

[Original Article]

## An exploratory study on Chinese shoppers' perception of luxury brands' social responsibility

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### Abstract

Recently China has become one of the major markets for luxury brands. In addition, practicing social responsibility by manufacturers of luxury brands has become ubiquitous because consumers' perception of such practices may affect their purchase decisions positively. This study explored Chinese shoppers' perception of luxury brands' social responsibility practices and their information seeking behavior. In this study, value congruence was used as a theoretical framework. Twelve participants were selected out of customers in a shopping mall in Beijing, and they were subject to in-depth interview. The interview consisted of open-ended questions about perception of luxury brands' social responsibility practices, sources to access such practices, and the degree of personal value congruence to such practices as well as demographic information. Qualitative approach was used to analyze the data. Half of the participants indicated their awareness of the social responsibility practices of luxury brands, which sets up a foundation for understanding importance of luxury brands' social responsibility practices. Approximately half of the participants preferred to learn about luxury brands' socially responsible practices online especially via social media. These findings imply that Chinese luxury shoppers' trust and preference for the companies would be enhanced by effective development and advertisement of companies' social responsibility practices, and thus provide luxury companies with useful information on marketing strategies.

*Keywords: social responsibility, Chinese shoppers, luxury brands, customer perception*

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### I. Introduction

China is one of the world's largest exporters of textiles and apparel. As the country's economy continues to grow, the number of individuals with mid-level incomes has increased dramatically. Based on data from Goldman Sachs (A Plus, 2007), the rate of Chinese customers' spending on luxury goods increased from 17%

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in 2007 to 29% in 2015. A recent report indicated that Chinese consumers spent \$116.8 billion on the global luxury market in 2015 (Yifu, 2015). Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou are the most developed cities in China, and are the home of over 40% of Chinese millionaires. Moreover, Beijing alone contains 17% of all of the millionaires in China (Roberts, 2014), which a number increases constantly. Thus, Beijing, with its large market volume, was an appropriate city for this study.

As social responsibility has become popular in the world market, the manufacturers of luxury brands must also respond to the social responsibility issue (Doval, Singh, & Batra, 2013). Although luxury brands were previously conservative in adopting socially responsible practices, they are now active to do such practices (Doval et al., 2013). Fashion manufacturers use eco-friendly or recycled materials for sustainability (Hustvedt & Dickson, 2009). Social responsibility has become more commonly associated with conscientious practices that affect human rights and labor standards as well (Dickson & Eckman, 2006). Apparel brands as members of fair labor association (FLA) could improve their social responsibility practices, focusing on labor conditions, treatment of workers, etc. (Kunz, Karpova, & Garner, 2016). In particular, the luxury apparel brands have had little exploitation of labor because they have worked with highly trained artisans to appeal high quality and timeless products to the consumers (Joy, Sherry Jr., Venkatesh, Wang, & Chan, 2012).

Although previous studies describing luxury brand purchase behaviors exist, no studies have focused on how Chinese shoppers perceive luxury brands' social responsibility. This study investigated Chinese shoppers' perception and information seeking behavior of luxury brands' social responsibility practices. Main research questions were: 1) How do Chinese luxury shoppers perceive luxury brands' socially responsible practices? and 2) What sources do Chinese luxury shoppers use to learn about luxury brands' contributions to social responsibility? Answering these questions provides companies producing luxury goods with useful information on the development of effective social responsibility practices.

## II. Literature Review

### 1. Theoretical Framework

#### 1.1. Value congruence

Value is defined as "...general beliefs about the importance of normatively desirable behaviors or end states." (Edwards & Cable, 2009, p. 655). Value congruence is defined as "the match between the organization's values and individuals' values (Erdogan, Kraimer, & Liden, 2004, p. 308). Value congruence is an important concept because it underpins the process by which consumers' perceptions of social responsible practices affect their purchase decision making. Zhang and Bloemer (2008) found the positive influence of value congruence on repurchase intention, using consumers in clothing stores in the Netherlands. Park, Rabolt, and Jeon (2008) found a positive relationship between conveying personal values (e.g., uniqueness) and young Korean consumers' purchases of luxury goods. Thus, Chinese luxury shoppers may also purchase socially responsible luxury products because they represent personal values.

## 2. Luxury Products and Chinese Luxury Shoppers

Luxury is defined as an inessential and desirable item, which is expensive or difficult to obtain (Luxury, 2015). Luxury products are characterized by price, quality, aesthetics, rarity, extraordinariness, and symbolism (Heine, 2011). A high price is the first characteristic people attribute to luxury products, but simply increasing the price does not transform an ordinary item into a luxury product (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). Instead, quality is the most important criterion (Heine, 2011). The exceptional methods with which they are manufactured, their comfort and functionality, their unique features, superior customer service, appropriate sizes, and durability contribute to the quality of luxury products (Heine, 2011). The aesthetics refer not only to design, but also to all sensory pleasures that satisfy shoppers (Dubois, Laurent, & Czellar, 2001). Rarity denotes the restricted availability of certain products, including limited editions, as well as the use of rare materials in manufacturing (Heine, 2011). Extraordinariness directly indicates outstanding designs that characterize a product (Goody, 2006). Symbolism is related to people's values and lifestyles (Heine, 2011). People's desire to comply with affluent lifestyles of the upper class affects their luxury seeking behavior (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004).

Luxury shoppers have a higher social status, value their appearance more highly, and pay more attention to their belongings and behaviors (Han, Nunes, & Dreze, 2010). Davies, Lee and Ahonkhai (2012) found that luxury shoppers care more about a product's quality than the manufacturers' ethics. Over 50% of Chinese luxury shoppers are considered wealthy or extremely wealthy (Atsmon, Dixit, & Wu, 2011).

Younger Chinese luxury shoppers are willing to spend a significant monetary amount on luxury products than other consumer groups (Walley & Li, 2015). Little emperor, who is the only child in their families due to China's one-child-per-family policy implemented from 1971 to 2015, receives both affection and economic support from their parents (Chadha & Husband, 2006), and this young Chinese consumer group purchases luxury products at a higher rate than do other consumer groups (Walley & Li, 2015). Langlois and Barberio (2013) reported that Chinese women over 35 years old are primary shoppers for luxury products. Chinese women make over half of luxury purchases because they receive better education and attain higher incomes than men (Burkitt, 2011).

## 3. Social Responsibility

Social responsibility is defined as "a theory that obligates individuals and groups to act in a way that benefits the greater good of the society. Applied to businesses, it means that a company can be defined as socially responsible if its main objectives, practices and processes not only respect laws and regulations, but also contribute to the growth and well-being of the community" (Rochon, 2017). Dickson and Eckman (2006) pointed out the ways in which social responsibility can be applied to the production, distribution, consumption, and disposal of apparel and textiles. In the production stage, they mentioned that social responsibility practices are related to raw materials, design, and production. After the production stage, social responsibility practices are connected with how products are merchandised and then retailed to consumers. In the final stage, they indicated that social responsibility plays a part in how products are consumed, disposed of, and perhaps recycled such as making donations to appropriate local businesses or offering second-hand clothing to Ragstock, Salvation Army or Good Will (Dickson & Eckman, 2006).

Social responsibility in the apparel industries has increased in the past few years (Goworek, 2011). For example, social responsibility practices on offering environmental friendly products to consumers through the major luxury brands have been fulfilled. The major luxury brands, Stella McCartney, Louis Vuitton and Gucci, have released

limited edition T-shirts made of organic materials. Parts of Christian Dior's handbags are made of Italian bio-farmed leather to reduce the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> released into the atmosphere (Kapferer, 2010).

#### 4. Perceived Social Responsibility and Chinese Shoppers' Purchase Decisions

Chinese consumers in Shanghai and Hong Kong paid a lot of attention to and were supportive of socially responsible practices (Ramasamy & Yeung, 2009). Chan and Wong (2012) found that the environment and displays in an eco-friendly fashion store in Hong Kong affected customers' purchase decision significantly. According to Havas Media, Chinese consumers were quite willing to consider environmental and social concerns when making purchase decisions because of China's current environmental problems (Nicholson, 2011). Affluent consumers like Chinese luxury shoppers have purchase intention of luxury brands after they perceive social responsibility implemented by luxury brands (Han, Awan, & Khan, 2016).

Chinese luxury consumers may refer to advertisements, such as in newspapers, television shows, magazines, websites, and events relayed via word of mouth to obtain detailed information about socially responsible apparel brands. Fashion-oriented customers are willing to make purchases after reading informative labels on socially responsible products (Gam, Ma, & Banning, 2014). Consumers cannot determine whether certain products are made of organic or other "green" materials simply by examining the labels (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2014). Nicholson (2011) found that Chinese consumers obtained insufficient information about socially responsible goods. It is essential for luxury fashion brands to understand which current media Chinese luxury shoppers use to obtain social responsibility information.

### III. Method

A qualitative method was used. Participants were selected purposefully from a customer list (200 female and male luxury shoppers who have experienced purchasing luxury products) provided by the customer center at the Beijing SKP shopping mall. The Beijing SKP shopping mall was selected because it has been praised as the model for high-end shopping malls in China with a sales volume of 7.7 billion Yuan (approximately \$1.1 billion) in 2014 (Qianzi, 2016). We selected 50 female customers between 25 and 50 years because females are more involved with fashion and they demonstrate greater sensitivity towards clothing than men do (Moss, 2009). This particular age group was chosen because they have found a job and personal incomes. The people in this age range constitute the foundation of the society and serve as the link between the preceding and following generations. We sent emails to all of fifty female customers that were explained why certain customers were selected, and asked them whether they were willing to participate in the study or not. Twelve female participants participated in the study as the final sample.

Data were collected using in-depth interviews via email and telephone. The interview process lasted 30-40 minutes and electronically recorded. All questions were translated into Chinese prior to data collection. A trusted colleague translated the questions alone, and then the researcher checked both versions of the translated questionnaires to ensure the accuracy of the translations. In addition, all answers were translated into English prior to data analysis.

Prior to interview questions, the definition of social responsibility was explained to the participants. Interview questions consisted of open-ended questions about perception of social responsibility practices, sources to access luxury brands' social responsibility practices, and the degree to which personal value toward social responsibility is congruent to social responsibility practices supported by luxury brands. Participants were also asked demographic

questions (e.g., age, education, income) and willingness to purchase socially responsible luxury products regardless of the price. Actual interview questions were as follows: "Are you aware of any information about luxury brands' practices of social responsibility?", "Do you like to purchase "green" luxury products which are environmentally friendly by themselves or are produced in an environmentally friendly way?" and, "In which way are you receiving social responsibility information of luxury brands?"

Content analysis, followed by coding and categorizing, were used to analyze the data. In our research, we picked up the key words from participants' responses, calculated the frequency and percentage, and coded participants' responses into categories. The inter-coder agreement method was used to check whether the coding done by each researcher achieves the agreement. Inter-coder reliability coefficient was 85%, which was deemed acceptable for qualitative research (Touliatos & Compton, 1988).

## IV. Results and Discussion

### 1. Sample characteristics

Twelve Chinese luxury shoppers participated in this research. Seven shoppers were between 41 and 45 years old, two were between 37 and 40 years, and three were between 33 and 36 years. Eight participants held master's degrees. The yearly income categories ranged from \$23,000 (Chinese Yuan Renminbi 149,000) to more than \$54,000 (CNY 350,000). Nine participants' annual incomes were greater than \$54,000. Six participants have worked in private enterprises, three in government enterprises, two are freelancers, and one is self-employed. Four participants generally purchased more than 15 luxury products per year and the remaining eight purchased 6 to 10 products. The total number of luxury products owned ranged from 10 to 50. Six participants showed their willingness to purchase socially responsible luxury products regardless of the price (Table 1).

Table 1. Sample characteristics

	Age	Education	Income	Occupation	Number of luxury products purchased /year	Willingness to purchase socially responsible luxury products regardless of the price
P1	41-45	Master's	\$54,000 +	Self-employed	More than 15	Yes
P2	41-45	Master's	\$54,000 +	Government	6-10	Yes
P3	41-45	Bachelor's	\$54,000 +	Private enterprise	6-10	Yes
P4	37-40	Master's	\$54,000 +	Private enterprise	More than 15	Yes
P5	41-45	Bachelor's	\$54,000 +	Private enterprise	6-10	Yes
P6	41-45	Bachelor's	\$54,000 +	Government	6-10	No
P7	41-45	Master's	\$38,000 – \$46,000	Government	6-10	No
P8	33-36	Master's	\$38,000 – \$46,000	Freelancer	6-10	No
P9	41-45	Master's	\$54,000 +	Private enterprise	More than 15	Yes
P10	33-36	Master's	\$23,000 – \$31,000	Private enterprise	6-10	No

	Age	Education	Income	Occupation	Number of luxury products purchased /year	Willingness to purchase socially responsible luxury products regardless of the price
P11	33-36	Master's	\$54,000 +	Private enterprise	More than 15	No
P12	37-40	Doctorate	\$54,000 +	Freelancer	6-10	No

\*P=participant

## 2. Chinese shoppers' perception of social responsibility practices of luxury brands

Two interview questions were used for the analysis. First, participants were asked to indicate their awareness of information about luxury brands' social responsibility practices. Six (50%) indicated a knowledge of luxury brands' social responsibility practices. The following are the examples of comments from participants.

- *"At least I know [the brand] Stella McCartney of social responsibility practice" (Participant 3).*
- *"I know some, like LV's classic tote bag, it's made of leather, and very durable" (Participant 5).*
- *"I know that brands like Chanel, I loved, can make more environmental-friendly products because this brand makes such a big impact on the fashion market" (Participant 7).*

Half of the participants expressed awareness of the social practices. These results indicated that the social responsibility practices of luxury brand manufacturers were important to most participants. These results are consistent with the conclusions of Ramasamy and Yeung's (2009) study in which Chinese consumers attached importance to and supported social responsibility practices.

Participants were then asked to indicate their beliefs about supporting luxury brands' social responsibility practices and their purchase decisions relevant to "green" luxury goods. Seven participants (58%) answered this question positively. Examples of comments from the participants include the following:

- *"Yes, I would like to buy personal items that are made of natural materials, cleaning supplies, paper related products, organic food. I'll also buy environmental friendly and simple-packaged products, and as well as reusable and refillable products" (Participant 1).*
- *"Yes, I'll consider buying luxury products that can bring positive attitudes" (Participant 2).*

This finding agreed with Tian, Wang, and Yang's finding (2011), which showed that Chinese consumers with strong beliefs about social responsibility practices including environmental protection activities were more likely to purchase socially responsible products.

## 3. Sources to access luxury brands' social responsibility practices

Participants were asked to tell about their main sources for receiving luxury brands' social responsibility information. Six participants listed the media they often used. Weibo, which is a microblog-style online social media, was mentioned three times, online news twice, and weekly newspapers once. Approximately half of the participants preferred to learn about luxury brands' social responsibility practices online especially via social media. However, the

results also showed that they did not have enough sources and channels to access such information easily. The following are some examples of comments from participants.

- *"Yes, I always get information from Weibo" (Participant 2).*
- *"I know, there are a lot, Baidu is a great website" (Participant 3).*
- *"I like to access information about social responsibility in weekly newspapers" (Participant 4).*

## V. Conclusions and Implications

Half of twelve participants were already aware of social responsibility practices performed by luxury brands. In addition, more than half participants indicated their willingness to purchase environmentally friendly luxury products. These results suggest that companies producing luxury goods need to spend more efforts of introducing and advertising their social responsibility practices to Chinese luxury shoppers.

Value congruence was used as a theoretical framework to see whether the value participants assigned to social responsibility is congruent to the value of such practices conducted by luxury brands. It can be suggested that Chinese luxury shoppers' satisfaction and trust in their luxury brands' social responsibility practices would be improved in part by value congruence.

Recently, social responsibility initiatives by apparel companies have become ubiquitous and the Chinese market became to occupy a large portion of the luxury world market. Therefore, understanding how Chinese luxury shoppers perceive social responsibility of luxury brands would be useful for the development of marketing strategies. Specifically, Chinese luxury shoppers' trust and preference for the companies would be enhanced by effective advertisement of companies' social responsibility practices. These findings suggest that the companies producing luxury products need to make more effort in advertising their social responsibility practices, especially through social media and internet, so that Chinese luxury shoppers' purchase intention would be increased. The current results provide a foundation for understanding importance of luxury brands' social responsibility practices. The further research can be conducted to identify determinants of Chinese shoppers' purchase decisions for socially responsible luxury products.

## VI. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This research focused on female Chinese luxury shoppers and male Chinese luxury shoppers were not included in the research. Thus, the results can not be generalized to male Chinese shoppers. The results may also not be generalizable to all female Chinese luxury shoppers under 30 and over 50 years of age. In addition, because the sample was drawn from Beijing and sample size was very small, the results may not be generalized to all female Chinese luxury shoppers, even though Beijing is one of the most developed cities in China.

Future researchers may recruit participants from other top cities in China, such as Shanghai, the top contributor to GDP in China in 2015 (SouthMoney, 2015). In addition, Shanghai, the commercial capital of China, is home to 159,000 millionaires, and is ranked the second largest city in China. In 2016, the 9<sup>th</sup> Shanghai Luxe Pack Exhibition was held in Shanghai, and dealt with social responsibility and sustainability, and fashion trends (LuxePack, 2016). Therefore, subjects selected from Shanghai may represent additional meaningful results.

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