

CASE STUDY NO. 01 · LUXURY CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGY

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# What Louis Vuitton Taught Me About Belonging

*A personal study in luxury psychology, consumer motivation theory, and the architecture of desire.*

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## I. THE MOMENT

# Milan, and the Feeling That Didn't Come

A black dress from Shein. Chanel-inspired earrings. Sandals that had no business being in Milan. None of it mattered — or at least that's what I told myself — because that day I wasn't dressing for what I had. I was dressing for where I believed I was going.

The Galleria stopped me. Not the architecture exactly, but the names. CHANEL. Louis Vuitton. Tiffany & Co. What struck me wasn't excitement. It was something closer to recognition — the visceral realization of how deeply I had already internalized these brands before ever standing in front of them. They had lived in my peripheral vision for years: on screens, in conversations, in the visual language of aspiration itself. And here they were. Physical. Permanent.

I asked to go inside Louis Vuitton. More than once. Because in my mind, stepping through those doors meant something — like crossing a threshold I had only ever observed from the outside. I had constructed the feeling so completely in my imagination that I was certain I'd recognize it when it came.

*It didn't come.*

No rush. No revelation. No reorganization. I felt exactly the same. I kept moving, more slowly now, searching for the feeling rather than waiting for it. And then I found a black t-shirt — just that, with 'LOUIS VUITTON' printed across the back. I stared at it longer than was probably appropriate, waiting for the quality to announce itself in some obvious way. Instead came an unwelcome thought: the dress I wore today feels better than this.

*That wasn't what was supposed to happen*

I looked at my parents. My mother stood in front of a green leather purse, visibly uncomfortable — not just at the price, but at the space itself. The silence in the room. The associates whose attention was present but unreadable. The way the environment seemed to expect something from you. My father, meanwhile, offered to buy the bag. Not because he had a particular relationship with Louis Vuitton. But because the act of purchasing something there felt weighted with significance to him — like generosity made visible.

My mother said no. Firmly. And we left.

Three people. Same room. Same products. Same price tags. Three completely different psychological experiences. That contradiction has driven everything I've studied since.

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## II. WHY LOGIC DOESN'T WORK HERE

# Luxury and the Collapse of Rational Buying

Normal purchases follow a structure most of us understand intuitively. Do I need this? Does it work? Is the price reasonable? A torn winter coat gets replaced. A broken phone gets repaired. The decision is justified because it solves a problem.

Luxury breaks that logic completely. No one needs a plain t-shirt with a brand name on it. No one needs a \$5,000 purse. Srun (2017) states this plainly: luxury is something that, for many people, 'has no real utility.'<sup>1</sup> And yet the global luxury market is worth over \$1.5 trillion annually, with brands like Louis Vuitton, Chanel, and Hermès generating billions in revenue every year

So something else is driving it. And that something isn't taste, or quality, or even aspiration in its most surface-level form.

Research by Hauck and Stanforth (2007) found that when people buy things they don't functionally need, the most significant driver is to 'improve the quality of life,' followed closely by 'pleasure.'<sup>2</sup> Not status, which ranked lower. Not impulse, which ranked lowest of all. What people are really buying is an experience of themselves — a feeling about who they are or what they've earned.

Srun (2017) puts it simply: 'Luxury is always about experience. It is necessarily emotional rather than simply functional.'<sup>1</sup> The store, the lighting, the spacing between objects, the unreadable attention of the associates — these aren't incidental details. They're the actual product. What the space is selling is the feeling of deservingness. The quiet message that you are the kind of person who belongs here, who can claim this thing without apology.

*Luxury has always existed, in various forms, throughout history. It corresponds to a human aspiration — the need for self-affirmation.*

— Srun, F. (2017). *Luxury Selling*. Springer.

That's what I didn't understand standing in front of that t-shirt. I was evaluating the object. But the object was almost beside the point. What I was really confronting was the gap — or the absence of one — between the version of myself I believed in and the version the space reflected back at me.

My mother felt watched. I felt underwhelmed but still tempted. My father felt generous. Hauck and Stanforth (2007) describe this precisely: 'luxury and necessity are social perceptions based on differing values and tastes.'<sup>2</sup> We don't walk into a boutique empty. We bring our entire psychological interior with us — our self-concept, our relationship to achievement, our sense of what we've earned and what feels like overreach.

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## II. WHY LOGIC DOESN'T WORK HERE

### Why People Buy What They Don't Like

I thought the green purse was ugly. And yet, when my father offered to buy it, something in me lit up. Not because my opinion of the bag had changed. Because the act of purchasing it there felt like it would mean something. That reaction confused me for a long time. Now it doesn't.

Srun (2017) identifies what he calls the 'self-affirmation' engine at the core of luxury consumption. It operates through five expressions: the search for self-esteem, eagerness for success, social accomplishment, expectation of rewards, and the need for pleasure.<sup>1</sup> What unites them is that none of them are about the product. They're about what the product allows someone to believe about themselves.

My father offering to buy the bag wasn't really about the bag. It was about being the kind of person who could make that gesture — generous, successful, present. Srun describes exactly this: 'For many customers, being able to own a handbag from a high-end brand is a sign of success — being able to consume high-priced products.'<sup>1</sup> The object is the vehicle. The destination is a feeling about oneself.

And my mother's discomfort? That was self-affirmation in reverse. The space was asking a question — do you belong here? — and her answer, felt rather than spoken, was uncertainty. Not about the price. About her right to claim the experience without apology. The longer we stayed, the more the space seemed to press that question.

Hauck and Stanforth (2007) offer a definition of luxury that makes this visible: 'things you have that I think you shouldn't have.'<sup>2</sup> This isn't just a clever provocation. It reframes the entire act of walking into a store. You aren't evaluating an object. You're negotiating your right to occupy a certain identity. The store is a stage where worth and belonging are silently assessed — by the space, by the associates, and most relentlessly, by yourself.

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#### IV. THE PROBLEM WITH 'KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE'

## Why Archetypes Alone Don't Work

The standard response to all of this in marketing is to say: understand your audience's values and speak to them. Know what drives your consumer emotionally and build your messaging around that. It's reasonable advice. It's also incomplete in a way that costs brands real money.

The problem is that people don't know their own values cleanly, and even when they do, those values don't activate consistently. They activate differently depending on who's watching, what just happened, where the person physically is, and what emotional state they're in when they encounter your brand.

Hauck and Stanforth (2007) found that the same individual will categorize the same product as either a luxury or a near-necessity depending on whether they've previously purchased it.<sup>2</sup> Once someone has justified owning something, it shifts categories in their mind entirely. The motivations themselves are unstable across context — the study found that younger cohorts ranked entertainment and self-gifting as primary motivators, while older cohorts ranked relaxation and home beautification higher. Same types of products. Entirely different psychological needs being satisfied.

Srun (2017) notes that 'there are different types of luxury just as there are different consumer profiles' — and that a single customer carries multiple possible motivations simultaneously.<sup>1</sup> The same person buying a watch might be driven by pride in connoisseurship in one moment and by social recognition in another. Context doesn't just change how the motive is expressed. It changes which motive activates at all.

What this means practically is that building a single audience archetype — 'the status-seeker' or 'the pleasure-driven buyer' — and messaging toward it universally is a strategy that will always underperform. Not because the archetype is wrong. Because it's incomplete.

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#### V. A BETTER FRAMEWORK

## Motive × Context: The Architecture of Contextual Trigger Strategy

What I've come to think — and what the research supports — is that the real unit of analysis isn't the consumer. It's the consumer in a specific situation. And the strategy question isn't 'what does this person want?' but 'what does this person want, right now, in this environment, given what's happening in their life?' This leads to a framework I think of as Motive × Context. It works in three layers:

### LAYER 1 — CORE MOTIVE

What is the person emotionally trying to secure? The six most common in luxury contexts are:

*Status · Safety · Reward · Belonging · Distinction · Transformation*

### LAYER 2 — CONTEXT MODIFIERS

What changes how that motive is expressed and which signal will actually land?

*Age · Gender · Culture · Physical environment · Public vs. private use · Occasion · Peer group · Economic position · Life stage*

### LAYER 3 — SIGNAL STYLE

Given the motive and the context, what kind of communication cue will activate the response?

*Loud · Subtle · Intimate · Authoritative · Aspirational · Rebellious · Refined*

The research from Hauck and Stanforth (2007) gives this framework empirical grounding. Their finding that 'consumers' experiences at their coming-of-age do influence perceptions of luxury'<sup>2</sup> is essentially a context modifier — the life stage in which a person first encountered luxury shapes what they consider luxurious for the rest of their lives. A 65-year-old who grew up without cell phones may perceive a smartphone as a luxury in a way that a 22-year-old simply cannot. The same product, in the same store, carries completely different psychological weight depending on who's holding it and what their history with that category looks like.

To make this concrete: take the motive of 'reward' — which Srun (2017) identifies as one of the core self-affirmation drivers, rooted in 'the expectation of rewards' that begins in childhood and carries into adult purchasing behavior.<sup>1</sup> That motive exists in many people. But how it activates, and what signal will reach it, changes completely depending on context:

**Reward × post-breakup, late 20s, female consumer:** the motive is self-reinvention. The signal that works is intimacy and permission — 'you deserve this for yourself.' Loud status messaging would feel alienating here.

**Reward × career milestone, 40s, male executive:** the motive is recognition of achievement. The signal that works is quiet distinction — something that tells a story to people who know what to look for, not everyone.

**Reward × first major purchase, early 20s, new money consumer:** the motive is arrival. The signal that works is aspirational and visible — something that announces the crossing of a threshold

Same core motive. Three completely different signals required. A brand that runs one campaign for all three will reach at most one of them — and probably none of them fully. This is why the question marketers should be asking isn't 'what does our consumer want?' but 'which motive is active right now, in which context, and what signal style fits that specific intersection?'

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## VI. WHAT THIS MEANS FOR BRANDS

### Identity Is Fixed. Triggers Are Not.

There's an important distinction that gets lost in a lot of brand strategy conversation. The brand identity — who the brand is, what it stands for, its aesthetic and philosophy — should not change. Neither should the identity of the buyer the brand is speaking to. What changes is the reason you foreground at any given moment.

Srun (2017) illustrates this through the lens of how skilled sales advisors approach individual clients — not by pitching the same story, but by reading which psychological need is most active in that specific person at that specific moment, and speaking directly to it.<sup>1</sup> The advisor doesn't change the product. They change which truth about the product they make visible.

At the brand level, this looks like running different campaigns for the same product that each activate a different motive — not by changing what the product is, but by changing which layer of its meaning the message illuminates. Take a luxury watch:

**Ad built around identity:** 'It doesn't need to be loud to be noticed.'

**Ad built around rationality:** 'Built to last decades. Not seasons.'

**Ad built around heritage:** 'Every detail designed with intention.'

**Ad built around reward:** 'You've been keeping time for everyone else. This one is yours.'

Same product. Same brand. Same buyer profile. Different trigger activated. And critically — each ad works best in a different context. The identity ad belongs in a private moment of browsing. The heritage ad belongs in a setting of social visibility. The reward ad belongs in the post-achievement moment. The rational ad belongs when the buyer is justifying a decision they've already emotionally made.

The brands that understand this aren't running more campaigns. They're running smarter ones — anchored in a clear brand identity, directed toward a defined buyer, but calibrated to the specific emotional state and contextual moment that makes each message land.

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## VII. WHAT THE STORE WAS REALLY ASKING

### Closing Thoughts

I went into Louis Vuitton expecting a feeling. I came out with a question I haven't stopped turning over: why was I underwhelmed by the product but still drawn to the idea of owning it? Why did my father want to spend money in a place that held no particular meaning for him? And why did three people living in the same household feel something entirely different standing in that same room?

The answer, I've come to think, is that luxury has never really been about the object. The object is almost incidental. What luxury sells is a feeling of deservingness — and that feeling is not universal, not fixed, and not triggered the same way in every person or every moment.

Hauck and Stanforth (2007) found that 'luxury and necessity are social perceptions based on differing values and tastes' — and that these perceptions are shaped by the formative experiences of a person's early adulthood.<sup>2</sup> Srun (2017) found that luxury consumption is rooted in self-affirmation, and that the most effective luxury selling isn't about the product at all — it's about understanding the specific psychological trigger that is active in a specific person at a specific moment, and meeting them there.<sup>1</sup>

What the store was really asking, the whole time, was: do you belong here? My mother couldn't close that gap. My father tried to close it through generosity. I closed it in my imagination, which is probably the most honest answer of all.

And that's the thing no amount of product quality, heritage, or price signaling can manufacture on its own. Belonging isn't sold. It's triggered — by the right message, in the right moment, speaking to the right layer of who someone believes themselves to be.

*That's what luxury brands are really in the business of. And it's what I intend to spend a career understanding.*

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## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Srun, F. (2017). *Luxury Selling: Lessons from the World of Luxury in Selling High Quality Goods and Services to High Value Clients*. Springer International Publishing. Pages 41–81. Scholars Portal Books.

<sup>2</sup> Hauck, W. E., & Stanforth, N. (2007). Cohort perception of luxury goods and services. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 11(2), 175–188. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13612020710751365>