

Exposure to Unattainable Luxury: Effects on Materialistic Goal Pursuit

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the influence of exposure to (unattainable) luxury on consumers' materialistic and extrinsic goal pursuit. We show that exposure to luxury may produce very different effects depending on whether a person feels that (s)he is able or unable to attain the depicted luxuries. Specifically, in three studies, we demonstrate that being able to attain the exposed luxuries increases levels of materialism. In contrast, viewing unattainable luxury may trigger self-protection mechanisms. In particular, after being exposed to unattainable luxuries, participants tended to devalue the importance they attached to materialistic (extrinsic) goals, due to decreased levels of self-esteem.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While research has examined consumers' motives to consume luxury products (e.g., Vigneron & Johnson, 2004; Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010), it is less clear how exposure to luxury influences their values and goals. Since luxury consumption is related to materialism (Belk & Pollay, 1985), it seems obvious to assume that exposure to luxury increases materialistic goal pursuit. Given that materialism may have a wide range of adverse effects (e.g., Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002), we consider the study of causes of materialism as highly important, especially in a society where ever more people are repeatedly confronted with luxury and images thereof.

One channel through which luxuries are continually promoted is advertising. Not surprisingly, advertising has often been criticized for spreading materialism (e.g., Pollay, 1986; Han & Shavitt, 2005). However, empirical evidence supporting these criticisms is lacking or not unequivocal (e.g., Phillips, 1997; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003). We propose that this might be due – at least in part – to the fact that the influence of exposure to images of luxury is much more complex than is usually assumed.

We hypothesize that the effect of exposure to luxury depends on whether an individual may or may not attain the depicted luxuries. Specifically, we propose that the pleasant experience of feeling able to afford luxuries may motivate consumers to strive for even more wealth and financial success (Vohs & Baumeister, 2008), in which case the exposure may indeed increase materialism. However, being exposed to luxuries that one cannot afford may produce an opposite effect. This would be consistent with previous research that has shown that people derive unpleasant feelings from the perception of being unable to achieve a desired outcome. To cope, consumers may devalue the unattainable goal (Baumgartner & Pieters, 2008); this would lead to decreased levels of materialism.

In sum, we suggest that exposure to luxury may produce very different outcomes depending on whether the luxury is attainable for a certain person or not. Contrary to the common assumption that exposure to luxury boosts materialism, we predict that, in the face of unattainable luxury, consumers may engage in self-protection and downplay the importance of luxury and materialistic pursuit.

In Study 1, 131 students were asked to either decorate a classy villa (highly expensive and thus unattainable luxury) versus a mainstream house. Specifically, they received a floor plan of a villa or house and sets of photos with possible interiors per room to choose from (luxurious or common interiors). To increase their involvement with the task, participants were instructed to choose their favorite interior for each room and place the pictures of their choice on the floor plan (see Appendix). Next, materialism (Richins & Dawson, 1992) was measured ($\alpha=.83$).

As intended, participants believed that residing the mainstream house would be significantly more attainable within ten years ($M=7.86$), than residing the villa ($M=4.48$) ($t(129)=-9.84, p<.001$). Most importantly, however, the importance of pursuing materialistic values was significantly lower after decorating the villa versus the mainstream house ($M_{villa}=2.83$ vs. $M_{mainstream}=3.05$; $F(1,129)=5.84, p=.017$).

Study 2 involved the same manipulation as Study 1 and additionally tested whether the pursuit of materialistic goals is altered if participants are encouraged (versus not) to imagine themselves owning the home they decorated¹. Previous research already found that positive thoughts evoked in such mental simulation task, may reduce other, more critical considerations about the exposure (Escalas, 2004). 152 students were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (type of home: expensive villa vs. mainstream house; simulation: imagination vs. no imagination). Subsequently, we measured materialism (Richins & Dawson, 1992, $\alpha=.83$), and extrinsic goal pursuit (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006, $\alpha=.82$), which is related to materialism (Kasser, 2002).

For both dependent variables, the type of home interacted significantly with simulation ($F_{materialism}(1,148)=5.70, p=.018$; $F_{extrinsic}(1,148)=8.77, p=.004$; see Figures 1 and 2). Consistent with Study 1, participants in the no imagination condition were significantly less materialistic after decorating the expensive villa versus the mainstream house ($p=.034$). However, imagining (versus not) owning the villa significantly increased materialistic values ($p=.029$). A similar data pattern was found for extrinsic goal pursuit.

These findings suggest that consumers try to cope with their inability to own the exposed luxuries by downplaying the importance of being financially successful. After all, participants only indicate to pursue less materialistic and extrinsic goals when being exposed to unattainable luxuries, not when the same luxuries seem less unattainable (through the imagination manipulation).

Figure 1: Materialistic goal pursuit

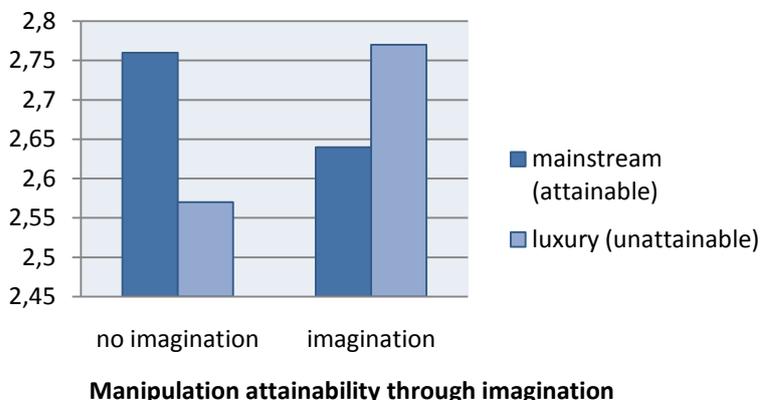
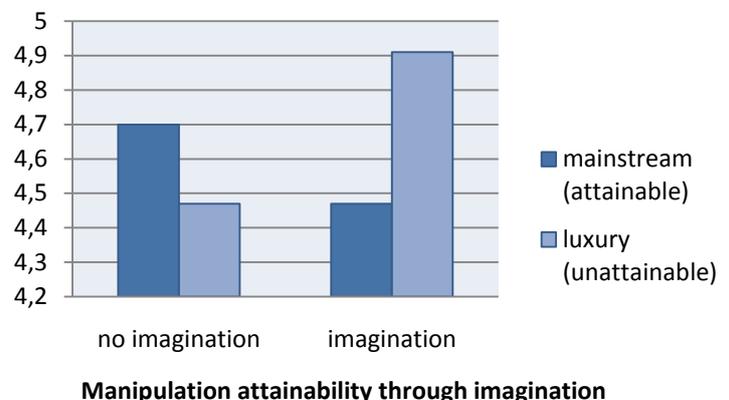


Figure 2: Extrinsic goal pursuit



¹ The imagination procedure is assumed to render the luxurious villa less unattainable.

Study 3 tests this assumption more explicitly. Instead of the decoration manipulation, we now exposed participants to advertisements for luxury products. Rather than manipulating attainability, we now measured perceptions of affordability to assess whether the luxury products were attainable to the participants or not.

37 students were either exposed to six ads for moderately expensive products (to allow for variation in participants' feelings of affordability; e.g., Apple MacBook, HugoBoss clothing) or to no ads (control condition). Next, we measured extrinsic goal pursuit (like in Study 2, $\alpha=.85$) and self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965, $\alpha=.92$). At the end of the experiment, participants in both conditions judged for each ad whether they would be able to afford the advertised product. An index of perceived affordability ($\alpha=.86$) was calculated².

Both for extrinsic goal pursuit ($F(1,33)=9.05, p=.005$), and for self-esteem ($F(1,33)=10.44, p=.003$), we found a significant interaction between exposure and perceived affordability. Advertising exposure increased extrinsic goal pursuit and self-esteem of participants who believed they could afford the promoted luxuries, but decreased it for participants who felt they could not afford them.

Mediation analysis showed that the direct effect of the interaction of exposure and perceived affordability on extrinsic goal pursuit was no longer significant ($p=.43$) when self-esteem was added to the model, while the effect of self-esteem was significant ($p=.007$), attesting to a significant mediation ($z=2.16, p=.03$).

In sum, our findings confirm that exposure to luxury may indeed increase people's materialistic and extrinsic goal pursuit. Quite paradoxically, however, they also show that the opposite result may occur when people are unable to afford the exposed luxuries. Future research may investigate whether exposure to unattainable luxury may also instigate more non-materialistic behavior (e.g., higher donations for good causes).

² Affordability was measured at the end of the experiment to assess whether these concerns affected self-esteem and goal pursuit without being actively cued (as in Study 2).

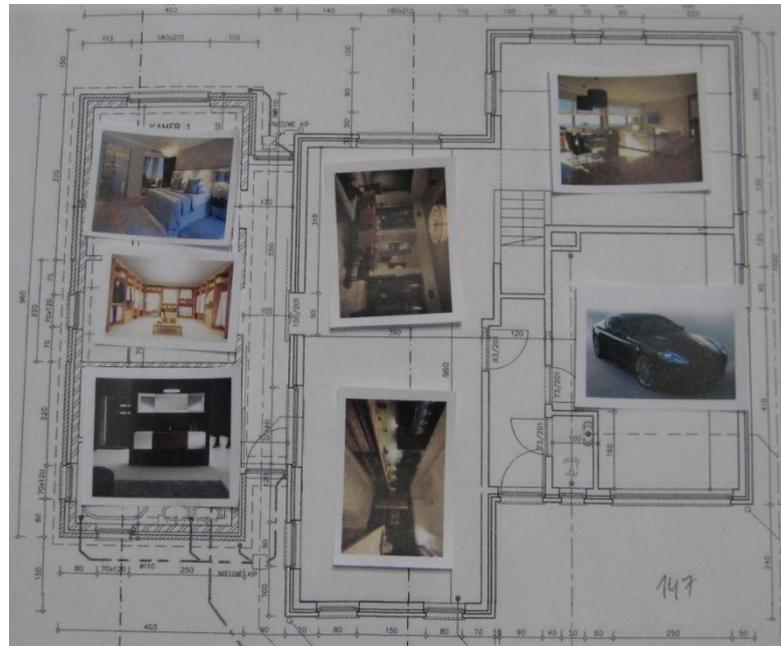
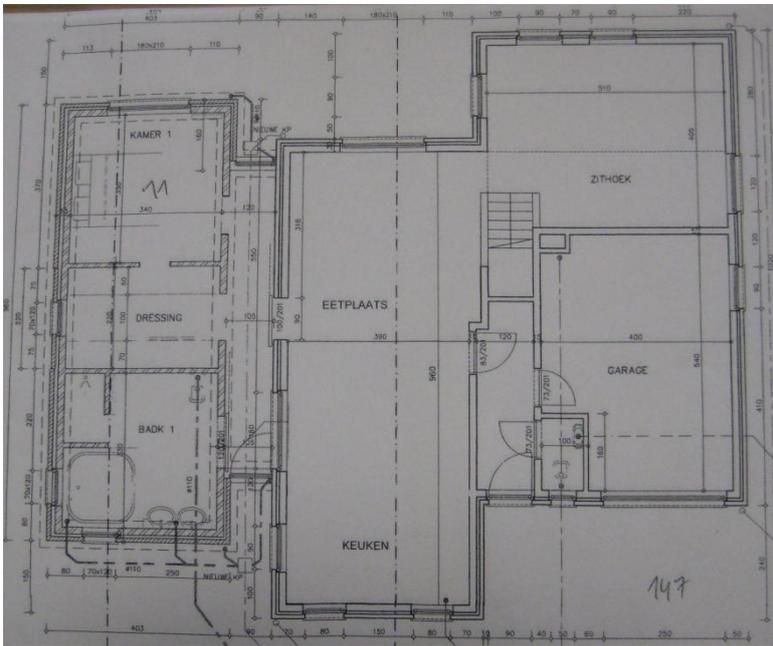
Appendix

Examples of home decoration: manipulation of unattainable luxury (villa) versus no luxury (mainstream house) (Studies 1 and 2)



Appendix (continued)

Example of floor plan (Studies 1 and 2)



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