotion of *guilt* has also been noted to influence sustainable consumer behavior (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). Guilt refers to an individual's sense of regret and remorse, which is caused by his/her consumption experience that disregards his/her own values or social norms (Burnett & Lunsford, 1994). According to Burnett and Lunsford (1994), consumers may experience a sense of guilt when they make excessive spending, such as luxury consumption, that is not easily justifiable to themselves as well as to others. Although many retailers concern that consumer guilt will have a negative impact on their business (Izzo, 2014), many researchers suggest that guilt is not necessarily harmful (Burnett & Lunsford, 1994; Onwezen, Bartels, & Antonides, 2014). For example, prior studies demonstrate that guilt provides an explanation for individuals' ethical, prosocial, and altruistic behavior (Burnett & Lunsford, 1994; Onwezen *et al.*, 2014). In specific, Onwezen *et al.* (2014) demonstrate that guilt stimulates consumers to engage in a sustainable behavior, which enables them to correct their negative emotional experience. Furthermore, Kaiser and Shimoda (1999) demonstrate that consumer guilt elicited from unnecessary consumption influences them to engage in pro-environmental behavior.

Despite the heightened importance of sustainability for luxury retailers and the significant role consumer guilt plays in sustainable consumption, limited studies have addressed these subjects in the domain of luxury fashion consumption. Although prior studies linked luxury and sustainability, they primarily shed light on the perspective of

retailers (i.e., sustainable production), but not much on the stance of consumers (i.e., sustainable consumption) (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2014). Besides, although consumers experience both positive and negative emotions in purchase-related situations, little attention has been paid to the negative side of consumer emotions and the role it plays (Burnett & Lunsford, 1994). Furthermore, prior studies mainly focused on individuals' consumption behavior; therefore, less is understood on their post-consumption behavior (Mugge, Schifferstein, & Schoormans, 2010).

To fill in the aforementioned research void, we build on Coping Theory (Lazarus, 1966) that proposes two key premises that individuals generate positive or/and negative emotional responses through the *cognitive appraisal* of their experiences; and that when a negative emotion (e.g., guilt) is elicited, they trigger a *coping mechanism* so as to alleviate the displeasing feeling. Employing the theory to the luxury consumption domain, we explore the relationships among luxury consumers' purchase behavior, post-purchase evaluation, and post-purchase behavior. Specifically, the purpose of this study is threefold: We examine (a) whether SLP leads to *luxury consumer pleasure* (LCP); (b) whether LCP influences *sustainable divestment intention* (SDI) and *repurchase intention* (RI); and (c) whether *luxury consumer guilt* (LCG) moderates the relationship between LCP and SDI.

II. Background

1. Coping Theory

Coping Theory posits that when an individual evaluates an experience as taxing (i.e., cognitive appraisal), he/she evokes a *negative emotion* (e.g., stress or guilt) that triggers his/her *coping mechanism* (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). As such, Coping Theory suggests two key processes: *cognitive appraisal* and *coping*. Cognitive appraisal refers to the process through which an individual "evaluates" whether a particular experience is relevant to his/her well-being or not, which in turn develops his/her positive or negative emotional response (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). On the other hand, *coping* refers to the process of "executing" the response to the aroused emotion, which is aimed at reducing negative emotion and reaching a more desirable emotional state (Duhachek, 2005). According to Miller and Kaiser (2001), coping can be classified into either engagement or disengagement coping. Engagement coping refers to a strategy individuals use to cope with the displeasing emotion by "confronting" it, whereas disengagement coping is a strategy people use to "separate" themselves from the negative emotional situation (Tobin, Holroyd, Reynolds, & Wigal, 1989). Applying Coping Theory to the luxury consumption context, we propose that consumers will evaluate their luxury purchase behavior (i.e., SLP) and express positive or/and negative emotional responses (i.e., LCP and LCG). We further posit that when consumers experience guilt from luxury purchase, they will trigger engagement coping strategy (i.e., SDI) to wash away the displeasing emotion and reach a better emotional state.

2. Sustainable Luxury Purchase (SLP) and Luxury Consumer Pleasure (LCP)

Luxury retailers have recently embraced sustainability as part of the luxury essence (Bendell & Kleanthous, 2007; Kendall, 2010). Luxury and sustainability share common ideals in the sense that they both stress on timelessness, durability, and quality (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Kapferer & Michaut, 2015). Consistent with luxury retailers' sustainable movement of providing timeless and durable products, a growing number of luxury consumers are expressing their aspirations for a better world by shifting from conspicuous consumption to conscientious consumption (Bendell & Kleanthous, 2007; Cvijanovich, 2011). When consumers make a conscientious choice of purchasing a luxury product for its *long-lasting style and quality* (i.e., SLP), they are engaging in sustainable

consumption as it allows them to keep their purchase for long and buy less, which ultimately contributes to minimizing the causes of pollution and reducing waste of natural resources (Blevis *et al.*, 2007; Joy *et al.*, 2012; Ki & Kim, 2016; Simkus, 2010).

According to Ki and Kim (2016), SLP elicits consumer pleasure, which is greater than the pleasure experienced from conspicuous luxury purchase. Consumer pleasure refers to a favorable emotional response, such as comfort, happiness, and pleasure, gained from a consumption experience (Keller, 2001; Wood, 2000). Numerous studies have demonstrated that consumers feel positive emotion, such as pleasure and satisfaction, from luxury consumption (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2009; Kapferer, 1997; Truong & McColl, 2011; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Furthermore, noting that consumers respond favorably when they make a purchase that is desirable and yields something good not only to themselves but also to others in a society (Clark, Kotchen, & Moore, 2003), SLP, which satisfies one's personal fulfillment, at the same time makes positive impacts on the environment, will elicit satisfactory emotions such as pleasure. Thus, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: Sustainable luxury purchase will lead to consumer pleasure.

3. Luxury Consumer Pleasure (LCP) and Sustainable Divestment Intention (SDI)

According to Antonetti and Maklan (2014), a positive consumer emotion plays an important role in triggering consumers' responsible behavior. Carter (2011) assents that consumers' positive emotional responses influence them to behave in a desirable way, for example, in a way to engage in a pro-environmental behavior. Specifically, when consumers develop a positive emotional connection with their products, they tend to show a sustainable divestment behavior (Cho *et al.*, 2015). When a product is no longer of use, individuals have several means to dispose it in a sustainable manner (Shim, 1995). For example, consumers can keep their old items remain in the consumption system, instead of simply discarding the products away, by reusing or recycling them for new purposes (Cho *et al.*, 2015; Shim, 1995). In other cases, consumers can sustainably divest the used products by handing them down to close friends or selling them at second-hand stores (Shim, 1995). In light of the aforementioned review, we expect that consumer pleasure elicited by luxury consumption will influence the consumer's SDI. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Consumer pleasure experienced from luxury consumption will lead to sustainable divestment intention.

4. Luxury Consumer Pleasure (LCP) and Repurchase Intention (RI)

Repurchase intention (RI) refers to an individual's interest in consuming the product or brand again (Hellier, Geursen, Carr, & Rickard, 2003). Extant literature has demonstrated the significant relationship between individuals' consumption-related emotions and their post-consumption behavior (Bigné, Mattila, & Andreu, 2008; Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Ladhari, 2007). For example, Yu and Dean (2001) demonstrate that positive emotional responses such as consumer satisfaction lead to consumer loyalty. In a similar vein, Brakus *et al.* (2009) demonstrate that positive consumer emotions influence their repeat patronage. Babin and Babin (2001) show that positive emotions are associated with enhanced patronage intentions and shopping value. In further support, Soscia (2007) demonstrates that a positive emotional response from consumers leads to their positive word-of-mouth and

repurchase intentions. Such findings lead us to assume that consumer pleasure elicited by luxury consumption will enhance luxury repurchase intention. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Consumer pleasure experienced from luxury consumption will lead to repurchase intention.

5. Luxury Consumer Guilt (LCG) as a Moderator

Guilt refers to a violation of an individual's internal standard (Burnett & Lunsford, 1994). When guilt is linked with a consumption context, consumer guilt indicates consumers' negative affect caused by their buying decisions that violate their own values or social norms. Previously, consumer guilt has been linked with individuals' impulsive consumption (Rook, 1987), compulsive consumption (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989), overconsumption (Pirisi, 1995), and luxury consumption behavior (Berens, 2013). Although guilt refers to a negative valence, it can be a functional emotion because it hints individuals that they have violated their personal values or social norms, which in turn triggers their reparative action (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). In support of this notion, researchers have demonstrated that guilt triggers individuals to conduct prosocial or sustainable behavior (Lindsey, 2005; Young, Hwang, McDonald, & Oates, 2010). Taken above, we expect that consumer guilt will positively moderate the relationship between LCP and SDI. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: Consumer guilt experienced from luxury consumption will positively moderate the relationship between consumer pleasure and sustainable divestment intention, in such a way that increased guilt will enhance the association between pleasure and sustainable divestment intention.

III. Methods

To test the proposed hypotheses, data were collected from consumer panelists of a commercial online survey company. Respondents received an e-mail invitation to participate in and complete an online survey, hosted by a major university in the southeast region of the United States. In order to solicit questions on a branded product, a total of 40 luxury brands that offer fashion product items of both clothing and handbag/briefcase were selected from "The Luxury Brand Directory" (Heine, 2014). At the beginning of the survey, respondents were asked to select a brand from the list of 40 luxury fashion brands and one product item (either clothing or handbag/briefcase) they purchased most recently. If they responded "none of these," they were exited from the survey.

Out of 452 valid respondents, 175 selected clothing, and 277 selected handbag/briefcase. The largest number of respondents chose Gucci ($n = 80$), followed by Louis Vuitton ($n = 56$), Ralph Lauren ($n = 41$), Marc Jacobs ($n = 37$), Prada ($n = 31$), and so on. The brand name and product category that a respondent provided were automatically embedded in the questions on SLP, LCP, LCG, SDI, and RI. Informants' ages ranged from 18 to 82 years with the mean age of 39. The majority of informants were female (84.3%) and Caucasian (70.8%), and the household income was widely distributed with the median income of \$60,000-\$79,999.

The measurement items for all variables were adapted from established scales and measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The items for SLP were adapted from Cho *et al.* (2015) and Gentry and Gupta (2013); LCP, from Garg, Wansink, and Inman (2007); LCG, from Lau-Gesk & Meyers-Levy (2009) and Gelbrich (2011); SDI, from Cho *et al.* (2015) and Shim (1995); and RI, from Bian and Forsythe (2012).

IV. Results

Before hypotheses testing, a median-split was used to divide respondents into *high guilt* and *low guilt* groups. Since Cronbach's alphas of guilt was .97, the mean scores of guilt was used for the median split analysis ($Med = 2.25$). There was a significant difference between the *high guilt* group ($n = 218$) ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.51$) and the *low guilt* group ($n = 234$) ($M = 1.37$, $SD = .46$) ($t = -32.89$, $df = 450$, $p < .001$).

1. Measurement Model and Metric Invariance Tests

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed via AMOS 22 to test the convergent validity and discriminant validity of the measurements. Convergent validity was examined with factor loadings, reliabilities, and model fit indexes (Steenkamp & Trijp, 1991). First, two items from SLP, one item from LCP, and one item from SDI were deleted in the measurement model because of their low factor loadings or low squared multiple correlation values. After deleting these items, all the t-values of factor loadings were significant (all p-values < .001). In addition, each construct was found to be reliable with its Cronbach's alpha being greater than .70 (SLP = .88; LCP = .93; SDI = .74; RI = .92), as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. The measurement model statistics

Measurement Construct	Cronbach's alpha
<i>Sustainable Luxury Purchase (SLP)</i>	.88
I bought this {brand} {product} for its timeless style.	
I bought this {brand} {product} for its long-lasting quality.	
I bought this {brand} {product} because it coordinates with other products I own.	
I consider the purchase of this {brand} {product} to be a sustainable purchase.	
<i>Luxury Consumer Pleasure (LCP)</i>	.93
Buying this {brand} {product} made me feel good.	
Buying this {brand} {product} gave me pleasure.	
Buying this {brand} {product} made me feel happy.	
Buying this {brand} {product} was comforting	
<i>Luxury Consumer Guilt (LCG)</i>	.97
I felt guilty when I bought {brand} {product} instead of non-luxury brand {product}.	
I felt remorseful when I bought {brand} {product} instead of non-luxury brand {product}.	
I felt regretful when I bought {brand} {product} instead of non-luxury brand {product}.	
I am blameworthy for buying {brand} {product} instead of non-luxury brand {product}.	
<i>Sustainable Divestment Intention (SDI)</i>	.74
I will "hand down" this {brand} {product} in family or among friends.	
I will give away this {brand} {product} to help others that I know.	
I will reuse this {brand} {product} for other purposes to get the most out of it.	
<i>Repurchase Intention (RI)</i>	.92
If I were going to purchase a luxury {product}, I would consider buying {brand}.	
If I were shopping for a luxury brand, the likelihood I would purchase {brand} is high.	
The probability I would consider buying {brand} is high.	

Convergent validity was further confirmed by the average variance extracted (AVE) ranging from .50 to .81, none of them being less than the threshold of .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was also satisfactory with AVEs being larger than the shared variances (i.e., squared correlation coefficients) between all possible pairs of constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), as illustrated in Table 2. The overall fit of the measurement model was acceptable: $\chi^2_{(71)} = 214.65, p < .001, RMSEA = .07, GFI = .94, AGFI = .91, TLI = .96, CFI = .97$.

Table 2. AVE and discriminant validity

Constructs	1	2	3	4
1. Sustainable Luxury Purchase (SLP)	.64			
2. Luxury Consumer Pleasure (LCP)	.55	.81		
3. Sustainable Divestment Intention (SDI)	.31	.19	.50	
4. Repurchase Intention (RI)	.62	.61	.23	.81

Note. Diagonal entries show the average variance extracted by the construct and off-diagonal entries represent the variance shared (squared correlation) between constructs.

To compare paths from LCP to SDI, the equality of factor loadings between high guilt and low guilt groups were measured. Two group CFAs were performed and the chi-square fit differences between the non-restricted model and the restricted model with the path coefficient of LCP to SDI set to be equal between the high and low guilt groups was not significant, supporting full metric invariance model [$\Delta\chi^2_{d(14)} = 18.22, p = .20$]. Thus, the full metric invariance model was used to test the moderating effect of LCG on the relationship between LCP and SDI.

2. Structural Model and Hypotheses Testing

To test the hypothesized relationships of H1 through H3, we employed a structural equation modeling (SEM). The overall fit indices showed an acceptable fit of the data: $\chi^2_{(74)} = 329.50, p < .001, RMSEA = .09, GFI = .90, AGFI = .86, TLI = .94, CFI = .95$. As illustrated in Figure 1, the test of H1 confirmed the positive relationship between SLP and LCP ($\beta = .76, t = 14.91, p < .001$); testing H2 supported the positive relationship between LCP and SDI ($\beta = .46, t = 8.25, p < .001$); and the test of H3 confirmed the relationship between LCP and RI ($\beta = .80, t = 17.69, p < .001$).

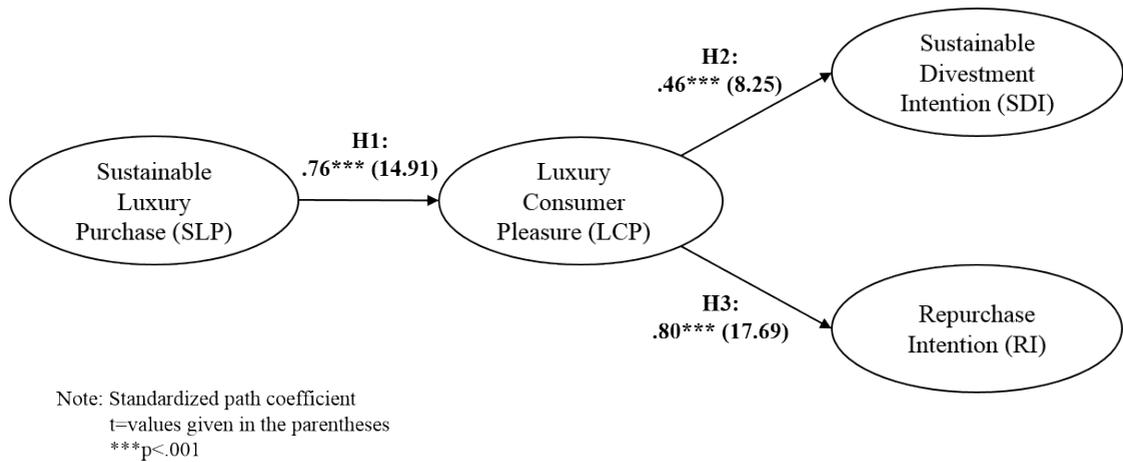


Figure 1. Results of hypotheses testing (H1 to H3)

Furthermore, to test H4, the individual path coefficients were compared across the high and low guilt groups. According to the test result, the chi-square fit difference test between groups was statistically significant. As illustrated in Figure 2, the path between LCP and SDI was significantly higher for the high guilt group ($\beta=.81$, $t=10.21$, $p<.001$) than for the low guilt group [$\beta=.22$, $t=2.83$, $p<.01$; $\Delta\chi^2_{(1)}=21.49$, $p<.001$], supporting H4.

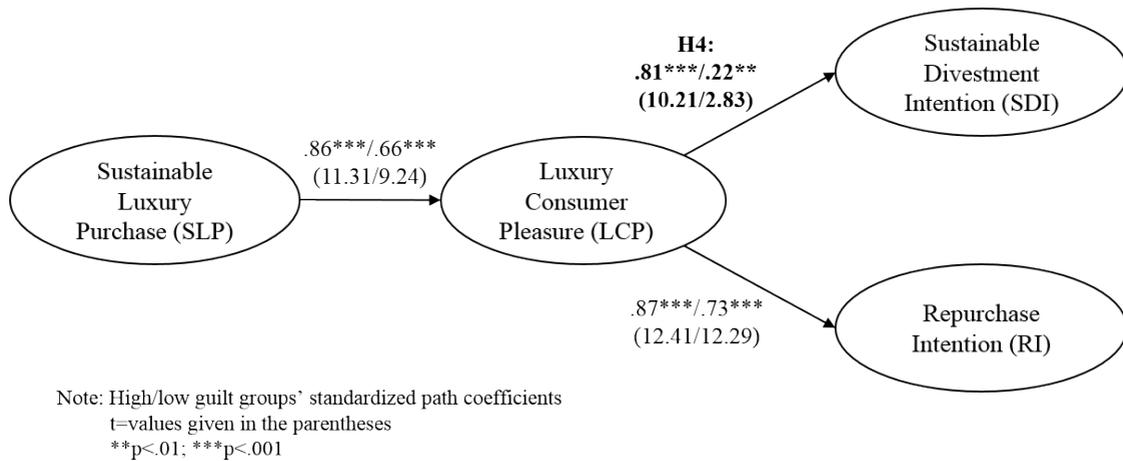


Figure 2. Result of moderation analysis (H4): high vs. low guilt group (n=218 vs. 234)

V. Conclusion

Reflecting the recent trend of sustainable consumption, this study investigates whether luxury consumers' SLP leads to LCP, which ultimately influences their intention to repurchase luxury and make sustainable divestment behavior. Furthermore, drawing upon Coping Theory, we explore whether consumers' negative emotional response from luxury consumption (i.e., LCG) plays a key role in triggering consumers' sustainable post-purchase behavior. Our findings reveal that SLP leads to positive purchase evaluation (i.e., LCP), which in turn drives consumers' positive post-purchase behavior (i.e., SDI and RI) and that LCG positively moderates the relationship between LCP and SDI. Detailed theoretical and managerial contributions of our study are specified below.

This study contributes to the luxury literature by demonstrating that luxury consumers experience positive emotion via SLP that signifies consumers' responsible choice of buying luxury for its long-lasting style and quality over short-term fashion and unnecessary quantity, which in turn drives their intention to make sustainable divestment behavior and to repurchase luxury. This implies that luxury retailers can indeed encourage a sustainable pattern of consumption (i.e., from sustainable purchase to sustainable divestment behavior), and thereby contribute to sustainable development, as well as keep their customers loyal to their brands. Second, this study finds that consumers who experience high guilt, compared to those who experience low guilt, show a greater intention to make sustainable divestment behavior. This corroborates the proposition of Coping Theory in that guilt triggers consumers' engagement coping mechanism to wash away the displeasing emotion by positively moderating the relationship between LCP and SDI.

The aforementioned findings hint several recommendations to luxury retailers and marketers. First, we suggest luxury fashion retailers to strongly embed its sustainable aspects (i.e., timeless style and long-lasting quality) in their luxury essence, which influence customers to experience favorable consumption emotions. For instance, we suggest luxury marketers to communicate their sustainable manufacturing processes of creating classic style and durable fabrics or materials to luxury consumers, who are increasingly paying attention to social and environmental issues. In so doing, luxury retailers may trigger consumers' intention to involve in SLP, which will further provide favorable emotions to their customers. We also recommend luxury retailers to provide consumers ways to reuse their old luxury items. For example, luxury retailers may upload video clips on their corporate social media sites that instruct several approaches to reform old luxury clothing or handbags (e.g., adding new patches to an old Gucci jacket or embedding studs or unique artwork to an old Chanel bag), which will promote customers to sustainably divest their luxury items. Furthermore, it is noteworthy for luxury marketers to shed new lights on the negative consumer emotion of guilt. We recommend luxury retailers to build effective marketing strategies to attract consumers, who feel guilty after luxury purchases, to engage in sustainable divestment practices, which will alleviate consumers' negative emotion and ultimately lead to maximizing their favorable consumption experiences as well as positioning that luxury products are sustainable.

This study has several limitations, which provide recommendations for future studies. First, we confined our conceptual model to the context of luxury fashion products. Therefore, we recommend future researchers to test the conceptual model of this study in a broader luxury business context other than luxury fashion items. Second, in terms of the outcome (post-purchase) variable, we suggest future researchers to include more variables that are related to sustainable consumer behavior other than SDI. For example, future researchers may ask consumers' intentions to repurchase "sustainable luxury products," instead of asking their intentions to repurchase general luxury products. In

so doing, the findings may provide a better understanding whether individuals are indeed displaying a cycle of sustainable consumption. Furthermore, it will be intriguing to examine whether the conceptual model can be applied to other cultures, where luxury spending is growing. By addressing these limitations, future research can provide a deeper understanding of the roles “luxury retailers” and “consumer guilt” play in promoting sustainable consumer behavior.

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