

# Luxury values and the perceptions of Japanese female shoppers: An evaluation based on the social cognitive theory perspective

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## Keywords

*Luxury consumption, Experienscape, Hospitality, Nostalgic memories, Social cognitive theory*

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper examines the behavioural determinants of luxury shopping behaviour, focusing on the effect of past experiences and nostalgic memories and how interaction with others influences buying behaviours in light of the social cognitive theory perspective.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A qualitative method was applied to textual data collected from in-depth in-person interviews with 24 female Japanese shoppers. The software applications NVivo and User Local were used for text mining, and an original analytical framework focusing on the values of luxury consumption ('conspicuous', 'social', 'hedonic' and 'learning from others and self') was proposed and discussed.

**Results:** Consumers identified positive past experiences and nostalgic memories as aspects of luxury consumption and as impactful factors influencing their future purchasing behaviours. When purchasing luxury goods requiring considerable expenditure, consumers reaffirmed the value of luxury goods and the meaning of owning luxury goods in a social context by learning from others who shared their experiences, which helped them to make a decision about their next purchasing opportunity.

**Limitations/implications of the study:** In order to deepen the findings and understand their implications, work is needed to broaden the scope of the analysis and generalise the output of this study to various consumer segments.

**Practical implications:** The findings provide a valid argument that aids luxury goods retailers' development of effective marketing strategies. In particular, we found that luxury goods shoppers highly value hospitality and service at stores and that they learn and use 'fond memories' of past purchases that relate to their own (ascertained from talking and exchanging with others in a social context) to inform their own purchase decisions. These findings should be considered when designing companies' marketing strategies, maintaining and improving the quality of hospitality services, and proposing stimulus packages such as the provision of opportunities for peers to share memories and experiences.

**Originality/value:** This is the first study to attempt and propose the use of a social learning theory perspective as an extension of the overall approach to luxury consumption. This theoretical suggestion will enhance the academic debate in this area and contribute to the design of effective marketing strategies in the field of study.

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Corresponding author: 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2024

Email addresses for the corresponding author: 12<sup>th</sup> of May 2024

The first submission received: 6<sup>th</sup> of October 2024

Revised submission received:

Accepted:

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## Introduction and Background

### Background of the Study

### Research Gap

Luxury shopping has been analysed and investigated based on luxury value perceptions, and various analytical models have been proposed. Researchers have discussed and presented analytical platforms for consumer behaviour in the context of shopping environments; these platforms include the 'servicescape', 'brandscape' and 'hospitality' (e.g. Chang 2016; Dedeoglu et al., 2018; Pizam & Tasci, 2019). However,

because the consumption of luxury, unlike the purchase of everyday goods, involves large expenditures, as well as the fact that the ownership of luxurious goods creates social implications, any analysis of the antecedents of purchasing behaviours requires a new analytical perspective that takes into account the changing times and contemporary context. Therefore, from this perspective, this study will organise the issues required to perform a new analysis with the aid of social cognitive theory; these issues include the recognition through interactions with peers and decision-making through these interactions.

## Literature Review

### *Theoretical Discussions of Luxury Consumption*

Various views on luxury goods exist among different disciplines (Kaolawanich et al. 2020). Phau and Prendergast (2000) stated that the meaning of luxury goods is subjective and depends on an individual's relationship with others (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). While one person may define a commodity as a luxury good, it may be an ordinary commodity to others (Hauck & Stanforth 2007), and furthermore, the meaning of luxury goods may vary from society to society (Kemp 1998). Vigneron and Johnson (1999), the gold standard of research in this area, stated that customers' perceptions of luxury goods are influenced by a variety of factors, including object characteristics (e.g. top-quality goods), hedonic value (e.g. sensory beauty) and interaction with others (e.g. admiration and peer reference groups). Vigneron and Johnson (1999) focused on the perceived value of luxury goods, such as perceived pleasure value, perceived quality value and perceived social value. However, as Vickers and Renand (2003) said, when considering luxury purchasing behaviours, attention should be paid to the function of luxury goods as symbols of social identity and personal self-expression. Vickers and Renand (2003) also suggested that research into luxury goods purchasing decisions should be based on the hypothesis that customers acquire both internal experiential value and external social status when they purchase luxury goods.

While it is essential that research on luxury purchasing behaviours take into account consumers' values, motivations and purchase intentions (Nwankwo et al., 2014; Tsai, 2005), most previous studies have focused on consumers' perspectives of luxury goods; the context and overall dynamics influencing how consumers purchase luxury goods in their environment have not been adequately examined.

### *Consumption through Interactions with Others: Applicability of Social Learning Theory to Luxury Consumption*

Luxury goods function as symbols that express social class through their craftsmanship and scarcity (Becker et al., 2018; Okonkwo, 2009). People with high disposable incomes are said to differentiate themselves from others by associating themselves with fashion luxury, and the purchase and ownership of fashion luxury goods socially transmit the status that is reflected by valuable material possessions, from which they derive self-gratification (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). Das and Jebarajakirthy (2020) analysed Western fashion luxury consumption from a perspective of social cognitive perspectives.

Social cognitive theory, developed by Bandura (1986), may provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the relevance of the decisions behind luxury purchasing behaviours, which is the main topic of this study (Das & Jebarajakirthy, 2020). Social cognitive theory is a useful framework for understanding how people acquire and maintain behaviours (Bandura, 2009). This theory states that people acquire behaviours through the social learning that occurs when interacting with others and the environment (Bandura, 1986). Based on this theory, we focus on the potential for luxury goods to alter the perceptions of luxury goods and to influence purchasing behaviours through interactions with other buyers and with past memories, based on the key factors by which luxury goods are perceived by buyers.

### *Consumers' Perceptions towards Luxury Goods*

Vickers and Renand (2003) stated that, while non-luxury goods prioritise functional aspects, luxury goods are characterised by symbolic interaction and focus on those aspects of the product that are most highly individual and socially identifiable; for example, luxury goods have a higher ratio of intangible and situational utility to price (Nueno & Quelch, 1998). In the following section, based on the literature review, we take luxury goods as an example and identify consumer perceptions of a) individual value, b) social value and c) experiential value.

### *Individual Value*

D'Astous and Ahmed (1999) emphasised how the perceived value of luxury goods, as enhancing one's status and image, reproduces stereotypes. The level of the prestige conferred by the purchase of luxury goods is related to the purchaser's social status (Eastman et al., 1999). In other words, consumers may confirm their own status through the process by which they purchase luxury goods, which they do to enhance their own status. It can be argued that by purchasing luxury goods, buyers confirm their 'self-identity' and the self that deserves to have them.

Vigneron and Johnson (1999) explained that customers focus on perceived hedonic value by purchasing luxury goods to satisfy their desire for intangible benefits such as sensory satisfaction and aesthetic appeal. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) argued that luxury goods are supremely hedonic and elicit emotional and sensory experiences, such as aesthetics, fantasy, enjoyment and sensual pleasure, in purchasing customers (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000). When people make conspicuous purchases of luxury goods, they are sending a signal of status to others in society (Veblen, 1912); that is, within the framework of individual value, consumers constitute two subfactors: self-identity and hedonic value.

### *Social Value*

According to Vigneron and Johnson (1999), consumers who belong to the prestige group purchase luxury goods to differentiate themselves from the non-prestige group; in other words, prestige-group customers try to gain recognition from others by purchasing luxury goods. D'Astous and Ahmed (1999) emphasised that the purchase of luxury goods enhances one's status and that the prestigious value of luxury goods is associated with the social status of the buyer (Eastman et al. 1999).

According to Hofstede (1980), Japan is culturally a collectivist society, and having the same approach to luxury goods as family and friends may give consumers collectivist values, increase their attachment to the group they belong to and make them feel safer and more comfortable (Sun et al., 2004). Zici, et al. (2021) compared individualism-collectivism in luxury purchase intentions, while Pillai and Nair (2021) compared the sources of luxury purchase behaviours from a similar perspective.

The show-off factor in luxury goods research has always been firmly established as an important factor in purchasing decisions (Oe et al., 2022). Kumar et al. (2022) examined the consequences and mediating effects of prior factors on conspicuous consumption, while Sedikides and Hart (2022) focused on the narcissism brought about by the purchase of luxury goods and discussed the relationship between such tendencies and conspicuous consumption. Based on the perspective of the previous literature review, this study will use the three components of 'social value' – prestige, collectivism and conspicuous value – as guidance for the analysis.

### **Research Questions**

Based on Hennigs et al. (2012) and in light of the above discussion, the conceptual research questions of this study are summarized below.

RQ1: The perceived value of consumer luxuries can be classified into complex clusters.

RQ2: The perceived value of consumer luxuries can vary depending on consumer interactions.

RQ3: The perceived value of consumer luxuries is constructed through cognition in consumers' social interactions.

### **Methodology**

#### ***Data Collection and Samples***

This study aims to explore, identify and clarify key dimensions of Japanese consumers' luxury value perception and to develop and propose a conceptual model that will explain these consumers' key perceived luxury values. In doing so, it will analyse a new paradigm for Japanese consumers' perceptions of luxury purchases (Muret, 2018).

To achieve research objectives, it is necessary to select participants who are close to and experienced and knowledgeable about the topics in question. This study employs a purposive approach to sample collection. Purposive sampling is very useful in qualitative research and is one of the most cost- and time-effective sampling techniques (Van Haute, 2021). The participants range in age from 31–48 years old, and all of them have purchased luxury goods and have been using them in their daily lives. The study used an

in-depth interview method to collect primary data and text-mine participants' thoughts and feelings. The qualitative research approach adopted by this study attempts to examine and explain the fundamental significance that individuals ascribe to social phenomena (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative approaches are often preferred when analysing human judgments and behaviours as this study aims to do (Lehnert et al., 2016); that is, these methods are used to analyse human opinions, attitudes, views, beliefs and preferences.

### *Semi-Structured Questionnaire Design and Analysis*

The inductive thematic approach treats participants' perceptions, feelings and experiences as the paramount object of a study (Saldaña, 2021). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis, we first transcribed the recorded data into written form. Through this process, we were made familiar with the contents of the primary data collected from the focus group and interviews and could use it to identify explicit patterns. We then moved to the second step: generating an initial list of recurring elements in participants' comments and designating them as the most significant codes. In this study, 'quality', 'price' and 'friends' were identified as significant terms; this was expected, based on previous academic discussion, although there were some unexpected words that were coded for the further analysis of perceived value structures. The coding process enabled us to construct a holistic impression of Japanese consumers' perceptions of luxury values and to identify potential analytical themes.

Two text-mining software applications (SPSS Text Analytics version 4.0.1 and NVivo Pro version 12) were used to reveal broader patterns in the raw data and enabled us to investigate the relationships and combine the resulting codes into overarching research questions. As a thematic analysis procedure, some word trees were also created and analysed; these indicated the real image of luxury values embedded in the Japanese consumers' perceptions. The themes arising from the literature were then presented, providing meaningful contributions to an understanding of current perceptions among Japanese consumers. The results of this study presented some unexpected findings that made interesting departures from previous academic discussions. With support from the analytical software, we broke down the relevant data into distinct units of meaning before labelling them to create critical themes and further processes.

## **Findings and Analysis**

### *Overall Outcome of the Text Mining*

Interviews with the 24 collaborators were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere and through dialogue with the authors. The interviews followed a semi-structured questionnaire that covered issues raised by previous studies. By doing so, we ensured a logical flow of conversation around the topic area and allowed the participants to speak and feel comfortable enough to offer their opinions and experiences.

Figure 1 is a co-occurrence map of the key words in the statements; here, three potential concepts – the 'functional value', 'personal value' and 'social value' were developed according to their associated words. In addition to these words, the figure indicates a nostalgic look back at past shopping experiences on a particular high-end street; this finding was called the 'Ginza value' ('experiential value').

Figure 1: Co-occurrence map of text.

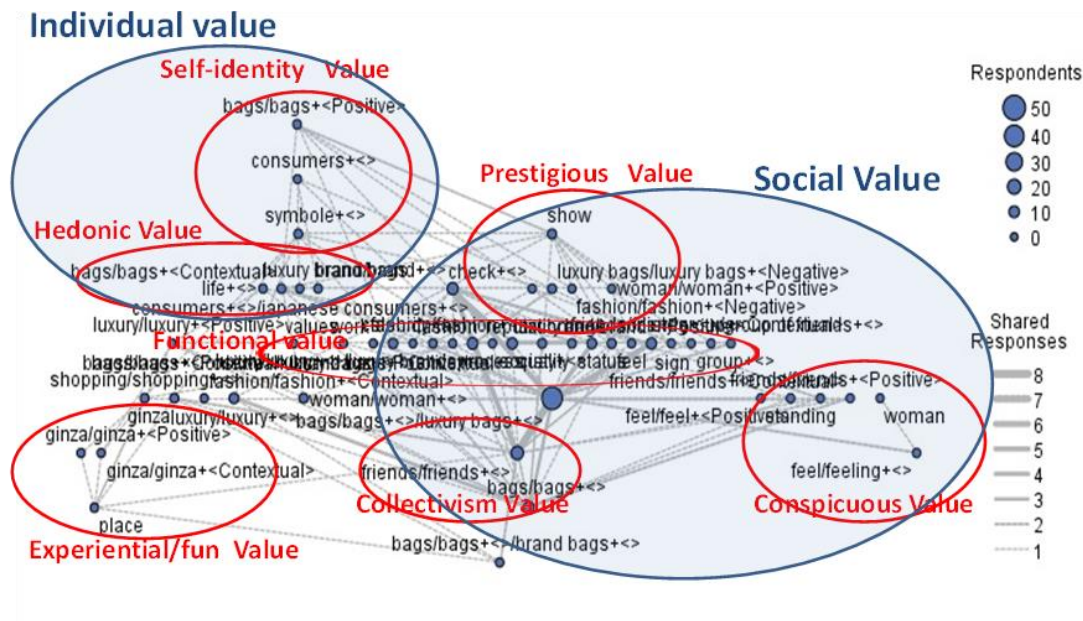


Figure 2 is a two-dimensional map generated from the resulting text. It is intended to provide an overall overview of the tendency of words in an utterance to appear in the same place. In other words, in this map, words that are close to each other tend to appear in the same place (that is, words with similar word occurrence tendencies are placed closer together and words that are not similar are placed further apart). The t-SNE method is used to determine the position in the two-dimensional coordinate system, while the two-dimensional map represents the relative distance between words. In this map, words near each other have a similar tendency to appear, while words far away from each other have a less similar tendency to appear.

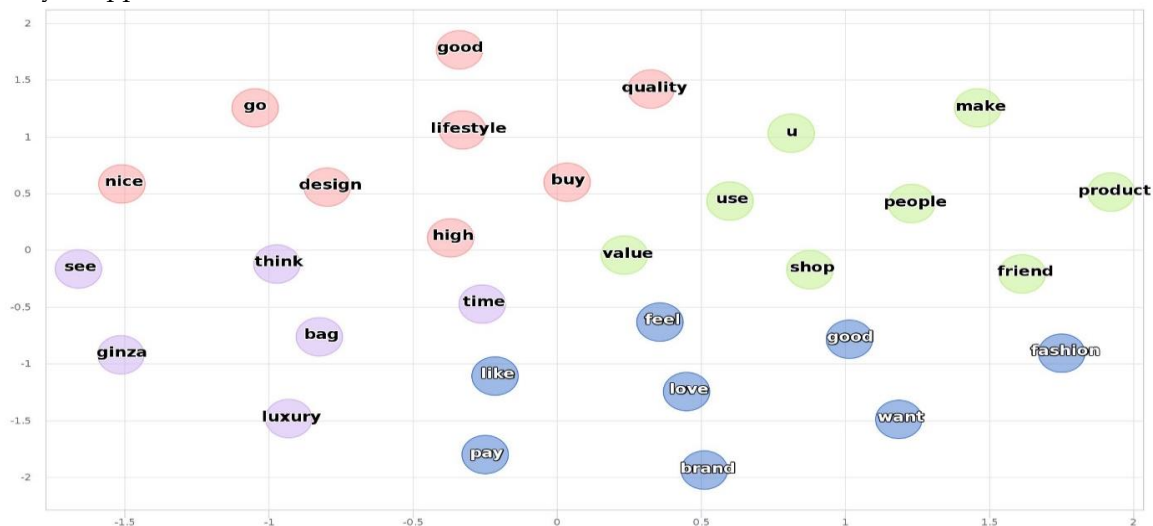


Figure 2: A two-dimensional map.

*Individual Value*

Next, we observe ‘individual value’, which is constructed through self-identity and hedonic factors. The statements imply that consumers do not necessarily perceive the self-identity value, but they seem to evaluate their past experiences of purchasing luxury bags as happy memories.

*I like to have a luxury bag, as it can make me more confident. (A, 45 years old)*

*Maybe having luxury bags enhances our self-identity; we also feel secure if we have the same brand of bags as our close friends. (D, 41 years old)*

*'To be honest, I really enjoy shopping for luxury things; the process of buying them made me so happy. (E, 49 years old).*

### **Social Value**

Social value means that we obtain relevant statements relating to prestige, collectivism and conspicuous factors. Unexpectedly, we also observed that the participants felt comfortable; this is shown in the word tree as the 'cognitivism' value.

*It was nice for me to have the same brand bag as my closest friend; sometimes we bought from the same line but in different colours. (B, 48 years old)*

*Actually, it was such a prestigious moment for me to shop in the high street and buy a bag from a luxury brand. I really enjoyed the moment of purchase; I felt happy, not only for owning the bag I bought, but also for the fact I was shopping for it. The latter is more valuable to me. (B, 48 years old)*

*Walking with a certain brand of bag; a confident moment, indeed! (C, 41 years old)*

*To have the same brand of bag as my close friends makes me feel comfortable. (F, 49 years old)*

Interestingly, the informants did not show any positive statements relating to the conspicuous factor.

*I sometimes hide my luxury bag from others' view, but I can use it and share the fact of owning it with my close friends. (B, 48 years old)*

*We feel a little bit reserved and don't show our luxury stuff to others; we don't want to be seen to be 'too posh' as the owners of luxury bags. (C, 41 years old)*

*It is nice to emphasise the wealth enabling me to purchase these expensive things; we have a nice and polite culture, don't we? (D, 41 years old)*

*That was my learning process: I bought luxury bags just because I wanted to appear trendy to others, posh, rich enough, earning a reasonable amount and having reached a fairly good position in society. [I bought them] as a present for myself, as I'm working hard... but now, when I think of my shopping experiences back then – well, anyway, it was a good buy, but... I don't know. My expensive bags are my treasures, but... (A, 45 years old)*

### **Experiential Value (Revealed from Primary Data)**

Another value that was commonly stated by the participants was the past experiential value of shopping for luxury goods. This value should be noted as the 'Ginza-related value'. Ginza is one of the biggest Tokyo high streets; it is well known as the place to shop for top brands.

*I still clearly remember the day when I bought my luxury bag – I can even remember the smell of the street! (C, 41 years old)*

*I cannot forget our memorable, enjoyable shopping experience in Ginza. What a brilliant moment for us! (F, 49 years old)*

*Ginza, yes, it had to be Ginza. Omotesando is also a nice area for shopping, but the special venue where we go to enjoy shopping for luxury things has to be Ginza! (B, 48 years old)*

*Stepping into a luxury atmosphere, served by the shop staff in black suits – just that air in the gorgeous shop had priceless value to me. (E, 49 years old)*

### **Word Trees and Conceptual Model**

As shown in Figure 3, we focused on seven words, namely lifestyle, society, enjoyable, vogue established; Ginza and design. Below, we describe how each word constructs a 'fond memories' in people's minds. It is the experience in the individual's life, i.e. the 'special feeling' created by talking and exchanging information with others in a social context.

With regard to lifestyle, the value of the product has the effect of stimulating one's own sense of taste. With regard to society, the high-status and success of fellow owners of the same products is a positive effect. With regard to enjoyability, the shop's sense of luxury and the excellent customer service of its staff can uplift one's life. With regard to value, the design and functionality of the product has the effect of elevating oneself. With regard to Establish, it brings a sense of confidence and happiness as a woman. With regard to GINZA, the luxury and history of the location makes it different from purchases elsewhere

and brings prestige. Finally, as far as design is concerned, the products' top quality and aesthetic functionality have the effect of making one look polished and more beautiful.

What these seven words mean is the following. Buying a brand-name product of the highest quality and functional beauty in the special place called GINZA is a truly special purchase that contains the story of one's accumulated life.

As shown in Figure 3, attention was focused on seven words: "Lifestyle," "Society," "Enjoyable," "Value," "Established," "Ginza," and "Design." Below, we explain how each of these words builds "nostalgic memories" in people's hearts. In a social context, a "special feeling" is born through conversations with others and the exchange of information, which are experiences in one's personal life.

Regarding lifestyle, the value of a product stimulates one's sense of style. Concerning society, the high status and success of peers who own the same product have a positive effect. As for enjoyment, the luxury atmosphere of the store and the excellent service of the staff elevate one's life. Regarding value, the design and functionality of the product enhance oneself. For establishment, it brings confidence and happiness as a woman. Concerning Ginza, the luxury and history of the place bring a prestige different from purchasing elsewhere. Lastly, concerning design, the highest quality and aesthetic functionality of the product have the effect of refining and beautifying oneself.

What these seven words represent is that purchasing branded goods with the highest quality and aesthetic beauty in a special place like Ginza is truly a special shopping experience that encompasses the story of one's life journey.

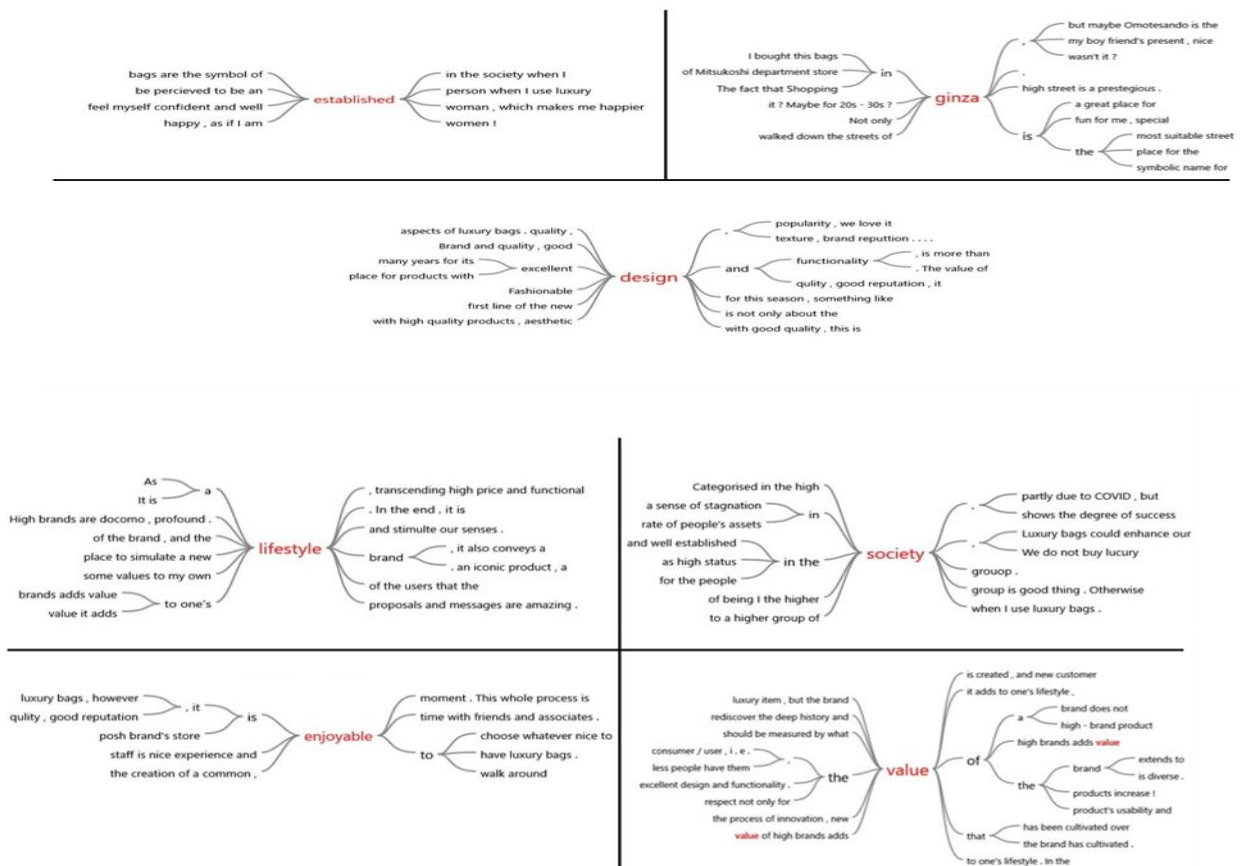


Figure 3: Word trees

## Discussion

### *Overall Discussion*

The two cognitive maps (Figures 1 and 2) show that functional and personal values are clearly recognised as statements about luxury goods. In regard to social value structure, the participants strongly valued prestige and collectivist values; however, their attitude toward luxury goods was less pronounced. The hedonic component of the personal value category is integrated with the perception that the consumers have made 'happy purchases' in the past. In this sense, the consumers' hedonic values are not only derived from the products they purchased, but also from their memories of purchasing the luxury goods and their subsequent experiences of using them.

We found that Japanese consumers perceive the value of luxury goods as being strongly linked to their memories and experiences of shopping; in parallel, each person's sense of value is confirmed as their own memory through their interaction with and reflection of others. This follows social learning theory, as discussed in the previous section. The results also suggest that personal value can be broken down into hedonic and self-identity elements (Figure 1); however, a more multifaceted study, including a time-series analysis, would be needed to determine how relationships with others affect people's perceptions of luxury goods.

Another interesting aspect is the emergence of collectivist and 'showing-off' elements. Rather than flaunting their differences from others, the participants seem to feel more comfortable if they see themselves as being the same and owning the same things as their close friends. In other words, while they appreciate the value of 'having the same brand as their friends' and recognise the value of collectivism, they do not seek a conspicuousness factor.

A more distinctive finding is the emergence of experiential value as a new cluster. As the cognitive map indicates, the distance between personal and social values show that participants clearly recognised the experience of being in the store where they purchased the luxury item, the thrill of the purchase, the atmosphere of the store's space and the experience of value that transcended the servicescape. All these were etched in their memories, forming a distinct aspect of their behaviour when making the luxury purchase. They recognised the value of the experience of purchasing the luxury item as a distinct aspect of their behaviour in this regard.

### *Answers to the Research Questions and New Insights: Social Cognitive Theory and Perceptions of Luxury*

In order to understand the dynamics of consumer behaviour regarding luxury goods, it is essential to delve into the conceptual framework provided by social cognitive theory. This theory offers a lens through which we can examine consumers' perceptions of value and how these perceptions evolve over time. Central to this analysis are the concepts of core beliefs and mediating beliefs, which together shape individuals' responses to luxury products. Core beliefs, deeply ingrained in the psyche from early experiences, form the foundation of one's cognitive framework. However, it is the mediating beliefs – those influenced by automatic thoughts and immediate impressions – that exert a significant influence on consumer behaviour in the context of luxury goods. By exploring these cognitive processes, we can gain insights into the complex interplay between individual beliefs and consumer choices.

In the consciousness of Japanese consumers of luxury goods, factors such as social value and personal value are not the sole determinants of behaviour. Emerging prominently are the sentiments towards luxury goods born from past experiential value and interpersonal relationships. These factors play a pivotal role in shaping consumer behaviour, often influencing decisions beyond mere material considerations. As such, understanding the multifaceted nature of luxury consumption among Japanese consumers requires a nuanced examination of these underlying motivations and emotional connections.

Within the realm of luxury consumption among Japanese consumers, the principles of social cognitive theory offer valuable insights into the underlying motivations and determinants of behaviour. In addition to the concepts of social value and personal value, which are central to this theory, the influence of past experiential value and interpersonal relationships on attitudes towards luxury goods becomes apparent. As shown in Figure 4, Social cognitive theory posits that individuals' behaviours are not only shaped by their immediate environment and personal beliefs but are also influenced by past experiences



and social interactions. Therefore, in the context of luxury consumption, the interplay between these various factors underscores the complexity of consumer decision-making. Understanding how past experiences and interpersonal relationships contribute to perceptions of luxury goods allows for a more comprehensive analysis of consumer behaviour in the Japanese market.

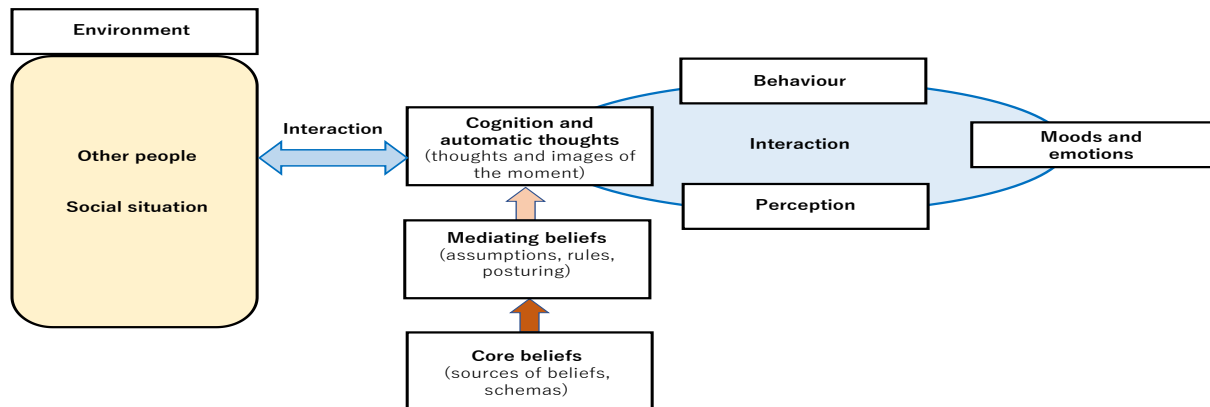


Figure 4: New insights: social cognitive theory and perceptions of luxury

This study indicates that, based on a cognitive-behavioural perspective, the three components of cognition (automatic thoughts, mediating beliefs and core beliefs) described above can be used to form a basic model made up of environment, behaviour, cognition, emotion and action.

## Conclusions

This study focused on luxury consumption behaviour from the perspective of social cognitive theory, investigating the influence of past experiences, nostalgia, and interactions with others on purchasing behaviour. Employing a unique analytical framework, it revealed how consumers recognize the value of luxury goods and the impact of positive past experiences and nostalgia on their purchasing decisions. Furthermore, it demonstrated how learning from others reaffirms the value of luxury goods in a social context, influencing purchasing intentions. By incorporating a social learning theory perspective into the study of luxury consumption, this research not only contributes to expanding academic discourse but also offers valuable insights for the development of effective marketing strategies and a deeper understanding of consumer behaviour.

## Theoretical Contributions

Salsberg (2009) elucidated the significant and enduring shifts in attitudes and behaviours among Japanese luxury goods consumers, which serve to diminish the long-standing influence of 'the brand as badge'. In light of these findings, this study underscores the pertinence of integrating principles from Social Cognitive theory to deepen our understanding of consumer behaviour in the luxury goods market. By employing the framework provided by Social Cognitive theory, which emphasizes the role of cognitive processes, observational learning, and social interactions in shaping behaviour, we can shed light on the nuanced motivations underlying consumers' perceptions and preferences for luxury goods.

Moreover, this study advances the discourse by proposing a more tailored and personalized approach to marketing strategies, informed by the principles of Social Cognitive theory. By recognizing the importance of individual beliefs, past experiences, and social influences in consumer decision-making processes, luxury goods companies can develop more effective and resonant marketing campaigns. This approach not only acknowledges the complexities of consumer behaviour but also reflects a forward-thinking perspective in adapting to the evolving landscape of the luxury goods market, particularly in the aftermath of economic crises and shifting societal values.

Thus, this study contributes to the literature by integrating insights from Social Cognitive theory with empirical findings from focus group discussions, thereby offering a novel perspective on consumer behaviour in the luxury goods market. By embracing the multifaceted nature of consumer decision-

making and leveraging principles from Social Cognitive theory, this study paves the way for innovative and tailored marketing strategies that are better attuned to the needs and preferences of luxury goods consumers.

### Limitations and Further Research Opportunities

We acknowledge conducting focus group discussions targeting women in their 40s. This demographic includes participants from the "bubble generation," who benefited from the bubble economy in their late twenties, potentially influencing their perceptions and behaviours towards luxury goods. Additionally, we recognize that this generation constitutes a core target audience for luxury goods consumers.

However, we also acknowledge the limitations of focusing solely on a specific generation. Conducting research targeting participants from different age groups and demographics allows for a more comprehensive understanding of consumer perceptions and behaviours based on Social Cognitive Theory. According to this theory, individual behaviours are influenced not only by environmental factors and personal beliefs but also by past experiences and social interactions.

As for future research directions, there may be opportunities to compare perceptions and values of luxury goods among consumers of different generations through quantitative analysis. Furthermore, leveraging the framework of Social Cognitive Theory, it is essential to conduct more detailed investigations into the role of social factors in consumer behaviours and decision-making processes across different generations. This will enable us to develop more effective marketing strategies for consumers of different generations and gain insights to adapt to the changing market environment.

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