



ISSN NO. 2320-5407

Journal homepage: <http://www.journalijar.com>

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF ADVANCED RESEARCH

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Luxury Products: The Curious Purchase Behaviour of Gulf Women

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Manuscript Info

Abstract

Manuscript History:

Received: 17 August 2013
Final Accepted: 25 August 2013
Published Online: September 2013

Key words:

Women, Luxury, Gulf,
Purchase Behaviour,
Atypical, Subversive.

In the Gulf region, atypical purchasing behaviours can be observed from women who buy luxury products. In order to identify those behaviours, a 707-subject research was conducted among Bahraini, Saudi, Kuwaiti, and Qatari ladies. The results show that the latter follow learning-affective-hedonistic tendencies at the same time, feel no post-purchase cognitive dissonance, behave as low-incomers despite their social position, and seek advice like amateurs do, but to get reassurance on the social impact of their choices rather than on the quality of items. As a conclusion, the article proposes a series of advertising advices to luxury brands when targeting Gulf women, and raises the question of the motivation leading Gulf women to differentiate from a group that is culturally homogeneous to enter a group that is socially homogeneous.

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1. Introduction

Subversion basically consists in reversing or observing opposite traits or behaviours from what the common sense considers as usual practices. All fields offer great intellectual escapes for such arguments, and the case of women consumers purchasing luxury goods in the Gulf Region is certainly one of the most interesting phenomenon marketers can observe.

In 1967, Watzlawick *et al* came up with the conclusion that the possible or supposed causes of behaviour were but of secondary importance, whereas the impact of this behaviour upon the relationship of individuals intimately acquainted would become a criterion of prime importance.

What shows in such an approach is merely that what really matters may not be to try and understand why consumers make choices, but what happens in terms of behavioural impact on their environment after they did. And, interestingly, the consumer behaviour of Arab women from the Gulf Region induces post and purchase behaviours that seem to be opposite from what the literature traditionally assumes as

international consumer traits, at least as they are described by recurrent consumer behaviour models.

This research proposes to analyse such post and purchase behaviours based on the observation of a 707 GCC lady-sample living in the Kingdom of Bahrain, and to draw recommendations for luxury brands to improve future communication strategies.

Indeed, to properly represent the impact of a financial crisis on the different levels of consumption, the hourglass-shape is a good solution. When in turmoil, consumers naturally give priority to buying both basic products - thus making Maslow's theory true again -, and luxurious ones because it gives them the insurance that what they spend is somehow 'invested'. The products suffering the most from financial crises are then of middle-range positioning because they are considered too expensive for basic use, and not expensive enough to provide both the quality and the credibility that is expected from a superior brand. Such a perception then helps understand why the consumption of luxury products benefited from a 50%-increase in 2012 while all populations were suffering and complaining about

their lost purchase power. This might have been less preeminent in the Gulf Region where the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries somehow managed to cope with the international financial storm slightly better than the Western countries did.

The State of Kuwait, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman, the State of Qatar, the Kingdom of Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates represent a global population of 50-million individuals, among which 41% are women, and only 16% work for a salary. Yet, women are definitely the first consumers of luxury goods, should it be for themselves or for their children: brands such as Burberry Children, Dior Kids, Dolce & Gabbana Junior, Gucci kids, Tommy Hilfiger Junior, or Young Versace are common in the Gulf malls, especially in Dubai. In 2012, the region represented 2% of the global luxury market, with an estimated value of 4.1 billion Euros, and an expected consumption growth of around 10% to 12% in 2013.

Luxury can take different forms and shapes, as well as inspire varied imagery. According to the 2012 CNN Consumer Connect Luxury Survey (*i.e.* presented *infra* as '2012 CNN Survey'), luxury means 'expensive' for 75% of consumers. Perceptions linking luxury with quality, design, exclusivity, or prestige come far behind. The survey also clearly identifies advertising as the major source - 75% - for building the image of a luxury brand.

In the Gulf, a wind of change has blown strongly from the West over the past decade, and not only in terms of advertising mutation. Nevertheless, traditions are still extremely anchored and some pillars remain unchanged despite the invasion of foreign brands. A good example is the importance of the family, especially since women often share the act of purchasing with other female members of the family or with close friends of the same gender. Gulf consumers consider shopping as an important destination, both from a social and entertainment point of view. According to the 2012 CNN Survey, such a leisure activity is considered important to practice with friends in 70% of cases, and with family members in 40% of cases.

The link between international turmoil, luxury products, and Gulf ladies' purchase behaviour could then be expected to be similar to what was described earlier: the bigger the crisis, the stronger the tendency to buy luxury products. And this is the case. What actually differs from what is known is the post & purchase behaviour of Gulf women. The latter

would highlight details that Western women would consider neither appropriate nor elegant.

With all the subjectivity such a definition may carry, a product theoretically reaches the label "luxury" when it has such a design, quality, performance, or durability that is remarkably superior to its comparative substitute. More precisely, a luxurious product has to be of excellent quality, very expensive, scarce and unique, beautiful and polysensual, holding heritage and personal history, and superfluous (Dubois *et al.*, 2001). Others (Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000) also consider that luxury goods bring prestige to their owner, prestige being understood as technical superiority, uniqueness, signalling wealth and status, as well as aesthetics appeal (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). It is of course quite impossible to determine which brands produce the higher level of wealth perception, proof of good taste, and attraction towards groups of both reference and aspiration. Interestingly, one can notice that the lower the level of utility, the higher the perception of luxury.

As noticed by several researchers (Gao *et al.*, 2009), luxury goods are apparel, accessories, handbags, shoes, jewellery, and perfume for which use brings prestige to their owners, apart from any functional utility.

Previous research (Anzieu and Martin, 1979; Brinberg and Plimpton, 1986; Martin and Bush, 2000; Mascarenhas and Higby, 1993) shows that group influences play an important role in suggesting purchase decisions. Group dynamics, *in situ* influence, personal desire to match aspiration groups, or group-related dynamics have long been recognised determinant of behaviour. The influence of groups is so heavy that consumers often consult friends, partners, or family members to support their evaluation process. But it is also frequently observed that many consumers, associated to hedonistic and perfectionist traits, are more interested in the product's quality and performance than in its price. Such consumers then trust their own judgement to make decisions (Husic and Cicic, 2008). But in both cases, high prices remain key components of the perception of luxury from consumers (Groth and McDaniel, 1993).

2. Challenges and Methodology

Most of the Gulf women cover their hair with a scarf, the 'shayla' - or 'hidjab' -, and wear a long and wide

black robe, the 'abaya'. Both garments have a meaning. Covering the hair has a Muslim origin since women are not supposed to show their femininity, long hair being considered as highly seductive. Wearing the abaya also helps hide women shapes, but also contributes in reducing the possibilities of being physically attractive. Women then have very few solutions to differentiate themselves from other ladies since abayas are extremely limited in terms of variety (*i.e.* they are always black). If women also cover their face with a nekab, individualities merely disappear. In such circumstances, women only have very limited options to differentiate themselves, and those lie in accessories.

More precisely, since the list is far from being exhaustive, they can differentiate themselves thanks to glasses, jewels & watches, bags, shoes, mobile phones, and cosmetics.

The local cultural restrictions then give birth to a clear domination of items with large brash logos, items that may be considered gauche in the West. Indeed, in places where handbags and shoes are the only conspicuous accessory that culture allows, brands need to comprehend that the message has to be adapted to such codes, but not only; a point that shall be developed in our research findings.

The main challenges this investigation had to cope with concerned the interviews themselves. Several issues had to be managed.

The first one was to determine the quality and the relevance of the sample. Luckily, the Kingdom of Bahrain is a natural regional destination for local tourism; it is much less conservative than The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia or the State of Qatar, but remains very traditional and culturally strong, making The Kingdom of Bahrain a destination that is preferred to Dubai or Kuwait City. Finding representatives of the whole region was then quite easy.

The second challenge that came up was to be able to make a pre-selection of the women to be interviewed. Indeed, as highlighted in our findings, a key issue is to make sure that the people who would be part of the panel do really have a social status represented by the brands they wear, not wear brands to pretend to have a superior social status. This element was of course extremely subjective. Yet, it was essential to try and identify women who would be in the first case, the latter being the core target for our investigation. To

try and manage this delicate discriminant aspect, performing the survey in the only luxury mall of the Kingdom would not bring enough security as regards to the real social origin of the participants.

A pre-selection was then performed by caring about two aspects: (1) selecting women shopping in group, as long as all the group members would wear similar brands and outfits, and (2) selecting women shopping alone, then focusing on minor but important details such as their jewellery or their shoes, because both of them being naturally hidden by the abaya, they are not intended to be shown. Whoever wears luxurious garments without ostentatious objective can certainly be considered as of natural high social status. It was obviously difficult to perform such observations, and it was necessary to wait for the women to walk and/or to adjust their hidjab to be able to try and identify in a snap a famous shoe brand - in the case of Christian Louboutin, the red sole helps a lot, but not all brands are so easy to identify - or a brand spearhead such as a Pasha watch from Cartier or a B01 ring from Bulgari. Of course, to avoid any embarrassing and unethical situations, female investigators performed those observations. And this naturally brings up the last challenge: the contact.

In the Arab culture, men are not supposed to speak to women they do not know. The rules of conduct are extremely strict. This is the reason why Arabic & English speaking women performed our investigations. Not only the contact process would be easier, but also women would definitely confide in their interviewers in a more gentle and relaxed way. The questionnaire was extremely flexible since the amount of information needed was very limited. It was then decided that the best way to try and get replies to our questions was through a chatting process.

Eventually, our investigations only focused on women who would walk out of a shop, holding a bag from the brand. It was then quite confident to discuss with them a real just-happened behaviour and not a prospective-possible one.

Conspicuous consumption lies in most of the luxury purchases, even if it ranks last in terms of association with the perception of luxury. We all need to express our social status and power through manufactured objects. But this need is even stronger when the solutions for individual positioning development are limited. And since the Gulf Region is a perfect representation of such a trend, our subjects were

originally from the Kingdom of Bahrain, the State of Kuwait, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the State of Qatar - the Sultanate of Oman and the United Arab Emirates being underrepresented in terms of regional tourism.

The survey took place over a 5-month period, starting in Eid 2012 and ending in January 2013. Women were tested in the Kingdom of Bahrain's main malls: Moda Mall, Seef Mall, and City Centre.

The brands/shops involved were: Bottega Veneta, Bulgari, Cartier, Chanel, Christian Dior, Christian Louboutin, DKNY, Dolce & Gabbana, Fendi, Hermès, Hugo Boss, Kenzo, Lacoste, Louis Vuitton, Prada, Versace, and Yves Saint-Laurent. The data was collected *in situ*, through semi-directive interviews performed by Arab & English speaking women under the supervision of the author, in order to avoid discrepancies and cultural frictions. Questions aimed at determining reasons for choosing specific luxury brands, buying motivations, elements considered - or not - when selecting items, respondents' age, possible post-purchase dissonance origins, and group components of the interviewees at the moment the test was performed (*i.e.* were the interviewees alone or with friends or family members/aspiration groups representatives).

Since clear tendencies started to appear after the 500th interview, 207 more were conducted to confirm them, moving to 707 to avoid having a round number.

Our findings show that any extra interview would have maybe brought marginal observations but without making any modification as regards to the core findings of our investigation.

3. Results

Foote, Cone, and Belding company - FCB - points out that most of the purchase behaviours are dictated according to four different variables: intellectual approach, emotional tendency, high level of involvement, and low level of involvement. Based on the latter, FCB explains that when consumers are highly involved in their purchase through an intellectual approach, they tend to learn before making a decision - in order to decrease the possible post-purchase dissonance -, when they are highly involved through an emotional approach, they tend to develop affective decision-making processes, when they are less involved through an intellectual approach, they develop routine behaviours, and when

they are less involved through an emotional approach, they seek hedonism.

3.1 Gulf women buy luxury products by mixing several FCB traits

Out of our 707-women sample, a first tendency that is quite subversive was noticed: Gulf women buying luxury products are learners, emotionally guided, and hedonistic in the same time (*i.e.* 97%). There is no distinction whereas one trait is usually dominant, as described by FCB. Those three traits are concomitant and similarly important in their purchasing process of luxury products. Gulf women do not learn about the product's features, quality, or technology but rather about the impact it may have on their environment in terms of prestige transfer.

They do not have an emotional approach of what they 'like' but a strategic intention of what they 'should like', based on the aspiration group they want to be associated with. Eventually, they are not really concerned by price issues, which make luxurious products switch from the high involvement standard to the low involvement one. This unexpected association of three out of four FCB traits on equivalent weight makes the Gulf woman a specific behaviour model. Indeed, since a real purchasing frenzy can be observed, probably due to the absence of other types of entertainments, then making shopping the only thing to do during spare time, it was noticeable that such purchase behaviours are an equivalent routine to food shopping. As a summary of this first trait, it can be assumed that Gulf women make frontiers vanish between both high and low involvement notions, and intellectual *vs.* emotional approaches of their purchases.

3.2 Gulf women feel no price or quality post-purchase dissonance

An impressive majority of women (*i.e.* 73% of our sample) has absolutely no feeling of cognitive dissonance in terms of quality or price, should it be before or after buying a luxury product. Their only objective is to belong to their group(s) of aspiration, whatever the price-value ratio and/or the effective quality of the product, a trait yet regularly observed and measured (Wiedmann *et al.*, 2009). This is not true in terms of luxury service since they have then no other choice than witness a lack of performance unless being considered stupid. But since the evaluation of a product's price, value, quality, and positioning is intimately personal, whatever the result

of such an assessment, as long as the product's codes make the consumer match their group of reference's codes, the rest becomes marginal.

3.3 Wealthy Gulf women follow low-income people behaviours

The third element that could be observed is the following: it is commonly accepted that lower-income people shop around to try and find cheaper brands. Nevertheless, this is untrue. Actually, what has to be considered is not the level of income but the level of education. High culture capital people logically have a high capability to find good bargains. They are able to judge values, compare currency rates, access international offers, and eventually make smart economic decisions after assessing numerous variables without ever damaging their own private luxury-related positioning. On the opposite, low-educated people would choose premium-branded goods to assert utopian social positions when unable to change other financial aspects in their environment or life. In this case, the temptation to link level of income and level of education is high. Yet, and this is probably true, what mainly comes out of this reality is that Gulf women are highly educated, relatively wealthy, but behave like people described in the second group: they only seek premium-branded goods, to both assert a social position that is, this time, absolutely real, and increase the number of indicators that are supposed to reaffirm their financial domination.

3.4 Gulf women are logophiles

According to the 2012 CNN Survey (*cf. supra*), out of 16 luxury product purchase criteria, price ranks 6 after quality, design, material, life duration, and functionality. This tendency is quite common to most of the developed countries. 'Connoisseurs' are therefore usually distinguished from 'amateurs', 'logophiles', and 'occasional buyers'. Connoisseurs seek quality; they are loyal to the brand, and they need no advice. Amateurs follow the same behaviour except that they seek advice.

Logophiles only look for installing an identity they like. And occasional luxury product consumers above all seek functionality; to them, price and related value are always more important than image and positioning. Gulf women buy luxury products as pure logophiles. There is nothing occasional in their behaviour: image is definitely much more important

than price, and functionality is of secondary importance.

Nevertheless, they also seek advice like amateurs do. But not on the accuracy of their choice; they would rather seek advice on the product's and brand's capability to make them reach the private and personal positioning they need to access to make sure that their environment will perceive them the way they want to be considered. This is easily understandable since the most desirable level of consumer-brand relationship is tribal, far ahead of the corporative feeling of belonging, of the product addiction, or of the brand experience. Interestingly, since the level of connivance through brands is the highest among people reaching their 40's in the Western countries, this phenomenon appears much earlier among Gulf women, up to 20 years before.

The obsession to show not only ostentatious brands, but to also insist on the fact that the product is brand new, gives birth to behaviours such as never ever removing labels from shoe soles, leaving plastics on car seats, and, of course, choosing the products on which the logos will be as demonstrative as possible, exactly opposite to a French Parisian woman for example, where ladies are educated so that they identify peers and create connivance with little details that are noticeable by connoisseurs only.

4. Discussion

The elements observed through this research are inspiring in terms of advertising and commercial communication processes. Based on the findings exposed here, luxury brands should develop communication strategies highlighting the following:

- Since the learning process focuses on prestigious data, the ad should absolutely not raise any distortion in the target's mind. Both supports and images should be highly prestigious.
- Prices should never be mentioned. It is not only useless; it may also bring the target's attention on an aspect of the product that would create a negative impact since peers would believe that the consumer's choice was influenced by the price, even secondarily.
- Advertisements should systematically display premium-logo branded products,

ostentatiously, but also shining colour-items because the latter have a double mission: attract attention just in case the size of the logo would not be sufficient, and compensate the impossibility for women to wear colourful clothes, unless hidden, because all abayas are black.

- Advertising messages should not hold any specific promise as copy or star strategies usually suggest it. Since there is no post-purchase cognitive dissonance, promises are eventually neither checked nor assessed.
- In relation to the last item, functionalities should also not appear in the message. Gulf women are not interested by the functionality capabilities of their luxury products. Neither are they by the level of comfort when it comes to clothes and accessories such as high heel shoes. No matter what the pain, as long as the impact on peers is there.
- Finally, the advertising message should broadcast aspiration group members. Showing the product in a scene where it is understood that it is a gift from social peers, as if the woman was inaugurated into the aspiration group of her dreams, is powerful enough to start up the purchase.

5. Summary and Conclusions

The purpose and objective of this article was to highlight Gulf women's behaviour traits when purchasing luxury products, those traits being subversive when compared to traditionally identified consumer behaviours towards such items.

Our research shows that Gulf women essentially seek belonging to aspiration groups through the consumption of similar products or recurrent luxury brands, most of them being of Western origin. Should women come from different Gulf countries, a clear common behaviour can be observed. The latter is positively regional and cultural, not only national. Yet, the strong desire of individualism developed by women who naturally try to sustain identities in spite of the cultural pressure of religious and political leaders, and of the quasi obligation to wear garments limiting their creativity and forcing them into image homogenisation, finds alternatives

into a different but still equivalent process of homogenisation.

Gulf women switch from wearing the abaya to wearing similar accessories, from premium brands, eventually ending in moving from one identity loss to another one.

Further research would then certainly be constructive if focusing on the reasons to consider luxurious products as the only solution to self-esteem development, personal identity growth, and individualism. Is moving from one group to another one a serious option for personal differentiation? To what extent the abaya homogeneity differs from the similar luxurious items one?

And eventually, how come such women consider luxurious items as a priority when it comes to imposing their wish for independence, character, and decision-making freedom, whereas such behaviour is linked to high levels of education, the latter being a quite infinite resource when it comes to positively distinguishing themselves in male-dominant societies?

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