

Consumers' Paradoxical Interpretations of Prestige and Luxury

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Tüketicilerin Prestij ve Lüks Kavramları Hakkında Çelişkili Algıları

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Özet

Tüketim ile bağlantılı olarak, prestij ve lüks kavramlarının açıklanmasında hem akademik yazında hem de tüketicilerin algılarında çelişkiler görülmektedir. Bazı yazarlar ve tüketiciler bu terimleri birbirlerine eş değer olarak kullanırken bazıları ise değişik anlamlar yüklemektedirler. Tüketicilerin bakış açılarından yola çıkarak, niteliksel yöntemler kullanılan bu araştırma ile amacımız, bu anlam karmaşasına bir açıklık getirmektir. Çalışmada öncelikle tüketicilerin prestij ve lüks kavramları hakkındaki farklı bakış açıları sunulmuştur. Prestijin maddesel boyutlarının yanı sıra manevi boyutları da olabileceği, lüks kavramının ise daha çok maddesel olduğu gözlenmiştir. Sonuçlarda, prestijin bu maddesel, manevi ve sosyal boyutları açıklanmıştır. Araştırma tüketici davranışları teorilerine ve maddencilik konusundaki tartışmalara katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Prestij, lüks, niteliksel.

Abstract

In relation to consumption, we observe puzzlement in the ways the terms prestige and luxury are interpreted both in scholarly discussions and in consumers' minds. Some use these terms interchangeably while others assign different meanings. Through our study, with a qualitative inquiry, we hope to shed light to this perplexity from consumers' perspectives. We first offer a framework about the confusion in consumers' minds related to their understanding of the notions of prestige and luxury, which can have different connotations. In addition to its material aspects, prestige may also be associated with moral values while luxury is often materialistic. Accordingly, the analysis shows these intangible, material, and interpersonal aspects of prestige. With the study, we hope to contribute to consumer behavior theories, at the same time highlighting both the limits and the success of materialism.

Keywords: Prestige, luxury, qualitative.

1. Introduction

Investigating the dynamics behind prestige brand consumption, we realized before everything else that there is confusion in the ways the terms prestige and luxury are interpreted, both in scholarly discussions and in consumers' minds. Especially marketing scholars use these terms interchangeably when talking about luxury/prestige brands, while others assign different meanings. Though, we must clarify at the beginning that the notion of prestige associated with a brand and the one associated with a person may have different connotations since a brand that is perceived as prestigious may lose its prestige overtone when possessed by a person who does not possess the necessary prestigious characteristics him/herself. Basically, the notion of prestige associated with a person is interpreted within the larger context, not always just with possessions.

After a brief look at the previous scholarly discussions about the notions of prestige and luxury in different fields of social sciences, we hope to shed light into this perplexity by offering a framework of these diverse interpretations of the notion of prestige and its connection / disconnection with the concept of luxury, in consumers' minds. By showing both the intangible and material aspects of prestige, we also highlight the limits and the success of materialism.

2. Theoretical Reflections

As Mason (2002) synthesizes in his review of conspicuous consumption theories, in early societies, conspicuous consumption had been perceived as the evil of vanity and ostentation, especially in light of the religious and moral values. Only by the end of the nineteenth century, the conspicuous consumption of goods and services has begun to be seen more positively for its economic value (Mason, 2002).

While conspicuous consumption is defined as a wasteful and expensive consumption in order to enhance social prestige and signaling wealth (Veblen, 1899; Chaudhuri and Majumdar, 2006); prestige consumption is generally associated with gaining social status and prestige via the acquisition of some certain materials and brands (e.g., Fan and Burton, 2002; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999: 2004).

The desire for uniqueness has been designated as one of the aspects of prestige brand consumption along with the desire for conformity (e.g., Dubois and Paternault, 1995; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999: 2004).

Invidious comparison (Veblen, 1899) and snob effect (Leibenstein, 1950) are the terms used for identifying the consumption patterns that refer to differentiating from the imitator members of lower class in order to show the uniqueness. Desire

for uniqueness has also formed the basis of rarity principle (Dubois and Paternault, 1995), which argues that the over diffusion of luxury brands will result in the erosion of prestige character of the brand due to destruction of rarity. Conforming to the behaviors of a group in order to affiliate to a higher social class has also influenced the consumption of prestige brands. Additionally, materialism is denoted as an aspect of conspicuous consumption for displaying success and arousing the envy of others (Wong, 1997).

On the other hand, as Wegener (1992) synthesizes, major social stratification theories describe the term prestige in terms of achievement, esteem, honor, and charisma, which are not always associated with material possessions. Rational-order theories suggest that prestige is what people get for their achievements that are in line with social needs (Davis and Moore, 1945). Accordingly, prestige differentiates form the system of social inequality. In rational-conflict theories, prestige is regarded as a commodity that can be exchanged in transactions like money and it is a function of esteem (Coleman, 1990; Homans, 1961) while normative-conflict theories refer to prestige as social honor (Weber, 1978). For normative-order theories, prestige is the exhibition of charisma which is also embodied in occupational roles (Shils, 1975).

From a different perspective, marketing researchers have been using the terms prestige and luxury often as subsets of each other, associating them with brands. This interchangeable use of the terms may indicate the existence of a conceptual confusion. For instance, the study of Vigneron and Johnson (1999) offers three levels of prestige defined in terms of brands. They classify the prestige brands as upmarket brands, premium brands, and luxury brands, in an increasing order of prestige. However, they contradict themselves in a more recent study (2004) by referring to prestige as the extreme end of the luxury-brand category, which is presented as a much more complex and larger category than previously stated. This new conceptualization of luxury proposed by the authors is a more inclusive word that includes both personal and interpersonal aspects. To summarize, they relate prestige consumption to purchasing higher priced products whereas luxury consumption to purchasing a product that represents value to the individual or the significant others. They classify the dimensions of luxury brands as perceived conspicuousness, perceived uniqueness, perceived extended self, perceived hedonism, and perceived quality. Our findings indicate a different path, assigning a much broader meaning to the notion of prestige rather than luxury, which seems to be perceived as highly materialistic by some consumers.

Furthermore, according to Kapferer (1998), luxury is the subjective interpretation of consumers, which can be based on beautifulness, excellence, magic, uniqueness, creativity, product sensuality, quality, and exclusivity. Belk (2001)

defines luxury as the stuff, capturing our desires that can not be possessed by everyone; this also includes expensive items that cannot be afforded by everyone or rare. Dubois and Paternault (1995), take the rarity principle into account by stating that the most successful luxury brands are the ones that can cultivate high level of awareness and highly controlled diffusion such as Rolex and De Beers.

From a cross-cultural perspective, other researchers argue that the rarity principle is not relevant in the Asian luxury market which has relatively collectivistic culture when compared to the US luxury market, with a more individualistic nature (Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). According to these studies, in Confucian societies like the Asian society, the luxury brands are seen as the dominant determinant of social position and status due to their collectivistic structure and interdependent self concepts in forms of conformity, and prestige will only be inflated instead of being eroded when the purchase level increases (Phau and Prendergast, 2000).

Our study conducted in a western city of Turkey seems to support the rarity principle observed in western societies. However, it also shows both associations and disassociations of the notion of prestige with the consumption of luxury items, offering a framework of consumers' diverse perceptions. The findings first present the confusion in consumers' minds about their understanding of the notion of prestige and luxury, and then the analysis expands, showing the intangible, material, and interpersonal aspects of prestige.

3. Methodology

We used qualitative methods trying to develop a deeper understanding of consumers' different interpretations of prestige and luxury. Findings came out from a larger study, investigating the dynamics and influences behind prestige brand consumption. 40 interviews were conducted with men and women of various ages between 19 and 47, mostly middle income people, representing the mundane in society. The research was performed in Izmir, the third largest city of Turkey, during the course of the years 2007 and 2008.

The analysis of the interviews started at the interview stage, building on critical points in each interview. This is when we started to observe the different interpretations of the notion of prestige and its connection / disconnection with the notion of luxury. We probed deeper on that issue, trying to flesh out these different perspectives. We investigated both the potential paradoxes in individual consumer's mind in perceiving these notions and the different perspectives among the informants. We coded and grouped the data, comparing the different views, looking for patterns as well as irregularities, splitting them into categories that were helpful to present our findings (Silverman, 2005). We also conducted

constant checks with consumers' discourses, our own interpretations, and theory, aiming for validity in findings.

4. Findings

Besides the diverse interpretations of prestige and luxury in scholarly discussions, we observe a similar puzzlement in consumers' minds. Figure 1 below offers a little framework, a little summary, of these diverse interpretations of prestige in consumers' minds and its connection with the concept of luxury:

Figure 1. Different Associations of Prestige and Luxury

	Prestigious	Non Prestigious
Luxurious	1	2
Non Luxurious	3	

Among the different interpretations of consumers, area 1 shows the alternative when the terms prestige and luxury are used interchangeably and carry the same meaning according to some consumers. Area 2 mostly emphasizes the material character of luxury, implying that not all luxury consumption have a prestigious connotation. Finally, area 3 highlights the intangible nature of prestige, implying that not all prestige consumption has to be linked with luxurious possessions.

The following paragraphs supported by consumer statements lay out these different interpretations and confusion in consumer minds. We purposefully do not structure and subtitle the below findings as area 1, 2, and 3 because as it will be seen in below quotations there is not a clear cut in consumers' interpretations

as they may end up contradicting their own statements. For instance, Selin's below statements first give evidence for area 3, but end up in area 1:

Prestige is something more moral, I can not materialize it. If you ask me what luxury is, I can materialize it. If you ask me who is prestigious, I can answer, but I can not define it with tangible assets or a commodity. "Prestige is equal to luxury," this is how prestige is commonly defined but this is not like that according to me. For this reason, defining prestige is very difficult. For instance, publishing books in your name can be prestigious (Selin, female, 28).

Selin later also says:

I think using a fill-up pen is a prestigious thing. I have a beautiful pen (showing her Cross brand pen). I also have others, but I give importance to one of them. This is an example of prestige I can give.

Although, Selin seems to assign different meanings to both terms, her later statements show her confusion. She first illustrates the notion of prestige with career achievement, but then, she ends up materializing it with an expensive fill-up pen, contradicting her previous statements. On the other hand, Cross is not a brand positioned at the far end of luxury fill-up pens like for instance Mont Blanc, though it is perceived as prestigious by Selin. Hence, what is prestigious in terms of the brands can be a subjective matter. From another perspective, Ali shows a different confusion first area 1, then area 2:

According to me, prestige is having a luxurious life... a luxury car, a luxury house means prestige to me (Ali, male, 23).

Ali later also says:

[Luxury and prestige] ...the meanings of these terms have a common point, but they are not so close to each other. You may carry out a luxurious life, but you may not have prestige.

From a different perspective than Selin, Ali first links the concept of prestige with the possession of luxury items, but he later also argues that living a luxurious life does not automatically imply having prestige. Further consumer statements similarly highlight this confusion:

[Prestige and luxury]...certainly they are not equal. The prestige of something derives from its quality, its experience, and the fact that it can be trusted. On the other hand, luxury is something different. In other words, you can make something luxurious, but you cannot automatically attach prestige to it. You don't have such a chance (Hasan, male, 22).

I see prestige in a level higher than luxury. For instance, a person with superior knowledge is also prestigious and respected, but every luxury may

not be prestigious. A man goes and buys a luxury item with money, and this is a luxurious consumption, but this does not make him prestigious. Prestige is something more moral according to me; you can gain it in time, but luxury is something you can get immediately if you pay for it. Luxury is more material (Deniz, female, 28).

Deniz and Hasan, mostly emphasize areas 2 and 3. Prestige is often positioned in a higher level of value than luxury in consumers' imaginary. It is associated with intangible values such as success, superior knowledge, and respect while luxury is associated with tangibles like money. In this sense, prestige has to be gained while luxury can be bought. Thus, the notion of prestige has morally more positive connotations than luxury.

Luxury has a more negative implication according to me. It seems like it can also imply waste (Oya, female, 34).

In today's world, luxury consumption can be linked with needless shopping just for the sake of ostentation while prestige is a less contaminated concept (Ebru, female, 24).

Interestingly, these informants bring out the topic of waste associated with luxury consumption, which is not about necessities but ostentation. Luxury consumption has this negative connotation also because it has the characteristics of compulsive buying behavior where consumers are found to have lower self-esteem and higher materialistic values (Shoham and Brencic, 2003).

The products are being promoted in such a way that... prestigious brand, luxury brand... like if prestige is equal to luxury, but for me, these two are different notions. Marketers are trying to impose it on us in this way. As a consumer, they have different positions in my mind. You can buy luxury, but you cannot buy prestige (Selin, female, 28).

Connecting luxury with prestige, according to me, comes from the fact that most luxury products are launched as prestigious (Mehmet, male, 19)

Some informants also pointed at the marketers as the source of this confusion for the interchangeable use of the terms prestige and luxury. They suggest that marketers have a strong influence on consumers' imaginary for defining what is prestigious. Some suggest that the concept of prestige is deliberately being used by marketers in order to create and enhance the demand for luxury products, thus encouraging materialism. These findings give support to Belk's (2001) suggestions that marketers create new luxuries through creating fashions, intentionally limiting supplies, setting high prices for new innovations, as well as by making claims of new and improved technologies.

The following sections now take a closer look at these diverse associations of the notion of prestige as tangible, intangible, and interpersonal.

4.1. Intangible Aspect of Prestige

Already from the previous quotations of consumers, we can synthesize that the notion of prestige has a more intangible overtone when compared with the notion of luxury that seems to be perceived as highly materialistic. This section aims to investigate more profoundly these non-material values associated with prestige.

[Prestige]... can be associated with a person, a product, or a brand for which/whom you have developed trust and feel reliability (Can, male, 22).

Prestige is the peak point of esteem. It is gained by experience and of course created as a consequence of a high degree of social acceptance (Gonca, female, 24)

Prestige is the reflection of quality to others. It is exposing yourself not only with your clothing, appearance, but also with your gestures (Oğuz, male, 25)

Prestige, according to me, is the combination of quality and success. For instance, this could be a person, a company, or a brand (Tijen, female, 19)

The notion of prestige is associated with intangible values such as being trusted, having superior knowledge or experience, reflecting quality, achieving success, and gaining the respect of others, which are the kind of values that cannot always be bought with money. These intangible values of prestige can be associated both with people or products.

According to Vigneron and Johnson (1999), quality is combined with the perfectionist motivation. A low level of quality may play a negative role over the perception of prestige. On the contrary, perception of high quality for a brand may lead to positive perception of prestige. For products, according to Vigneron and Johnson (1999), this kind of quality comes from the technical superiority of the branded product or the qualification of the production processes. However, as they suggest, perceived quality of a product is also generally related with the price level. On the other hand, quality perception of a person can be quite different from its product version:

You see a man... he may have a Rolex watch on his wrist, a Vertu mobile phone in his hand, sitting in a Ferrari. At first sight, that man may seem prestigious to you because he possesses high quality things, but if that man uses abusive language, spits and throws his cigarette to the street, then he is not prestigious anymore. I mean, he probably got some possessions with his money but this does not make him prestigious. He owns high quality things but he does not have quality as a person (Bennu, female, 20)

Within the larger context, good quality possessions may not be enough to define a prestigious person. Quality of possessions must be combined with the quality of

personal features and behavior. In this context, personal quality refers to being educated, good manners, and courtesy.

[Showing a photo]...this is one of the pictures that I like most: The photo of Atatürk, the one that is taken while Atatürk is sitting around a table with lots of kings and diplomats. Most of us have seen this. I think this photo is prestigious. The kings had more executive power when compared with Turkey just out of war, but still when I look at the photo, I can feel the prestige of Atatürk. In other words, the charisma of Atatürk gives him this prestige more than the money can buy (Iris, female, 20).

Finally, charisma can also be associated with the notion of prestige. Possessing a strategic occupation or being in the role of a leader can be prestigious. Though, this participant evaluates the overall posture of Atatürk beside his leadership position, while referring to charisma. As stated earlier, according to normative order theorists (Shils, 1975), charisma is the basis of prestige.

4.2. Material Aspect of Prestige

Materialism has been defined as the importance a person attaches to material possessions and the belief that certain possessions are the primary source of happiness (Belk, 1985). It generally gives precedence to economic values rather than more moral values (Ger and Belk, 1999). It also involves a belief that the consumption of luxuries causes more happiness (Belk, 2001).

It is possible to have prestige without luxury, but luxury brands reflect prestige much stronger (Taner, male, 25).

I vision a picture of a woman, wearing her trench coat, beautifully made-up, walking with her 4-5 Louis Vuitton bags with a little dog in her arms... a woman who stands out from the crowd... she is a prestigious person according to me... the kind of person who is different from the others, for whom you stop and turn around to take another look (Ahmet, male, 22).

For example, sun glasses for women and a wrist watch for a man are important items of prestige, according to me. Also, mobile phones have such a character. A good quality and elegant mobile phone is an indication of prestige. For instance, when you go abroad, in any country, if you have a Vertu phone, when you take it out they can make any reservations for you even if you do not reserve in advance. Also, when you enter to a shop, you are priority. Just like having an American Express credit card, you can enter in VIP lounges in airports. Prestige is something like that (Fatma, female, 20).

These informants fall in area 1 in our model; they make a strong association of prestige with the consumption of luxury items. Some scholars (Ewen, 1988) tend to portray modern consumption as a shallow dream of identity; modern life is so

anonymous and people are so rootless and isolated by individualism that they seek goods to substitute for an internal emptiness, assembling a commodity self. Material possessions define who we are (Belk, 1985), and in this context, these luxury items give people higher self confidence and prestige.

My computer is HP; I also have nice pens. I use good quality pens because I often need them in my daily life. When I need to sign a paper, I like to use a nice pen rather than an ordinary one and this makes me receive the admiration of others. If a person does not know who I am, just by seeing that pen, he puts me somewhere in his mind, and he is usually not disappointed when he also gets to know me (Kemal, male, 43).

This business man also uses objects to help him define who he is; though, people often tend to hide their materialistic ambitions. Any regular pen could serve the need for a signature; however, he specifically likes to use his Mont Blanc to make an identity statement. On the other hand, not everybody is as honest as him, admitting that he likes to receive the admiration of others. For instance, as Boven (2005, 140) suggests, the need for new, fashionable clothing or a newer and larger car, can be legitimized by saying "It is just for dressing appropriately at work" or "Just for a safe drive for my family." Consumers often disclose utilitarian reasons in a way to legitimize their materialistic behavior and to relieve themselves by proclaiming their consumption moral (Ger and Belk, 1999).

4.3. Interpersonal Aspect of Prestige

Finally, in this third section of our analysis, we emphasize the interpersonal character of prestige, which is a socially constructed concept. Individuals are constantly engaged in study of others' lives to prove that their personal ideals have been realized (McCracken, 1988). One's self has become the object of one's gaze and the gaze of the others; acquisition of identity has become the acquisition of products in the market (Firat, 1999). People largely make their judgments about others on the basis of what others consume and how they represent themselves through what they use, wear, and so on (Firat, 1994).

Prestige is not something that you need when you are alone in an island; it is about how others perceive you. Prestige is the mirror that reflects our position in society. This is about how others perceive us, how positive and honorable they approach towards us (Kemal, male, 43).

[Prestige]...implies esteem, having a higher position in society, being respected by others (Funda, female, 28).

The notion of prestige finds its meaning in society, with the presence of others. Rational conflict theories position prestige, deriving from esteem within groups (Coleman, 1990; Homans, 1961). 'The commodities and services that are considered status goods all have the feature of being either easily seen by others

(for example, clothing, luxury car, Jacuzzi, furniture), or easily talked about in social conversations (for example, vacations) (Fan and Burton, 2002: 43).

Prestige is something that is desired by everyone. How can I say... you want to be distinguished from the others with the clothes you wear... or when you stop at the traffic lights, you want your car to be noticeable, different from the other cars around... or you wish to be different with your hair style... It is about being different with something you possess (Tufan, man, 29).

The perceptions of exclusivity and rarity enhance the desire for a product or a brand (Belk, 2001; Dubois and Paternault, 1995; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). One way of achieving this uniqueness is also to display wealth that is not accessible by the mass. Veblen's (1899) notion of conspicuous consumption proposed that status then was a product of economic wealth, and fashion was mainly a practice of the leisure class. The wealthy consumed to display their prosperity by wearing expensive clothing. Good taste, which was termed as refined or cultivated, became associated with the expression of distance from the world of work, the practical or the natural world, which could be regarded as cheap. As Bourdieu also suggests ([1979] 1984), taste unifies those with similar preferences and differentiates them from those with different tastes, giving an individual sense of his/her place in the social order. He also argues that those in higher classes are far better able to have their tastes accepted and oppose the tastes of those in lower classes. Bourdieu gives great importance to social class differentiation, but he refuses to reduce it merely to economic matters; he emphasizes more the occupational or educational levels. In other words, besides its material aspect, he also points at the intangible sides of the notion of prestige.

This desire for uniqueness can also be explained with invidious comparison concept Veblen suggest and the snob effect defined by Leibenstein (1950), which refers to the desire to possess unique goods in order to dissociate oneself from the others. Distinction never goes out of fashion as Thompson and Haytko (1997) also suggest.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, our study contributes to previous literature by fleshing out consumers' diverse interpretations associated with the notion of prestige and luxury, which are not always parallel to the scholarly presentations of these concepts. For instance, our findings suggest that consumers assign prestige a more intangible and moral overtone while luxury is often perceived as more materialistic. Instead, Vigneron and Johnson (2004) suggested the reverse, assigning a much broader meaning to luxury. Our findings further suggest that possessing luxury items does not automatically entitle the person as prestigious.

Although this is the general emphasis in consumers' discourses, paradoxically, many also admit that possessing luxury items help boosting the prestige, especially at first sight in society. Consuming such items help to increase self-confidence. Still, consumers try to legitimize their materialistic behavior by claiming their consumption moral (Ger and Belk, 1999).

The prestige of a person is evaluated within the larger context, complemented by personal background (e.g. achievements), features (e.g. charisma), and behavior (e.g. good/bad manners). Even if possessing a product is perceived as prestigious due to its luxurious characteristics, the prestige connotation may be lost if the person lacks the necessary prestigious character him/herself. There comes the intangible aspect of prestige that cannot always be bought with money, but hard work, experience, superior knowledge, and also goodwill on the moral side.

Yet, all of these different approaches towards the notion of prestige do not prevent consumers to use the terms prestige and luxury interchangeably. Some blame marketers for having a strong influence on consumers' imaginary for defining what is prestigious, as they connected this notion with the possession of luxury items, also promoting materialism. Others assign luxury consumption a negative overtone because it may imply waste and bear the characteristics of compulsive buying behavior where consumers are found to have lower self-esteem and higher materialistic values (Shoham and Brencic, 2003).

In summary, the notions of prestige and luxury may have different connotations in consumers' minds, and here we also question the appropriateness of using the terms prestige / luxury brands interchangeably. For instance, the brand "Cross" may be considered as prestigious for some although it is not the most luxurious brand among fill-up pens like Mont Blanc. Hence, what is prestigious in terms of the brands can be a subjective matter. Moreover, some non-luxurious possessions may be perceived as prestigious, also for example, due to their nostalgic or emotional value. Basically, our findings suggest that not all luxury items are prestigious, and not all prestigious items are luxurious. Scholars should be aware of this distinction in consumers' minds because it sheds light to the limits of materialism (pointing at the intangible values associated with prestige), besides cherishing materialism (associating prestige with the consumption of luxury products).

On the other hand, this study has been conducted in a western city of Turkey, which is economically more advanced than many other cities in the country. Thus, perceptions of prestige and luxury may vary in others parts of the country and the world, also due to cultural differences.

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