CASE STUDY NO. 04 · LUXURY CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGY

The Customer Is Always Right

But which one? A field guide to the luxury consumer — who they are, what they want, and how you actually reach them.

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I. THE PROBLEM WITH THE POLL

Why I Got Five Different Answers and All of Them Were Right

A few months ago I ran a poll on my Snapchat. Nothing scientific — just a question sent to the handful of people I know who have real money, or at least more of it than me. The question was simple: *do you buy luxury, and if so, why?*

The answers did not cohere into a profile. One person said they bought luxury as a reward, something they allowed themselves after a good year. Another said they didn't care about the brand at all — they wanted the best-made version of the thing and the brand happened to be what that was. A third said visibility was never the point; they actively avoided logos. A fourth said the logo was entirely the point. A fifth said they didn't buy luxury at all, found the whole apparatus a bit embarrassing, and spent their money on property and travel instead.

Five people. Five completely different psychological relationships with the same category. And the one thing that united them was that none of them were responding to the same marketing, none of them wanted the same experience, and none of them would have bought from a brand that was designed for any of the other four.

This is the problem the luxury industry has with its own audience. It is vast, it is diverse, and it does not want to be treated as a single entity. But brands keep behaving as though understanding the customer means building one composite profile and running one campaign at it. That profile — the aspirational thirty-eight-year-old in a major city who values authenticity and owns too many tote bags — exists in every brand deck I have ever encountered. She does not exist in the data.

This case study is an attempt to answer the question the poll raised: if luxury has so many different kinds of consumers, how do you actually market to them? Not abstractly. Concretely — who are they, what do they value, what does their experience of luxury look like, and what do brands that understand them actually do differently?

II. BEFORE THE ARCHETYPES

One Finding That Changes the Frame Entirely

There is a piece of research that I think every luxury brand should be forced to read before they brief a campaign. It inverts the most basic assumption the industry operates on.

Jiang, Cui and Shan (2022) studied young luxury consumers in the United States and China — the two largest luxury markets — and asked a deceptively simple question: who prefers quiet luxury, and who prefers loud?[1] Quiet luxury means discreet logos, subtle design, items that require cultural literacy to read. Loud luxury means high brand prominence — visible signatures, recognisable patterns, the kind of piece that announces itself before you do.

The assumption, built into decades of luxury marketing, is that confident, status-secure consumers prefer loud. They have arrived. They want the room to know it. The research found the opposite. Overt narcissists — the most self-assured, extroverted, already-certain-of-their-status consumers — consistently chose quiet luxury. They reach for the subtle signal not despite their confidence but because of it. They don't need the logo to do the work.[1]

The consumers who chose loud luxury were covert narcissists: insecure, hypersensitive to social evaluation, anxious about being overlooked. For them the visible logo is not decoration. It is structural support. It closes a gap between the self they feel and the self they want others to see. The brand is doing something the consumer cannot do alone.

> *"Overt narcissists prefer quiet luxury… because it helps them demonstrate their sophisticated taste. Covert narcissists prefer loud luxury because the visible, recognisable features are effective markers in compensating for their uncertain self."* — *Jiang, Cui & Shan (2022). International Marketing Review, 39(2).*

The study also found that social anxiety amplifies both. Under pressure — a high-stakes environment, a first impression that counts — the overt narcissist reaches for an even quieter signal. The covert narcissist reaches for an even louder one. The same external pressure produces directly opposite responses depending entirely on who is feeling it.[1]

This is not a nuance. For a brand running one campaign at one consumer, it is the whole problem. The person who needs the brand to shout is not the person who needs the brand to whisper. And treating them as the same consumer — which most brands do — means reaching neither of them fully.

A Field Guide to Who Is Actually in the Room

What follows is not a demographic segmentation. These five consumer types are defined by psychology — by the function luxury serves for them and what they need from a brand to feel that function being served. Income bracket, age, and geography correlate with each type but do not define it. A thirty-year-old can be an old-money Connoisseur in disposition. A sixty-year-old can be a Status Seeker. What matters is the internal architecture.

01. The Status Seeker — "I want the room to know."
The most visible luxury consumer and the most misunderstood. Brands design for the Status Seeker disproportionately, partly because they are loud — they are doing the brand's marketing in public, for free — and partly because the industry has confused visibility with importance.

The Status Seeker's relationship with luxury is transactional in a specific sense: the brand is a message, and the message needs to be received. Jiang et al. (2022) describe this as a *social-adjustive attitude* — buying to regulate how the self appears in the social environment, to project a specific image outward.[1] The product matters less than what it communicates. Craftsmanship is relevant only insofar as it supports the signal.

This consumer skews toward new money, younger consumers in markets still negotiating their relationship with wealth, and cultures where status display carries higher social utility. Chinese luxury consumers, per the Jiang et al. research, showed stronger social-adjustive motivations than their American counterparts — the need to be seen in luxury was, on average, more pronounced.[1] But the archetype is not exclusively cultural or generational. The motive is what defines it.

<u>How you reach them:</u> Lead with brand recognition. Make the social proof visible. Campaigns that position the product as a marker of arrival work because they confirm what this consumer already believes: that owning this places them in a specific category of person. Harrison and Amatulli note that these consumers respond powerfully to detail-rich storytelling about brand history and clientele — not because they care about craftsmanship per se, but because the right clientele story confirms they are buying into the right group.[2] What kills the sale: subtlety, insider codes, anything that requires prior knowledge to appreciate. If you have to explain why it's good, you've already lost them.

Brand doing it well: Gucci under Alessandro Michele. The bold prints, the maximalist references, the double-G everywhere — illegible to no one. Gucci has, at various points, been the loudest brand in the room and has priced its volume accordingly.

02. The Connoisseur — "I want the right person to notice."

The archetype every luxury brand claims to serve and almost none actually do, because serving the Connoisseur requires confidence in the product's own quality that is difficult to maintain when quarterly results are the primary measure.

The Connoisseur's relationship with luxury is curatorial. They are not buying a product — they are building a position, a relationship with craft and heritage that is legible only to people who share the same literacy. Jiang et al. (2022) describe this as a *value-expressive attitude*: consuming to express the true self, not to seek social approval.[1] The Connoisseur does not want the room to know what they are wearing. They want the right person in the room to know. The gap between those two things is the entire point.

Old money belongs here almost by definition. Harrison and Amatulli observe that among affluent consumers with established wealth, loyalty is not to any single brand but to the standards of the category — they own Hermès and Louis Vuitton and Prada and Coach, not because they can't choose, but because they understand what each one does and when.[2] They are loyal to excellence, not to logos.

How you reach them: Lead with craft, then provenance, then restraint. Harrison and Amatulli identify what they call the five dimensions of transcendence in great luxury brands: history, scarcity, craftsmanship, clientele, and materials.[2] The Connoisseur wants all five, offered without persuasion. They do not want to be sold to. They want to be informed. The ideal encounter with this consumer is less sales pitch and more docent's tour — someone who knows what they are talking about and shares the knowledge as a fellow enthusiast, not a transaction professional.

What kills the sale: mass-market collaborations, celebrity endorsements aimed at volume, or anything signalling that visibility has become more important to the brand than integrity. The moment a brand becomes popular, the Connoisseur starts looking for what comes next.

Brand doing it well: Bottega Veneta — deliberately logo-free, built on intrecciato weave that only insiders recognise, and priced at a premium that the Connoisseur finds appropriate and the Status Seeker finds confusing

03. The Experiencer — “I want to feel like someone different.”
The fastest-growing archetype and the one least legible to brands built on objects. The Experiencer is not opposed to ownership. They are simply more interested in the felt quality of a moment than in the object that made it possible. The hotel lobby matters more than the hotel brand. The dinner matters more than the restaurant’s star count. The feeling of arriving somewhere that was designed with intention is the product.

Case Study No. 03 in this series documented the Experiencer’s psychology in detail. What the Kimpton Vividora did — the lemon-and-mint lobby water, the deliberate lighting, the rotary telephone in gold and white — was not incidental hospitality design. For this consumer, it was the purchase. The sensory environment constructed a specific version of themselves within fifteen seconds of arrival. That is what they came for.

This is also the consumer most likely to share, most likely to become a genuine advocate, and most likely to generate the kind of content no campaign budget can purchase — because it is honest, and their audience knows it. They do not post the product. They post what the product felt like.

How you reach them: Give them a story before they arrive. The pre-arrival window — the booking confirmation, the email, the packaging — is the first act of sensory design for this consumer. A confirmation that says “We’re looking forward to having you” is logistics. One that describes what the lobby smells like, what has been prepared, what the evening holds — that is already the experience beginning. In-person, lead with specificity: the detail that could not have been anywhere else, the element that signals someone with genuine taste made this. Generic luxury is the worst thing you can offer this consumer. If it could have been anywhere, it should have been nowhere.

Brand doing it well: Aesop. Every store designed by a local architect, smells different in every city, no advertising, no celebrities, no loud signals of any kind. The entire brand is an experience of being somewhere specific.

04. The Reward Buyer — “I deserve this.”
The most misunderstood archetype in terms of timing. The Reward Buyer is not a permanent luxury consumer. They are a situational one, and that distinction has enormous implications for how and when a brand reaches them.

The Reward Buyer purchases in response to an internal event: a promotion, a difficult year survived, a relationship ended, a milestone crossed. The purchase is not about the object and it is not, primarily, about other people. It is a private statement. *I deserve this.* That statement is the entire transaction. Everything else — the brand, the price, the product category — is secondary to whether the experience of buying confirms the statement.

Harrison and Amatulli's research on affluent consumers identified this as "selling to happiness" — the insight that today's wealthy consumers do not buy luxury to become happy. They buy it because they already are, and the purchase is an expression of that state rather than a pursuit of it.[2] The Reward Buyer has not walked into the store to be persuaded. They have already decided. The brand's job is to make it easy to say yes without making them feel like they are being sold to.

How you reach them: Warmth first. The language of permission rather than persuasion. Self-gifting messaging. The sense that this brand understands the significance of this moment. Harrison and Amatulli also identify the ritual of celebration as critical here: closing a sale with a Reward Buyer requires marking the moment — the carefully wrapped package, the associate who comes out from behind the counter, the gesture that says this purchase was witnessed and honoured.[2] The orange Hermès bag presented with both hands is not packaging. It is the completion of the experience.

What kills the sale: cold prestige, status language, any framing that makes a private act feel like a public performance. This consumer has not come to impress anyone. They have come to confirm something about themselves. Treat the transaction like a social performance and you have misread the room.

Brand doing it well: Tiffany's — the blue box is not just packaging, it is the ritual. The ritual transfers meaning from the purchase to the object. And it is recognisable enough that even people who do not know luxury know what that box means.

05. The Ultra — "I want what money alone cannot buy."

The consumer most brands know least about and design for least, because reaching them requires resources most brands do not have and a mindset most brands have not developed.

Mrad (2026) studied Ultra High Net Worth Individuals — those with investable assets exceeding thirty million dollars — across seventeen in-depth interviews with UHNWIs and luxury brand executives in the UAE. The findings reframe what luxury means at the very top of the market. These consumers are not pursuing prestige or experience in the conventional sense. They are pursuing what Mrad describes as *distinction and access* — the ability to occupy a social position that cannot be purchased outright, only earned through relationships, cultural capital, and the kind of recognition that brands extend only to clients they genuinely know.[3]

The UHNWI wants personalisation that extends beyond a monogram. They expect brands to know their preferences before they state them. They do not browse collections — the collection comes to them, often to their residence, presented by someone senior enough to warrant the visit. They are offended if served by the same staff who assist regular customers. One participant in the study said it directly: “We want the restaurant’s famous chef to come to our table and take care of us. So we feel more privileged.”[3]

The pre-purchase behaviour of this consumer is also distinctive. Mrad (2026) found that UHNWIs use Instagram as an alert system — they scroll silently, never liking or commenting, and move to private channels once they see something of interest.[3] They are on social media in the way a person stands at a window watching the street: observing without being observed. Luxury brands that interpret the absence of engagement as absence of interest are making an expensive mistake.

> *“They want to be seen during the purchase process but not seen at the same time. They desire to be noticed for their status and the level of attention they receive, but also prefer to keep the details of their transactions confidential.” — Mrad (2026). Journal of Global Fashion Marketing, 17(2).*

How you reach them: You probably cannot reach them directly, and that is part of the point. Mrad’s research identified personal assistants and stylists as gatekeepers to this segment — intermediaries who shape, and sometimes obstruct, the UHNWI’s access to luxury experiences.[3] The brand that understands this builds relationships with the assistant as carefully as with the client. At the purchase stage, the UHNWI wants a private environment, separated from the common retail space, served by someone senior. Post-purchase, they want proactive contact — not a follow-up email but a team physically present at the event to ensure the couture dress holds. The experience does not end at the sale. It ends when the client is done wearing the thing in public.

Brand doing it well: Elie Saab, according to Mrad's research. The brand does not repeat pieces — one or two dresses maximum per design. Saab himself is available for couture clients. The experience is built around the designer's presence as the product, not the dress alone.[3]

IV. THE ONE THING ALL FIVE SHARE

And Why It Changes Every Brief

Five different consumers. Five different psychological needs. Five different marketing strategies required. And one thing in common that the research keeps returning to regardless of which end of the market we are talking about.

They can all tell when you are faking it.

Harrison and Amatulli describe affluent consumers as having finely calibrated "BS detectors".[2] Successful entrepreneurs and senior executives have heard every pitch. Their professional success came partly from their ability to assess sincerity and gauge whether someone can actually deliver on what they say. The moment a brand, or a salesperson, performs enthusiasm rather than expressing it, this consumer registers something is off — often before they can articulate why.

Mrad's UHNWI respondents described the same thing in more direct terms. They want the creative director at the table, not the sales associate. They want to deal with the person for whom this product is a genuine expression of craft rather than a transaction to be completed.[3] The Status Seeker wants to feel the brand means what it says. The Connoisseur wants to feel the person selling it knows what they are selling. The Experiencer wants to feel the environment was designed by someone who cares. The Reward Buyer wants to feel the moment was understood. The Ultra wants to feel the relationship is real.

Different needs. Same underlying test.

This is why Harrison and Amatulli's concept of the docent is so useful. The museum docent does not sell. They reveal. They give you the history, the provenance, the distinction between the merely good and the genuinely exceptional — and they do it as a fellow enthusiast, not as someone trying to close something. The paradox of luxury selling is that the harder you are trying to sell, the less likely you are to succeed. The more you behave like someone who genuinely loves the category and wants the customer to understand it, the more they spend.

"For me, the ideal salesperson is somebody who loves their job… You can usually see it and feel it, right away, when somebody really loves what they're doing. When I sense that, I'll spend!" — Affluent consumer, quoted in Harrison & Amatulli (2012).

Closing Thoughts

The phrase is true. It is also, as a strategic principle, nearly useless until you specify which customer.

The people who answered my Snapchat poll were all right about what they wanted. The reward-buyer who saves for a year and then spends freely on the thing they've been thinking about. The connoisseur who buys based on craft and finds logos slightly embarrassing. The status seeker who bought the belt because the logo was large enough to be seen across a room. None of them were wrong. None of them wanted to be reached the same way. And the brand that designed for one would have alienated all the others without knowing why.

The research, across all three sources in this case study, arrives at the same place from different directions. Jiang et al. (2022) show that the psychology of visibility divides the luxury consumer into two fundamentally different camps that require opposite signals.[1] Harrison and Amatulli show that what all affluent consumers share is a sensitivity to authenticity that no campaign can manufacture and no technique can fake.[2] Mrad (2026) shows that at the very top of the market, the experience of luxury has almost nothing to do with the product and almost everything to do with the relationship — who you are dealing with, how well they know you, and whether the brand makes you feel like the version of yourself that belongs at this level.[3]

That last sentence is, I think, the one that ties all four case studies together. Luxury is not a product category. It is the experience of being recognised as someone who belongs at a certain level — and that recognition can be delivered through a visible logo, a quiet craft signal, a perfectly sequenced sensory environment, a warm sales interaction, or a creative director who comes to your house with the garment. The vehicle changes. The destination is always the same.

The customer is always right. The job is to know which one walked in.

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