When Do Consumers Indulge in Luxury? Emotional Certainty Signals When to Indulge to Regulate Emotions

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The objective of this paper is to improve our understanding of the relationships between emotional states and luxury consumption. Current theorizing suggests that the valence of an emotional state alone cannot explain indulgent consumption but that this could be contingent on whether the emotional state can change or not. We propose that the certainty appraisal associated with the emotion will signal consumers whether their emotions can change, influencing their willingness to indulge in luxury consumption. We test this proposition in two studies. Results suggest that consumers in a negative emotional state are more willing to indulge in luxury consumption when the emotion is associated with uncertainty because indulging can help repair the negative state, but people in a positive affective state are more willing to indulge in luxury consumption when the emotion is associated with certainty because indulging will not hurt their positive state. Reconciling previous research linking emotional valence, emotion regulation, and indulgence, these findings suggest that the certainty appraisal of specific emotions is important in predicting luxury consumption to regulate one’s emotions. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Imagine a consumer in a negative and a consumer in a positive emotional state, both facing an opportunity to buy a luxury handbag. Who would be more likely to indulge to manage their emotional state? While some people may engage in “retail therapy” when they feel bad, others embark on a shopping spree the minute they feel good (Garg/Wansink/Inman 2007; Kemp/Kopp 2011). Thus, the positive or negative valence of the emotional state alone cannot fully predict consumers’ willingness to indulge in luxury products to regulate their emotional state. We propose that the effect of the valence of an emotional experience on such “emotion regulation luxury consumption” is contingent on the certainty appraisal associated with the emotion, which signals consumers whether their emotional state can change or not.

Appraisal theories of emotion dwell in the fact that emotions are a result of cognitive appraisals comparing an actual and a desired (or reference) outcome (Ellsworth/Scherer 2003; Lazarus 1991; Scherer 1999). An emotion is a mental state of readiness that arises from cognitive appraisals, is accompanied by physiological processes, and may result in specific modes of action readiness (Frijda/Kuipers/ter Schure 1989). This stream of research has shown that discrete emotions of the same valence produce different judgments and behaviours, depending on their underlying appraisals (Lerner/Keltner 2001; Tiedens/Linton 2001; Zeelenberg et al. 2008). For example, Raghunathan/Pham (1998) show that anxiety and sadness, two emotions of negative valence, affect risk-seeking behaviour differently. Hence, recent research contends that the influence of emotions on judgments and behaviour depends not only on valence but also on other cognitive dimensions forming an emotional experience (Zeelenberg et al. 2008). However, research on emotions and indulgent behaviour has focused primarily on valence and contextual factors (e.g., Atalay/
We focus on the certainty-uncertainty component of emotions and investigate how this component influences willingness to indulge in luxury consumption as a way to regulate emotions. Certainty is a relevant dimension to examine because it represents, along with valence, one of the core appraisals of emotions (Roseman/Antoniou/Jose 1996), thus allowing us to study a broad spectrum of emotions. Another interesting reason to study (un)certainty is that we show counterintuitive outcomes for consumers and for marketers emerging from uncertainty. Neither consumers nor marketers seem to like a state of uncertainty: Previous research suggests that consumers prefer certainty and, at the same time, many market advantages such as more positive purchase intentions and increased loyalty emerge as a function of certainty (Tsai/McGill 2011). However, we show situations in which both certainty and uncertainty may help marketers stimulate luxury consumption or help consumers consume less luxury products, if they wish to curb such behaviour.

While the valence appraisal refers to the pleasantness of an emotional experience, the certainty appraisal conveys that something is clearly established or assured (Ellsworth/Smith 1988), thus carrying information that a given situation can or cannot change (Frijda 1988). Building upon the appraisal theories of emotion, we posit that the “absolute like the firmness of the earth” aspect of certainty signals people whether their current emotional state can change. That is, while certain or established emotions are definitive and will not change, uncertain or non-established emotions are tentative and may change.

The main implication is that the certainty appraisal dimension of an emotional experience may influence the degree to which people are willing to indulge in luxury consumption to regulate their emotions.

Although people can regulate their emotions via several different coping strategies (Gross 1998; Schmidt et al. 2010), we focus on luxury consumption as a way to regulate emotions. Luxuries seem to be especially suitable for emotion regulation consumption because they are by definition something out of the ordinary with the potential to impact one’s emotions (Patrick/Hagtveldt 2009). Luxury is considered to be the most emotional product category, with symbolic benefits often exceeding functional benefits (Kapferer 1997). Luxury consumption is critical to emotion regulation because of its concurrent positive hedonic consequences (e.g., the pleasure associated with purchasing a luxury product) and negative hedonic consequences (e.g., the guilt associated with spending so much money), which potentially lead people to experience both positive and negative emotions at the same time (Ramanathan/Williams 2007).

By better understanding the phenomenon of emotion regulation luxury consumption or consumers’ desire to indulge in luxury to regulate their emotional state, luxury brands may develop a competitive advantage to differentiate themselves from the growing competition in the global luxury sector (Bain & Company 2012). This paper contributes to research in luxury consumption by depicting situations in which consumers are more willing to indulge in luxury consumption. The theoretical contribution of this paper is showing that the certainty appraisal of emotions can affect willingness to consume luxuries by signalling consumers whether their emotional state can change or not.

The remaining of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the theoretical background leading to our hypotheses. Section 3 describes two studies providing support for our hypotheses. The paper concludes with a general discussion also covering future research opportunities and practical implications.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Luxury Consumption & Emotion Regulation

The investigation of the relationships between emotional states and luxury consumption requires a definition of luxury products. In the management literature it is accepted to distinguish luxury from non-luxury products by their essential characteristics. Luxury products have more than necessary and ordinary characteristics compared with other products of their category, which include their relatively high level of price, quality, aesthetics, rarity, extraordinariness, and symbolic meaning (Dubois/Laurent/Czellar 2001; Heine 2012). These characteristics can be thought of as dimensions that range from a minimum level that is also present in non-luxury products to a maximum level that represents the highest form of luxury. The luxuriousness of a product increases when the level of at least one of these characteristics increases. For example, based on the selling price, it is possible to differentiate between accessible, intermediate, and exceptional luxury products. This research concentrates on accessible luxury products such as accessories (e.g., wallets and scarves), which are affordable for a large part of the population (De Barrière/Falcy/Valette-Florence 2012).

Consumers consider luxuries as indulgences and may consume them to pursue their emotion management motives (Xu/Schwarz 2009). Luxury brands, and often luxury brand logos such as the well-known Louis Vuitton’s “LV” and Chanel’s interlocking Cs carry the social and cultural aspirations associated with luxury consumption (Wilcox/Kim/Sen 2009). In fact, the association between the brand/logo and luxury consumption is so strong that luxury and prestige often exist at the brand level (e.g., Tiffany & Co) rather than at the product category per se (e.g., jewellery), making the presence of the brand/logo a functional substitute for the luxuriousness of the product itself (Wilcox/Kim/Sen 2009). Thus, luxury brands or the mere presence of the luxury brand or logo is sufficient to satisfy consumers’ motivations in relation to luxury consumption.
The investigation of emotion regulation luxury consumption also requires a definition of emotion regulation. It is common sense that, in general, people prefer to feel good rather than bad (Clark/Isen 1982; Shen/Wyper 2008). Emotion regulation, therefore, relies on a hedonic goal pursuit assumption whereby positive emotions represent the final goal (Morris/Reilly 1987). According to Gross (1998, p. 275) “emotion regulation refers to the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions”. Accordingly, we refer to emotion regulation as efforts by people to repair a negative emotional state or maintain or improve a positive emotional state (Cohen/Andrade 2004). The literature has shown that consumers often engage in “retail therapy” (Atalay/Meloy 2011; Kemp/Kopp 2011) or emotion-driven impulsive consumption (Beatty/Ferrell 1998). Consumption as a way to regulate emotions manifests itself often in the lives of typical consumers, but there is still limited research about the processes involved in emotion regulation luxury consumption (Patrick/Hagvedt 2009).

Given that in emotion regulation the final outcome is a positive emotional state, and given that indulgent behaviour may generate both positive and negative emotions (Ramanathan/Williams 2007), people in a positive or a negative emotional state tend to have different motivations underlying their approach to indulgence: Individuals experiencing negative emotions are motivated to indulge to repair their negative state, while people in positive emotional states are motivated to refrain from indulgence to maintain their positive state (Clark/Isen 1982). Before engaging in indulgent behaviour consumers intuitively forecast the emotional consequences that this behaviour will produce given their current emotional state and associated motivations (Andrade 2005). People in a negative emotional state tend to ask themselves “is this luxury consumption going to help me feel better?”, whereas those in a positive state are more likely to question “is this luxury consumption going to hurt my pleasant feeling?”. In addition, prior research provides some evidence that people will only indulge if the indulgence is perceived to assist emotion regulation, that is, if indulgence indeed helps people improve a negative state or does not hurt a positive state (Andrade 2005; Tice/Bratslavsky/Baumeister 2001). As a consequence, both a positive or negative emotional state can stimulate or prevent indulgence in luxury consumption, as illustrated in our opening anecdote and further exemplified below.

2.1.1. Emotion Regulation Luxury Consumption in Negative Emotional States

A number of studies have found that people in negative states tend to indulge in hedonic consumption to repair their emotional state. For example, sad consumers may regulate their emotion by shopping to alleviate sadness (Atalay/Meloy 2011) and are willing to pay more for an item (Cryder/Lerner/Gross/Dahl 2008). Sad (vs. happy) people prefer to consume “comfort foods” such as chocolate as opposed to healthier alternatives (Garg/Wansink/Inman 2007).

However, an individual could be in such a negative state that indulgence would just not help. Consumers will only indulge if the current negative state is perceived as being changeable, that is, if indulgent behaviour offers the chance for improvement of the emotional state (Andrade 2005; Shen/Wyper 2008; Tice/Bratslavsky/Baumeister 2001). For example, Tice/Bratslavsky/Baumeister (2001) demonstrate that distressed individuals who believe their emotional state is changeable tend to engage in impulsive decisions as a way to regulate their emotions, but those distressed individuals who believe that their state is “frozen,” that is, unchangeable, are less likely to be impulsive. Shen/Wyper (2008) found that negative emotions increase indulgence only when such behaviours help people to eliminate the unpleasant state. Labroo/Mukhopadhyay (2009) provide further evidence that individuals are more prone to indulge when they believe action is needed to improve their emotional state. In summary, when consumers are provided with a cue suggesting that their negative emotional state can change, they tend to indulge to regulate emotion.

2.1.2. Emotion Regulation Luxury Consumption in Positive Emotional States

People in a positive emotional state are generally inclined to refrain from indulgence to keep their positive state. Consumers avoid buying luxury products when they feel good to avoid hurting a positive emotional state (Luce 1998; Luomala 2002). If consumers anticipate negative emotions such as guilt, they may avoid indulgence (Ramanathan/Williams 2007).

However, this only occurs if the current positive state can change, that is, if indulgence risks diminishing the experience of positive emotion (Andrade 2005; Isen/Simmonds 1978). For example, Andrade (2005) found that if something threatens peoples’ positive emotional state, they refrain from indulging to preserve this positive experience; but if the current positive state is not threatened (is unchangeable), people in a positive emotional state tend to indulge more.

In sum, the literature shows that solely the valence of the emotional state (positive or negative) is not enough to predict when consumers will be willing to engage in luxury consumption to regulate their emotional state. An analysis of the literature suggests that indulgent behaviour to regulate emotions will also depend on how people perceive the indulgence in luxury consumption to aid their emotion regulation goal. In the next section, we argue that the certainty appraisal can signal whether an emotional state can be regulated or not.

2.2. The Certainty-Uncertainty Appraisal of Emotional States

Appraisal theorists suggest that emotions are a consequence of combinations of cognitive appraisals (Ells-
worth/Scherer 2003; Ellsworth/Smith 1988; Lazarus 1991; Roseman/Spindel/Jose 1990; Scherer 1999; Smith/Ellsworth 1985). Appraisal theories developed by different researchers largely converge towards the idea that appraisals differentiate the specific discrete emotions (Scherer 1999). For example, the appraisal of valence (e. g., something good or something bad happened) determines the fundamental reaction of the organism (Ellsworth/Scherer 2003). In other words, it determines whether the consequent emotion is positive or negative, and therefore, Lazarus (1991) considers valence as the “primary appraisal”. Appraisals that follow help to further discriminate the emotion. For example, after evaluating if something is good or bad, one may appraise how certain the situation or the outcome of the event is: If something good happened (causing a positive emotion) and this event is certain (e. g., your paper was accepted for publication) the consequent emotion is joy, but if the event is uncertain (e. g., your paper was conditionally accepted) the consequent emotion is hope. Although appraisal theories were developed to explain how emotions emerge, people do not need to be consciously aware of these appraisals for emotions to emerge because appraisals can be non-reflective, automatic, and unconscious (Lazarus 1999). This creates an automatic association between emotions and underlying appraisals: When a given emotion is activated (e. g., hope), its underlying appraisals (e. g., positive valence, uncertainty) are also activated (Tiedens/Linton 2001).

The appraisal of certainty has been defined by several theorists and, although the wording slightly differs, the definitions largely converge (Ellsworth/Scherer 2003; Scherer 1999). In general, the appraisal of certainty refers to the (im)possibility of reversing what happened or to the extent to which the effects of the event have materialized or are anticipated (Frijda 1988). Thus, the appraisal of certainty refers to certainty about what is happening in the situation or about what will happen next (Ellsworth/Scherer 2003; Smith/Ellsworth 1985). According to appraisal theories, some emotions, for example happiness, contentment, disgust and anger, are characterized by an experience of certainty. Other emotions, including hope, surprise, fear and worry, are associated with an experience of uncertainty (Tiedens/Linton 2001). Yet other emotions, such as sadness, can be either associated with certainty or uncertainty. For example, sadness felt when a romantic relationship ends may be associated with the appraisals that something desired has been lost and cannot be recovered (certain sadness) or can be recovered (uncertain sadness; Roseman/Smith 2001).

We propose that the certainty appraisal signals people whether their current emotional state can change or not. Support for this assertion comes from the very own definition of certainty and from previous research. The appraisal of certainty conveys the idea that something is clearly established or assured (“impossibility of reversing”; Frijda 1988, p. 350). In addition, something certain is something that is “able to be firmly relied on to happen or be the case” (Oxford Dictionary 2012). This meaning of stability associated with certainty carries information that a given situation can or cannot change. As a consequence, we expect consumers to automatically infer that while certain or established emotions are definitive and will not change, uncertain or unsure emotions are tentative and may change. Additional support for this prediction comes from research on priming effects and automatic inferences. Research in social psychology has shown that when individuals are exposed to different stimuli, cognitions and behaviour that are congruent with the stimulus are automatically activated (Ferguson/Hasin/Bargh 2008). For example, Clore/Parrot (1994) manipulated the appraisal of certainty through hypnosis and found that certain people understood a poem better than uncertain people. Subjective experiences, such as the experience of emotional certainty, are informative in their own right and serve as a basis for judgment and behaviour (Schwarz 2004). Based on previous research, we expect that the meaning associated with the experience of emotional certainty will be automatically associated with the emotion per se (Clore/Parrot 1994; Tiedens/Linton 2001). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that consumers will automatically infer (Kardes et al. 2008) from the experience of certainty and its meaning of stability that their emotional state can change or not and consequently be more or less likely to engage in behaviours to regulate their emotions.

2.3. Willingness to Indulge in Luxury to Regulate Emotions

In this section we put together sections 2.1 and 2.2 to derive our hypotheses on how the certainty appraisal of an emotion may influence consumers’ willingness to indulge in luxury consumption to regulate their emotions. Section 2.1 concludes that because of the mixed feelings resulting from indulgence, consumers will be more willing to indulge when indulging helps them repair a negative emotion or does not hurt a positive emotion. Section 2.2 presents the rationale for the role of certainty. When an emotion is associated with certainty, people may infer that their emotional state is certain and unchangeable, and thus their subsequent behaviour can hardly change their emotional state. Conversely, when an emotion is associated with uncertainty, people may infer that their emotional state is uncertain and changeable, and thus their subsequent behaviour can change their emotional state. These contentions have important implications for consumers’ willingness to indulge in luxury consumption as a way to regulate their emotions.

If an emotion is negative and associated with certainty, indulging would not help consumers feel better, which would make them less willing to consume luxury products. If an emotion is negative and uncertain, the immediate pleasure of indulging, even at long-term costs, can help consumers to repair their negative state, so they

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would be more willing to consume luxury products. Thus, we should observe the following pattern for consumers who are in negative emotional states and have the opportunity to regulate their emotions via consumption of luxury products:

H1: People in a negative emotional state associated with uncertainty (e.g., fear) are more willing to indulge in luxury consumption than people in a negative emotional state associated with certainty (e.g., anger).

Conversely, if an emotion is positive and associated with certainty, indulging would not hurt one’s positive state, which would make people more likely to consume luxury products. If an emotion is positive and uncertain, the costs of indulging could hurt the uncertain positive state, which would lead people to be less likely to consume luxury products in order to preserve their pleasant emotional state. Thus, we should observe the following pattern for consumers who are in positive emotional states and have the opportunity to regulate their emotions via consumption of luxury products:

H2: People in a positive emotional state associated with certainty (e.g., happiness) are more willing to indulge in luxury consumption than people in a positive emotional state associated with uncertainty (e.g., hope).

We contribute to existing research by proposing that the certainty appraisal of an emotion is in itself a cue on whether the emotional state can change. One of the advantages of this approach is that it provides a way to communicate whether the emotion can change or not within the emotional experience itself, without the need of an external cue as done in previous research. These propositions are illustrated in Fig. 1 and tested in two studies described next.

3. Empirical Studies

3.1. Study 1: The Impact of Fear, Anger, Hope and Happiness on Willingness to Indulge in Luxury

3.1.1. Method

The study used a 2 (valence: negative vs. positive) x 2 (certainty: uncertain vs. certain) between-subjects design. Participants were business undergraduate students from an American university and completed the study voluntarily as part of a one-hour research session in exchange for extra credit for their marketing research course. This sample is appropriate for this study because university students are part of the target group of accessible luxury products such as accessories, which account for a large part of revenues of many luxury companies (Bain & Company 2012). In addition, as we are interested in general consumers’ willingness to engage in luxury consumption, we do not need participants with any prior luxury purchase experience. Thus, using a general sample that potentially includes customers and non-customers of luxury brands helps generalizing the results to the general public. A total of 80 participants completed the study (43.8 % female, average age = 21.46). Participants were welcomed to the lab in groups of approximately 15 and learned that they would complete several independent studies. This study was paper-based and participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions.

To operationalize the constructs of valence and certainty while using a natural setting, we chose discrete emotions that naturally vary in terms of the appraisals of valence and certainty instead of artificially manipulating them. We chose one emotion for each of the four experimental conditions: For the negative uncertain condition, we selected fear; for the negative certain condition, anger; for the positive uncertain condition, hope, and for the positive certain condition, happiness. These emotions were selected because they were already used in previous re-
search in comparable contexts. For example, all of these emotions were used by Tiedens/Linton (2001) as emotions differing in valence and certainty when they examined the effect of emotional certainty on information processing. In addition, fear and anger were used in a study by Lerner/Keltner (2001) about the impact of certain/uncertain emotions on risk aversion. Hope and happiness were used in a study by Roseman/Spinell/Jose (1990) about the emotion-causing patterns of appraisal including the certainty/uncertainty dimension. To obtain the four conditions of our experimental design, we manipulated the four different emotions: Participants received the 2-page paper questionnaire containing our study. On the first page, they were instructed to write about an actual emotional event that has happened to them. Depending on the condition participants were asked to think of, relive, vividly recall, and describe an episode that has made them scared, angry, hopeful or happy. The procedure used in this study is similar to that employed by Tiedens/Linton (2001) to manipulate valence and certainty of emotional states and has been shown to indeed induce these emotional states successfully.

After completing the emotion manipulation task, participants responded on the second page of the questionnaire to one manipulation check item for valence (“How pleasant was this experience?”) and two for certainty (“How certain were you about what was happening in that situation?” and “Did you feel that you could have predicted the occurrence of the event?”), all adapted from Smith/Ellsworth (1985) to measure the valence and certainty appraisals. The two certainty items formed a composite measure of certainty ($r = .65, p = .000$). Scale end-points ranged from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much).

Willingness to indulge in luxury was operationalized as follows: We measured participants’ disposition to indulge in luxury products with two items and 9-point scales whose end-points were pictures of products. Participants were told that we were investigating consumers’ willingness to purchase some products and were asked to rate their preferences for the purchase of the following products: One of two wallets, a plain black wallet and a luxurious red wallet with a Ferrari logo (“I prefer this wallet”), and one of two scarves, a plain black scarf and a luxurious Burberry patterned scarf (“I prefer this scarf”). Participants saw the pictures of these products and rated their preferences using the 9-point scale. These two items formed a composite measure of willingness to indulge in luxury ($r = .29, p = .01$). In this scale, “1” represents the non-luxurious product and “9” represents the luxurious product. Thus, the higher the mean, the higher participants’ willingness to indulge in luxury. To use stimuli that were as similar as possible to each other, all of the products shown in the scale end-points varied only in terms of their branding. The affiliation of a product to the luxury segment was symbolized either by the brands’ logo or pattern so that participants could identify this indulgence opportunity and use this indulgent consumption as a way to regulate their emotional state. As discussed in section 2.1, the presence of the luxury brand or logo should satisfy consumers’ motivations in relation to luxury consumption (Wilcox/Kim/Sen 2009), which in this case relates to emotion regulation. Rating preferences between a “plain” product and a clearly “luxury” product allowed us to capture willingness to indulge in luxury in a rather clean and subtle manner. We chose accessories as the product category because they represent affordable luxuries that are targeted to a large share of the market, so most consumers can relate to them. Burberry and Ferrari were chosen because a pre-test suggested that these brands are perceived as luxury brands and because they offer accessories that fit the stimuli of the study. After participants answered the demographic questions (age and gender), they were thanked and debriefed.

3.1.2. Results of Study 1

To examine whether the manipulation of valence was effective, we conducted a 2 (valence: negative vs. positive) x 2 (certainty: uncertain vs. certain) ANOVA with pleasantness as dependent variable. This analysis revealed a main effect of valence ($F(1, 76) = 136.12, p = .000, \eta^2 = .642$) showing that the valence manipulation was effective ($M_{\text{negative}} = 2.58, M_{\text{positive}} = 7.06$). To examine whether the manipulation of certainty was effective, we conducted a similar 2 (valence: negative vs. positive) x 2 (certainty: uncertain vs. certain) ANOVA with the certainty index as dependent variable ($F(1, 76) = 4.60, p = .035, \eta^2 = .057$). This analysis showed that the certainty manipulation was also effective ($M_{\text{uncertain}} = 4.46, M_{\text{certain}} = 5.56$).

To examine the effects of valence and certainty on willingness to indulge in luxury, we conducted a 2 (valence: negative vs. positive) x 2 (certainty: uncertain vs. certain) ANOVA with the willingness to indulge index as dependent variable. This analysis revealed only an interaction between valence and certainty ($F(1, 76) = 8.51, p = .005, \eta^2 = .101$). Planned contrasts suggest that when participants felt the negative uncertain emotion of fear ($M = 6.13$) they were more likely to indulge than when they felt the positive certain emotion of anger ($M = 4.53$; $F(1, 76) = 4.62, p = .035, \eta^2 = .057$). Planned contrasts also suggest that when participants felt the positive uncertain emotion of hope ($M = 4.64$) they were less likely to indulge than when they felt the positive certain emotion of happiness ($M = 6.08; F(1, 76) = 3.90, p = .05, \eta^2 = .049$). These results support H1 and H2 and are illustrated in Fig. 2.

1 The pre-test was conducted with a sample of university students extracted from the same population of the studies’ participants. Pre-test participants were told that we were interested in learning about luxury brands and were asked to list the five brands that came to their mind that they considered luxury brands. The most listed brands by this sample were: Gucci, Coach, Rolex, Tiffany & Co., Burberry, Armani, Mercedes Benz, Ferrari, Prada, Louis Vuitton, BMW, Ralph Lauren, Lexus, Versace.
These results support our proposition that the certainty appraisal associated with an emotion signals when to indulge in luxury products to regulate emotion. When the valence of the emotion is negative, we observe a tendency to luxury consumption when the emotion is uncertain and therefore indulging can improve one’s emotional state. When the valence of the emotion is positive, we observe a tendency to luxury consumption when the emotion is certain and therefore indulging cannot hurt one’s emotional state.

Although results were consistent with our predictions, our emotion manipulation does not allow us to control for differences other than valence or certainty. A more conservative test of our hypotheses involves a comparison between the same emotion associated with uncertainty or with certainty. Study 2 addresses this concern.

3.2. Study 2: The Impact of Sadness and Pride on Willingness to Indulge in Luxury

In study 1 we chose emotions based on the appraisal theory of emotions that have been found to be either associated with uncertainty (fear, hope) or certainty (anger, happiness; Tiedens/Linton 2001). Some emotions, however, do not present such clear position in the certainty spectrum. Sometimes the emotions of sadness and pride may be associated with greater certainty, but at other times these emotions may be associated with greater uncertainty (Smith/Ellsworth 1985; Tiedens/Linton 2001; Roseman/Antoniou/Jose 1996). Thus, varying the degree of the certainty appraisal within the same emotion allows us to conduct a cleaner and more conservative test of our hypotheses.

3.2.1. Method

Study 2 used a 2 (valence: negative vs. positive) x 2 (certainty: uncertain vs. certain) between-subjects design. Participants were undergraduate students and members from a sorority at an American university. They completed the study voluntarily as part of a half-hour research session conducted by the business school lab. A total of 61 females (average age = 21.08) completed the study. The same rationale described in study 1 for the appropriateness of the sample applies to study 2. The conditions were assigned randomly.

To operationalize emotional valence and certainty we used a procedure that was almost identical to that used in study 1. One crucial difference is that we manipulated only one negative emotion (sadness) and only one positive emotion (pride). To manipulate certainty, we emphasized that these emotions should be uncertain or certain. Thus, the four conditions were obtained by asking participants to remember, relive, and vividly recall an event that has made them either really sad and uncertain, sad and certain, proud and uncertain, or proud and certain. As in study 1, they were asked to experience the event again as vividly as possible. This procedure was adapted from Tiedens/Linton (2001), who manipulated the certainty associated with sadness. Based on previous research (Roseman/Antoniou/Jose 1996), we chose pride as a positive emotion that can be either associated with certainty or uncertainty. An example of uncertain pride is the following: “I remember the day when I purchased my first car. It did make me proud as I finally got a chance to purchase my dream car. But I was not very sure how my parents would react to the situation as I spent all of my savings to buy a car.” An example of certain pride is the following: “After completing my schooling I desired to join Engineering and become a Software Engineer. I got admission in a very reputed Engineering college. My parents were really happy for me; they were the real pillars behind my success.”

After completing the emotion manipulation task, participants responded to a valence manipulation check where they rated the degree to which the experience was pleasant and to a certainty manipulation check where they rated how certain they were about what was happening in the situation. These items are the same used in study 1 and were adapted from Smith/Ellsworth (1985) to measure the valence and certainty appraisals of emotions. Scales ranged from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much).

To operationalize our main dependent variable, we measured participants’ disposition to indulge in luxury products with two items, similarly to study 1. Willingness to indulge in luxury was captured with 9-point scales whose
end-points were pictures of products. As in study 1, the luxuriousness of the indulgent counterparts was expressed by their brand symbols so that participants could easily identify this indulgence opportunity and use it as a way to regulate their emotions. Because showing the same results across studies with different products would enhance the generalisability of the results, we chose different products. These products are also more appropriate for the female sample (products used in study 1 were appropriate for both genders). The selected brands, Coach and Tiffany & Co., were two of the most cited luxury brands in the pre-test. Participants rated their preference for one of two tote bags, a plain black bag and a brown/taupe bag with the Coach logo (“I prefer this tote bag”), and their preference for one of two earrings, one of them with a visible Tiffany & Co (“I prefer this earring”). As in study 1, in this 9-point scale the endpoint “1” represents the non-luxurious product and “9” represents the luxurious product. The products shown in the scale end-points were as similar as possible to each other but varied in the presence of the brand symbols. These two items formed a composite measure of willingness to indulge in luxury \((r = .69, p = .01)\).

3.2.2. Results of Study 2

To examine whether the valence manipulation was effective, we conducted a 2 (valence: negative vs. positive) x 2 (certainty: uncertain vs. certain) ANOVA with pleasantness as dependent variable. This analysis revealed a main effect of valence \((F(1, 57) = 199.57, p = .000, \eta^2 = .778)\) showing that the valence manipulation was effective \((M_{\text{sadness}} = 1.93, M_{\text{pride}} = 7.84)\). To examine whether the certainty manipulation was effective, we conducted a similar 2 x 2 ANOVA with certainty as dependent variable. This analysis revealed a main effect of certainty \((F(1, 57) = 5.70, p = .020, \eta^2 = .091)\), showing that the certainty manipulation was also effective \((M_{\text{uncertain}} = 4.79, M_{\text{certain}} = 6.33)\).

To examine the effects of valence and certainty on willingness to indulge in luxury, we conducted a 2 (valence: negative vs. positive) x 2 (certainty: uncertain vs. certain) ANOVA with the willingness to indulge index as dependent variable. This analysis revealed a main effect of emotion \((F(1, 56) = 4.77, p = .033, \eta^2 = .079)\) suggesting that luxury consumption is more likely in a state of pride \((M = 5.41)\) than in a state of sadness \((M = 4.42)\). More importantly, and supporting our hypotheses, this main effect was qualified by the predicted interaction between valence and certainty \((F(1, 56) = 9.16, p = .004, \eta^2 = .141)\). Planned contrasts suggest that when sadness was associated with uncertainty \((M = 5.13)\), participants were more likely to indulge in luxury consumption than when sadness was associated with certainty \((M = 3.70; F(1, 56) = 4.97, p = .029, \eta^2 = .075)\). Planned contrasts also suggest that when pride was associated with uncertainty \((M = 4.75)\), participants were less likely to indulge in luxury consumption than when pride was associated with certainty \((M = 6.07; F(1, 56) = 4.21, p = .045, \eta^2 = .069)\). These results support H1 and H2 and are illustrated in Fig. 3.

Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that the certainty appraisal of an emotional state affects willingness to indulge in luxury to regulate emotion. The two studies complement each other and together support our hypotheses. Study 1 shows the impact of the certainty-uncertainty dimension on willingness to indulge in luxury consumption for the purpose of emotion regulation; it uses positive and negative emotions that are associated either with a certainty or an uncertainty appraisal. Study 1 demonstrates that the certainty-uncertainty dimension can occur naturally in specific emotional states, thus affecting luxury consumption. Study 2 tests our hypotheses in a more controlled way and adds robustness to the results as the effect is replicated when we manipulate certainty or uncertainty associated with the same emotion. Thus, the results of studies 1 and 2 support our theoretical predictions and allow us to generalize the results across some emotional states and luxury product categories.

4. General Discussion

The results of this research demonstrate that the certainty appraisal associated with an emotion influences consu-
mers’ willingness to indulge in luxury consumption as a way to regulate their emotions. First, we demonstrated that people in a negative emotional state associated with uncertainty (e. g., fear) were more willing to indulge in luxury products than those in a negative state associated with certainty (e. g., anger) because luxury consumption would help them repair their emotional state. People in a certain negative emotional state were less willing to indulge because in this case luxury consumption would not help them repair their emotional state (i. e., emotion regulation is not possible). Second, we showed that participants in a positive emotional state associated with uncertainty (e. g., hope) were less likely to consume luxury products than those in a positive state associated with certainty (e. g., happiness) because luxury consumption could hurt their positive state, which they wish to maintain.

By showing that the certainty appraisal affects consumers’ willingness to indulge in luxury consumption to regulate their emotional state, this research contributes to existing research investigating emotion regulation (e. g., Andrade 2005; Labroo/Mukhopadhyay 2009; Shen/Wyer 2008; Tice/Bratslavsky/Baumeister 2001). We show that the certainty appraisal moderates the effect of the valence of emotions on emotion regulation by signalling to consumers whether their emotional state can change or not. More relevant to marketing, our results show how emotional certainty systematically affects consumers’ willingness to engage in emotion regulation luxury consumption.

4.1. Theoretical Implications

The findings of this research build on, integrate, and add to existing research. They are consistent with Tice/Bratslavsky/Baumeister (2001), who showed that participants who believed that their negative emotional state was frozen (i. e., unchangeable) were less likely to seek immediate gratification to improve their emotional state. The findings for positive emotional states are consistent with Andrade (2005), who showed that when an emotional state is expected to be changeable, people in a positive state indulge less in chocolate to preserve their pleasant emotion, but if an emotional state is expected not to change, people in a positive state condition indulge more. We integrate the findings of Tice/Bratslavsky/Baumeister (2001) and Andrade (2005) that indulgence depends on whether consumers infer if emotional states can change.

We add to this prior research by showing that the certainty appraisal of an emotion can serve the purpose of signalling whether the emotional state can change or not. In prior research, an external manipulation was used to change the extent to which participants perceive a behaviour to change their emotional state. Tice/Bratslavsky/Baumeister (2001) and Andrade (2005) concentrate less on the characteristics of emotions to explain consumers’ perceptions about the changeability of their emotions, but rather on product characteristics, that is, the emotion-regulating properties of comfort food and the self-lifting properties of chocolate, which women tend to acknowledge more than men. The perceptions about the extent to which comfort food has emotion-regulating properties were manipulated by a “mood-freezing procedure” that simply consisted of explaining to participants that eating comfort food would not help changing their mood (Tice/Bratslavsky/Baumeister 2001). The perceptions about the mood-lifting properties of chocolate were manipulated by using gender as a proxy for the acceptance (women) or the refusal (men) of chocolate as a mood-lifting instrument (Andrade 2005). In this research, we show that the certainty-uncertainty dimension of the emotion plays the role of the mood-freezing procedure (Tice/Bratslavsky/Baumeister 2001) and the gender proxy (Andrade 2005) and helps explaining consumers’ decision to indulge in luxury products by signalling consumers when their emotions can change. Importantly, results show that this signalling can occur within the emotional state itself. Theoretically, this helps to understand why different emotions of the same valence make consumers more or less likely to purchase luxury products. In addition, the key behaviour examined in this research is luxury consumption. Thus, besides showing that the certainty appraisal signals when to regulate emotion, we apply these findings to a context relevant to marketing.

4.2. Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of the study include the student sample and the laboratory conditions as this may not always reflect the behaviour of consumers in natural settings. However, both the sampling procedure and the experimental design add internal validity to the studies and consequently to the psychological process that we reveal. We suggest that future research further test the external validity of the findings. An interesting way to do this is by inducing emotions via advertising of luxury products and measuring consumers’ willingness to purchase the advertised product.

In the present studies, the affiliation of a product to the luxury segment was conveyed by presenting the luxury brand symbols (Wilcox/Kim/Sen 2009). However, a consequence of this operationalization is that respondents’ willingness to indulge in luxury consumption could be affected by their preferences for conspicuous consumption. The luxury experience can be broader than that and can exist regardless of the presence of a brand, including an aesthetic experience not necessarily linked to a brand. We expect that the results would extend to different indulgent situations, given that these situations also carry the desirable aspects associated with its costs. Extensions of the results to other types of indulgence and other types of luxury consumption can be investigated in future research.

Although we chose products that were as similar as possible to each other but varied in the presence of luxury
4.3. Managerial Implications

The results of this research have various practical implications for luxury brand managers and other market agents. Above all, results help brand managers in deepening their understanding about the phenomenon of emotion regulation luxury consumption and, more specifically, in recognizing some situations in which consumers are more likely to buy luxury products. Given that retail environments can induce specific emotional states on consumers via factors such as store atmosphere (Donovan/Rossiter 1982), product appeals (Kim/Park/Schwarz 2010), mall variety and environment (Wakefield/Baker 1998), and more specifically in luxury retailing via art and “magic” (Dion/Arnould 2011), it is important to understand how such emerging emotions can influence consumers’ preferences.

The findings demonstrate that it does not make much sense to invest in marketing activities to encourage emotion regulation luxury consumption on the basis of people’s positive or negative emotions alone. Luxury brand communication inducing positive emotional states could (unintentionally) prevent people from buying, and on the contrary, brand communication inducing negative emotional states could trigger purchases. Any emotional state may mean to marketers both a chance and an obstacle to sell consumers a luxury product.

There are several opportunities to manage emotion regulation luxury consumption. Brand managers could better address the naturally pre-existing emotional states of their customers by taking the certainty-uncertainty dimension of emotions into account. They could identify emotion-based positioning gaps and design luxury products that appeal to specific emotion regulation strategies such as, for instance, a luxury chocolate that promises to relieve uncertain negative affective states such as fear or worry. Alternatively, marketers can influence people’s emotional states through their marketing. Earlier research suggests that the manipulation of store atmosphere can impact consumer’s emotion (Donovan/Rossiter 1982). For example, the type and behaviour of salespeople, visual factors such as layout and colour, and ambient factors such as lighting, music, and smell can impact consumers’ emotional states. This is especially relevant for luxury brands, which tend to invest substantial resources in their flagship stores (Dion/Arnould 2011).

The research findings can assist luxury brand managers in designing their brand communication and especially advertising campaigns with regards to emotion regulation luxury consumption. For example, as the results suggest that consumers in a positive emotional state associated with certainty (e.g., happiness) are more willing to indulge in luxury consumption than people in an emotional state associated with uncertainty (e.g., hope), a luxury brand may prefer an advertisement inducing happiness to one inducing hope. The study by Kemp/Bai/Chapa (2012) demonstrates that advertising can be effec-
tive at appealing to consumers’ emotion regulation propensities. By using emotion-laden language and pictures in their communications, marketers can give their brands and products an emotional appeal, target specific valence-certainty-relationships of emotions and remind their consumers of the emotions that the use of their products may generate (Kemp/Kopp 2011).

As the results suggest some emotions that make consumers more or less likely to indulge in luxury consumption, they help market agents to employ emotional stimuli more effectively not only to encourage, but also to discourage luxury consumption. For example, while luxury managers may want to encourage luxury consumption, a competitor selling a non-luxury alternative may want to reduce consumers’ willingness to purchase the luxury option. From an economic perspective, it is possible that institutions (companies, non-profit organizations, governmental agencies) might be interested in promoting consumption of high-end products to improve quality of life, but it is also possible that these institutions want to educate consumers to consume less “unnecessary” products to invest in public well-being.

The main lesson of this research can be summarized in a clear message: To influence emotion regulation consumption of luxury products, marketing should not only take into account the valence of the emotions (positive or negative), but also consider whether consumers could perceive their emotions as being changeable. Luxury brands may develop competitive advantages by fine-tuning their emotional marketing techniques according to these results, which can increase consumer benefits, sales, and the return of investments in emotional advertising, product, and store design.

References


Keywords

luxury consumption, indulgence, emotion regulation, certainty appraisal