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The Impact of Materialistic Values on Thai Consumers' Brand Engagement in Self-Concept for Luxury Products

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S. Terason¹, P. Pattanayanon², C. Lin³

Abstract:

Purpose: The present study was designed to determine whether brand engagement in self-concept was a function of materialistic values (social recognition, appealing appearance, financial success, defining success, acquisition centrality, pursuit of happiness) among Thai consumers of luxury goods.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The participants were selected using multistage sampling on the basis of their shopping experience for luxury items. Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the best linear combination of materialistic values that could predict brand engagement in self-concept.

Findings: Appealing appearance, acquisition centrality, social recognition and defining success formed the significant variate that predicted brand engagement in self-concept.

Practical Implications: Taken together, these findings support strong recommendations to marketing managers of luxury products on how to tap into consumers' values in order to market a luxury brand.

Originality/Value: The study addresses the symbolic value of luxury brands and how such brands and their brand images interact with how consumers view their own identities.

Keywords: brand engagement in self-concept, social recognition, appealing appearance, financial success, defining success, acquisition centrality, pursuit of happiness

JEL codes: M31, M37.

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¹Assoc. Prof., DBA, Kasetsart University, Thailand, fssid@ku.ac.th

²Lecturer, DBA, Mahidol University, Thailand.

³Asst. Prof., DBA, National Kaohsiung University of Hospitality and Tourism, Taiwan.

1. Introduction

Disposable personal income in Thailand was reported to increase to \$261,656 million in 2017 from \$249,451 million in 2016. It was reported the amount of money that an average Thai household has available for spending and saving after income taxes averaged \$139,948 million from 1990 to 2017, reaching an all-time high of \$261,656 million in 2017 and a record low of \$45,501 million in 1990 (Oxford Business Group, 2019). It is believed that materialistic values among Thai consumers have tended to increase over time. Similar to many other developing markets across Asia, Thailand has relatively young, affluent, middle and upper class consumers, who provide a large target market for luxury goods. As of 2017, the 30-34 year-old age group constituted the largest share of the Thai population (20.5%) earning an annual gross income of \$150,000 or more, while the 35-39 year-old age group accounted for 18.6% (Oxford Business Group, 2018).

The increasing adoption rate of smartphones reflects the trend for luxury products acquisition. Statista (2019) reported that the number of smartphone users in Thailand increased from 2013 to 2018. In 2017, the number of users was estimated to be 24.14 million. According to the January 2019 survey by the National Statistical Office of Thailand, more than 90 percent of Internet users in the country go online via a smartphone, an exceedingly higher rate than via any other device. Some asserted that individuals with materialistic values tend to prioritize asset acquisitions and displaying their acquired objects (e.g., Osmonbekov, Gregory, Brown, & Xie, 2009; Roberts, 2011).

Many have investigated the unfavorable effects of materialistic values. For example, Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) advocated that materialistic individuals placed greater importance on product over experience. A large portion of time and energy was dedicated to acquiring, possessing and thinking about material things (Roberts, 2011). Life for those people was about striving, about reaching for those items and activities which they desired (Sheldon & Kasser, 2008). Furthermore, materialistic individuals usually had poor interpersonal relationships with other people and exhibited selfish behavior (Kasser, 2005). They cared more about themselves than other people, including family members or religion (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2011). In the extreme, materialistic values could cause a variety of mental health problems such as anxiety and depression; the more materialistic that some people were, the less satisfied and less happy they became.

In the marketing context, materialistic values, nevertheless, leads to some positive consequences, as it enhances brand engagement (Goldsmith, Leisa, & Ronald, 2011). Instead of investigating brand engagement as a generic construct, this study focuses on brand engagement in self-concept, an emerging marketing concept advocated in branding literature. It is recommended further research should tap into brand engagement in self-concept by using brands to capture and form consumer self-concept and self-identity (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2011).

Materialism is a concept that plays an important role in consumer behavior literature. Past researchers have investigated the connection of materialism to a very wide variety of normal and abnormal consumer traits and behaviors, ranging from obvious constructs such as overspending (Watson, 2003) and status consumption (Goldsmith, Flynn, & Clark, 2012a). By and large, materialism is worthy of close study for both theoretical and practical reasons.

In marketing, there is a need to study the motivations of consumers in the marketplace, in order to understand how those motivations play out and how marketers can appeal to their target market. In psychology, it has been indicated that materialistic values were correlated with compulsive buying and hoarding behavior (Frost, Kyrios, McCarthy, & Matthews, 2007) and low levels of happiness and satisfaction (Millar & Thomas, 2009; Wright & Larsen, 1993). Materialism is particularly important in marketing because it has been shown to influence important and valuable consumer constructs such as attitudes to advertising (Osmonbekov *et al.*, 2009), motivation for shopping (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2011) and innovativeness, status consumption and brand engagement with self-concept (Goldsmith, Flynn, & Clark, 2012b).

Research into the psychology of consumers has focused on antecedents and on the consequences of materialistic value. From a psychological perspective, Kasser (2002) suggested that two main reasons why individuals endorsed materialistic values were: (1) social modeling and (2) lack of fulfillment of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence, which resulted in a state of insecurity. Through the socialization process, materialistic values were acquired from their modeling behaviors from surrounding people such as parents or friends. However, some individuals who adopted materialistic values might simply be in a state of insecurity—materialistic values could make them feel better under such circumstances. Festinger (1954) asserted that consumers tended to compare themselves with others regarding opinions, abilities and material possessions. Material possessions were used to communicate people's social standing in relation to others (Saunders, 2001). People normally paid close attention to social status and rank (Hill & Buss, 2008); thus, it follows that if material possessions are reliable indicators of social rank, then individuals would tend to compare what they had in relation to others.

Social comparisons have been shown to have a positive effect on materialism. Duesenberry (1967) investigated how individuals compared their consumption habits with others. What was considered desirable by consumers was not only a function of the intrinsic attributes of a material possession or a reflection of one's true preferences, but also a function of what significant and similar items others possessed. Social comparisons were a potential source of consumer information. Furthermore, self-determination theory suggested that people shared a number of psychological needs that should be satisfied for optimal functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2002). One of those major needs was the need for autonomy, which was found to be

an antecedent of material values (Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2004). Specifically, the theory of material values suggested that when individuals felt that they did not have an environment supportive of their autonomy, they might orient toward material values as a compensation (Kasser, 2002). Consequently, low levels of support for autonomy are likely to increase the adoption of material values.

Individual differences in the endorsement of materialism were expected to lead to different degrees of cognitive, affective and behavioral outcomes (Kasser, 2002). For example, materialistic values affected the way individuals related to possessions, work and their spending on themselves and friends (Deckop, Jurkiewicz, & Giancalone, 2010; Roberts, 2011). Among the different outcomes that materialism was likely to influence, consumers' subjective well-being was particularly relevant. Researchers have suggested that subjective well-being has three components: cognitive assessment of life satisfaction, positive effects and negative effects (Diener, 1984). Across different investigations, materialism seemed to exert a negative effect on subjective well-being (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Dittmar, Bond, Hurst, & Kasser, 2014).

William James (2017), a most prominent scholar in the subject of self-concept, stated that "*in its widest possible sense ... a man's Me is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank account*" (p. 177). Therefore, apart from a person's physical and psychological characteristics, many objects could become elements of self-concept. His extended-self theory was expanded into the field of consumer behavior by Belk (2008) who analyzed the effects of self based on the objects people surrounded themselves with. Subsequently, researchers focused on product brands and their relations with the self (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Escalas, 2004). Studies on the generally understood issue of consumer-brand relationships, which included the issue of brand engagement in self-concept, followed (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015).

Brand engagement in self-concept was defined as "an individual difference measure representing consumers' propensities to include important brands as a part of how they view themselves" (Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009, p. 92). The concept and its measure came from research showing how people used brands as representations and extensions of their self-image (Fournier 1998)—consumers used brands not only to express their self-concepts but also to form their self-identity. Through responses to continuous advertising and from brand experience, consumers formed a bond with what then became "their brand" (Sprott *et al.*, 2009). Brand engagement in self-concept is an aspect of customer engagement which becomes the basis of relationship marketing.

Brand engagement in self-concept also drives brand loyalty (Hollebeek, 2011). Sprott *et al.* (2009) conceptualized brand engagement as a tendency in which consumers used brands as badges and embodiments of their own self-image. This is

important to companies commercializing branded merchandise. In fact, there are many constructs that were developed to explain the relationship between the self and brands. The best known constructs include: self-brand connections (Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2003), brand attachment (Whan, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010), consumer-brand identification (Lam, Ahearne, Mullins, Hayati, & Schillewaert, 2013; Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012) and customer brand engagement (Hollebeek, 2011).

The relationships between the self and particular brands of products have been explored and brand engagement in self-concept has been developed globally. According to the concept, product brands might provide consumers with certain self-schemata (structures of self-knowledge) and individuals might differ in this regard. The novelty of this concept lies in its focus on describing human predisposition to include important brands as part of self-concept. Brand engagement with self-concept has been found to be closely correlated with materialism (Spratt *et al.*, 2009; Goldsmith *et al.*, 2012a).

In essence, the current investigation was built on what was done by Fedeh and Taghipourian (2016) who discovered a significant relationship between the luxuriousness of a product and the decision to buy, as well as the interest of a consumer in a certain product as a result of brand engagement. From a different perspective, this study aimed to investigate how materialistic values contribute to brand engagement in self-concept when a consumer purchases luxury products. This was a response to the call for work examining the relationship between materialistic values and brand engagement in self-concept in the context of purchasing luxury products. Thus, the hypothesis is that all materialistic values significantly contribute to the prediction of brand engagement in self-concept on purchases of luxury products.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants ($N = 467$) in this study consisted of males (32%, $n = 149$) and females (68%, $n = 318$). They were aged 18 to 59 years. Most of them (53%) were aged 18–30 years; the least number were in the 41–50 year-old group (6%). The participants held various occupations: private company employees (49%), government employees (15%), business owners (20%), and others (16%). The largest average monthly earnings by group was \$1,501–\$1,900 (48%), followed by \$1,901 or more (34%) and \$950–\$1,500 (18%), respectively.

Eligibility criteria required individuals to have made at least three purchases of luxury goods that cost no less than \$1,000 per item during the last 12 months. The participants were randomly selected from a pool of luxury products customers at major stores in metropolitan areas in Thailand using multistage sampling. The participation was voluntary with no incentives offered. A cover letter was provided

explicitly stating that the participants were by no means under any duress to complete the questions, and that their responses would be kept confidential. An informed consent form was signed before the questionnaire was distributed and returned over a period of two months.

2.2 Measures

All of the scales used in the current study were adapted from prior studies. Validity in terms of content relevance and language accuracy was checked and established by five marketing experts and product managers for some luxury brands. The initial set of questions yielded scale-level content validity index (S-CVI) values of .87–.92, indicating satisfactory content validity of the questionnaire according to Shi, Mo, and Sun (2012) and Polit, Beck, and Owen (2007). After the first draft of the questionnaire had been completed, the authors conducted a test of internal consistency of the scales on 30 luxury items consumers. This test group had good internal consistency with mean inter-item correlations reported of .58–.87 (Brigg & Check, 1986).

The survey questionnaire entailed two parts: the personal data and the variables under study. The first part consisted of multiple-choice questions; questions in the second part utilized a 5-point summative rating scale that asked participants to rate how strongly they agreed with each statement with responses ranging from 1 (= *strongly disagree*) to 5 (= *strongly agree*). The brand engagement in self-concept scale was adapted from Sprott *et al.* (2009). The materialistic values scale was associated with different dimensions of materialism: social recognition, appealing appearance, financial success, defining success, acquisition centrality, and pursuit of happiness. The first three subscales were adapted from Kasser (2002) and the last three subscales were adapted from Richins and Dawson (1992). The example questions are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Selected Example Questionnaire Items for the Variables*

Variable	Selected example questionnaire items
Brand engagement	I have a special bond with the brands that I like. I consider my favorite brands to be a part of myself.
Social recognition	You will do something that brings you much recognition. Your name will be known to many people.
Appealing appearance	You will have successfully hidden the signs of aging. You will have people comment about your attractive look.
Financial success	You will have a job with high social status. You will have a job that pays well.
Defining success	I admire people owning expensive homes, cars, and clothes. Some of the crucial success include acquiring possessions.
Acquisition centrality	I usually buy only the things that I need. I try to keep my life simple in terms of possessions.
Pursuit of happiness	I have the things that I really need to enjoy life. My life would be better if I owned things that I do not have.

2.3 Analysis

Statistical significance was investigated using multiple regression analysis with the ordinary least squares estimation method in order to predict brand engagement in self-concept. The stepwise method of building a multiple regression equation was employed inasmuch as no a priori hypotheses were made regarding the order of entry of the predictor variables on purely statistical grounds (Myers, Gamst, & Guarino, 2017). By this method, one predictor is added at a time to the model and when the third predictor is added, the method invokes the right to remove a predictor if that predictor is not producing a significant result (Myers, Gamst, & Guarino, 2017).

3. Results

Multiple linear regression was used to determine the best linear combination of materialistic values for predicting brand engagement in self-concept. The assumptions of linearity, normally distributed errors and uncorrelated errors were checked. Pairwise linearity was deemed satisfactory. No univariate outliers were detected. All tolerance parameters were higher than 0.35, showing no sign of multicollinearity problems according to J. Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003).

Means and standard deviations as well as intercorrelations are presented in Table 2. As can be seen, the correlations between the six materialistic values dimensions and brand engagement in self-concept were all positive and ranged from .07 (defining success) to .65 (appealing appearance).

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations for Brand Engagement in Self-Concept and Materialistic Value Predictor Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
BESC	2.33	1.20	.16	.44	.34	.59	.09	.78
Predictor variables								
1. SR	2.84	0.78	–					
2. AA	3.23	0.66	.20	–				
3. FS	3.20	0.60	.09	.48	–			
4. DS	3.13	0.59	.07	.26	.41	–		
5. AC	3.34	0.51	.19	.12	.33	.32	–	
6. PH	3.28	0.55	.15	.31	.42	.37	.37	–

Note: BESC = Brand Engagement in Self-Concept; SR = Social Recognition; AP = Appealing Appearance; FS = Financial Success; DS = Defining Success; AC = Acquisition Centrality; PH = Pursuit of Happiness.

A multiple ordinary least squares regression analysis using the stepwise method was performed to generate a parsimonious prediction model. The final model contained four of the six predictors and was reached in four steps with two variables removed. This prediction model was statistically significant, $F(4, 462) = 5.33$, $p < .001$. It yielded the best linear combination of the four regressors consisting of appealing

appearance, acquisition centrality, social recognition and defining success significantly contributed to the prediction of brand engagement in self-concept. On the other hand, the other two predictors (financial success, pursuit of happiness) were excluded from the final model.

As can be seen in Table 3, Model 4 seemed to be the best fit model because it accounted for the most variance (65%) in brand engagement in self-concept ($R^2 = .65$, adjusted $R^2 = .64$). Table 3 also provides raw regression weights that inform how much a change in brand engagement in self-concept was associated with a unit difference in a predictor, given that all of the other explanatory variables were acting as covariates. Defining success received the strongest weight in the model ($\beta = .44$), followed by acquisition centrality ($\beta = .43$) and social recognition ($\beta = .35$); appealing appearance ($\beta = .23$) received the lowest of the four weights. The fitted regression equation for the model was Brand Engagement in Self-Concept = 13.48 + 0.41(Appealing Appearance) + 0.44(Acquisition Centrality) + 0.36(Social Recognition) + 0.55(Defining Success).

Table 3. Stepwise Regression Analysis Summary for Materialistic Value Variables Predicting Brand Engagement in Self-Concept

Step and predictor variable	B	SE B	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1:				.52***	
Appealing appearance	0.39	0.18	.17***		
Step 2:				.58**	.06*
Appealing appearance	0.33	0.18	.23**		
Acquisition centrality	0.43	0.18	.25***		
Step 3:				.60***	.02**
Appealing appearance	0.33	0.18	.21***		
Acquisition centrality	0.35	0.18	.32**		
Social recognition	0.76	0.16	.43**		
Step 4:				.65**	.05*
Appealing appearance	0.41	0.10	.23***		
Acquisition centrality	0.44	0.19	.35***		
Social recognition	0.36	0.11	.43***		
Defining success	0.55	0.15	.44**		

Note: ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

With the sizable correlations between the predictors, the unique variance explained by each of the predictors indexed by the squared semipartial correlations was relatively low. Specifically, appealing appearance ($sr^2 = .12$), acquisition centrality ($sr^2 = .09$), social recognition ($sr^2 = .07$), and defining success ($sr^2 = .11$), uniquely accounted for approximately 12%, 9%, 7%, and 11%, respectively, of the variance in brand engagement in self-concept.

Inspection of the structure coefficients suggested that social recognition (structure coefficient = .747) and defining success (structure coefficient = .787) correlated reasonably highly with the variate; in other words, they were strong indicators of

materialistic values. On the other hand, appealing appearance (structure coefficient = .587), correlated moderately with the variate and was a moderate indicator of materialistic values, while acquisition centrality (structure coefficient = .012) correlated least with the variate, and thus was deemed a poor indicator of materialistic values.

4. Discussion

This study set out to identify the materialistic values predictors and to assess their effect on brand engagement in self-concept when it came to purchases of luxury products. Among the six materialistic values, four (appealing appearance, acquisition centrality, social recognition, defining success) were significant predictors of brand engagement in self-concept, whereas the other two predictors (financial success and pursuit of happiness) were rejected based on statistical testings for incorporation into the final model. Though previous research (Kasser, 2002; Richins & Dawson, 1992), has shown that materialistic values were composed of six dimensions (social recognition, appealing appearance, financial success, defining success, acquiring centrality and pursuit of happiness), our study did not substantiate the entire set of variables in the hypothesis.

Acquisition centrality reflects that consumers of luxury products are mainly characterized by the acquisition of material possessions as a primary life goal; they believe that possessions are the key to happiness, and that success is judged by one's material wealth. Acquisition centrality is embedded in culture and is closely related to brand engagement in self-concept. The findings supported the concept advocated by Festinger (1954) who asserted that consumers tend to compare themselves with others in aspects of opinions, abilities and material possessions. People used those material possessions to communicate their own social standings to ascertain their social status (Saunders, 2001). In addition, these results corroborated the ideas of Hill and Buss (2008) which showed that people normally paid close attention to social status and rank. These factors explain why the acquisition centrality of material possessions plays a vital role in consumers expressing their own identities.

Appealing appearance is no doubt an important component of human interaction and the social benefits of an attractive appearance are commonly recognized. Characteristics associated with youth in this study are also considered as attractive. Though there is little evidence to suggest that physical attractiveness influences individuals' appraisal of themselves, it is clear that judgements made by other people about external appearance are of importance. Appealing appearance also is related to culture and brand engagement in self-concept. This is consistent with Liu, Shi, Wong, Hefel, and Chen (2010) who pointed out relationships among the physical attractiveness of female endorsers, endorser-product match-up and consumers' purchase intentions in a Chinese context. Their study indicated that female endorsers' attractiveness can affect consumers' purchase intentions more significantly than country of origin.

In fact, consumer self-image congruence and socially prescribed perfectionism have been advocated as antecedents to brand love and brand addiction in some research (e.g., Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Mrad & Cui, 2017). Research indicates how brand love leads to brand addiction and how brand addiction is conducive to positive effects on our attention to weight, body, and physical attractiveness (appearance esteem) and life happiness in general through consumption of fashion products (Goldsmith, Flynn, & Clark, 2012b; Goldsmith et al., 2011). The findings affirmed that actual self-image congruence influences consumers' brand love and addiction to particular brands, while ideal self-image congruence has a positive impact on brand love.

The current study's outcomes are consistent with Goldsmith *et al.* (2011) who found that social recognition, appealing appearance, financial success, defining success, acquisition centrality and pursuit of happiness all appeared to motivate shoppers to different degrees; their findings also demonstrated a positive relationship between brand engagement and shopping. It was very likely that Western cultural values were different from Eastern values, especially in terms of group orientation. Specifically, Western culture is more likely to be individualistic whereas Eastern culture is more collectivistic (Hofstede, 2002). People in collective cultures tend to emphasize the needs and goals of the group as a whole over the needs and desires of each individual. At the same time, they tend to get accepted by other members of the group by explicitly expressing their own identity.

However, Awanis, Schlegelmilch and Cui (2017) interpreted the way that people explicitly express their own identity through material or object possessions as self-prioritizing and that this behavior apparently opposed collective goals in favor of a lifestyle led by money, possessions and status. In fact, those consumers were not opposing the collective goals, but rather their personal goal was to mainly achieve equality within their social groups through material possession and expression.

Financial success and pursuit of happiness were not found to be significant regressors on brand engagement in self-concept due to their implicit characteristics of culture which involved unobservable behaviors, rituals or symbols (Kasser, Ryan, Couchman & Sheldon, 2004). Rather, the materialistic values which impacted brand engagement in self-concept were likely to have explicit characteristics based on culture. These included factors included appealing appearance and acquisition centrality.

Since the study was limited to purchases of luxury goods, it was not possible to generalize to other product categories. Thus, the present study has laid the groundwork for future research that might take into account a wider range of the symbolic value of non-luxury brands and how those brands and their brand images interact with how consumers view their own identities, and compare differences among consumers across cultures. In addition, further investigation might be conducted on particular luxury brands instead of on a product category. Finally,

these findings may help us to understand certain marketing insights for marketing managers in charge of a luxury brand.

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