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# **Japanese Luxury Consumption**

**Enjoy the freedom but follow the rules**

**Author: Evelyn Kogler  
Supervisor: Turaj S. Faran**

## **Abstract**

This study seeks to understand the underlying cultural and social concepts for the extensive luxury consumption in Japan. With Japan currently being the biggest market for prestige brands from the West, this study suggests a reinterpretation of existing 'Western' consumer theories taking into account aspects of Confucian tradition and looks at how these cultural orientations shape the practice of prestige brand consumption in Japan. This involves building a prestige-seeking consumer behaviour framework where existing theories of conspicuous consumption, distinction and signification as well as the self-concept theory are reviewed and integrated in a Confucian culture model.

Based on an inductive approach, interviews were conducted with prestige brand consumers in Tokyo and suggested that the importation of Western goods does not imply that purchase reasons are the same and that the same products fulfil the same social functions. Thus, a fine-tuning of existing Western consumption theories is required and suggested in this paper.

Keywords: brand, Confucian, consumption, interdependent, Japan, luxury

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Shopping – a women’s obsession

Like those in many cosmopolitan cities in Asia, the inhabitants of Tokyo are piously devoted to the art of shopping. Shopping has become a hobby, if not *the* hobby of the century.

What is known as the bubble economy, the economic boom of the 1980’s in Japan, provoked massive speculation in the markets and in real estate, and Japan is still experiencing the prolonged, low-level hangover that has persisted since the bubble burst, in 1991. But you wouldn’t notice that the country is in recession from the way young people spend their money. Due to the recession and the inflation of real-estate prices, many young Japanese continue to live at home well into their twenties or thirties; they are the so called ‘*parasite singles*’ who have no urge to get married soon nor have kids in the near future. The ‘*wagamama*’<sup>1</sup> young women enjoy living with their parents where everything in the household is being taken care of, thus they are free to spend their money and time on luxury goods or travels.

Today, no other country in the world is as concentrated a source of revenue for so many luxury brands as Japan. Here, a population not even half as large as that of the United States consumes an incredible 41 percent of the entire world’s luxury goods.<sup>2</sup> Japan possesses one of the top markets for luxury goods with 94 percent of Tokyo’s young women owning luxury products such as those created by Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Chanel, Prada or Christian Dior according to a study by the Japan External Trade Organization<sup>3</sup>. With those figures in mind my focus of interest lies in the social and cultural factors behind the Japanese luxury consumption.

## 1.2 Disposition

In this paper I point out why existing Western theories of increased consumption need to be reinterpreted taking into account the East Asian world view as luxury consumption becomes increasingly important in this geographical area. The paper is organized in four

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<sup>1</sup> Meaning selfish, wilful, see Orenstein, P. (2001), The New York Times, July 1<sup>st</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.jetro.org/content/361/limit/1/limitstart/0>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.jetro.go.jp/en/market/attract/retail/luxury.html>

main parts. First, I will discuss the concepts of consumerism and luxury as well as define terms important for this study. I proceed with addressing the methods used in this study and discussing the collection of the empirical material. Drawing on cultural and social influences on luxury consumption, I present my theoretical framework together with an analysis of my empirical material. In the conclusion I present my main findings and raise questions for further research.

### **1.3 Changing consumer behaviour**

Consumerism means the use of commodities for the satisfaction of needs and desires, however patterns of consumption change over time – so does its scale and intensity. What one person wants and needs might be entirely different in various societies across the world.

Consumer culture is a culture of mass consumption, but not necessarily the consumption of goods as much as the consumption of meanings and symbols.<sup>4</sup> Consumers use material goods as ‘signs’ according to Bourdieu (1984) to convey social meaning. As such consumers pay a certain price or economic value for their product, however, the exchange value includes an unknown factor: the price for the social meaning communicated by the product. The consumed product or sign then becomes a ‘text’ for its owner which in return can be interpreted by other consumers. However, our models’ rationality needs to be re-interpreted through the eyes of the East Asian or in this case Japanese reality which is our goal in this study because products are only able to signify a meaning when put into context.

### **1.4 Purpose and limitations**

The purpose of the study is to understand the cultural and social factors that lie behind the luxury phenomenon in Japan. Due to time and space limitations I only focused on the luxury retail sector such as clothing, accessories, bags and leather goods since the retail sector generates the highest sales<sup>5</sup> in Japan by brands such as Louis Vuitton, Fendi, Hermes, Gucci, Prada or Chanel. It is noteworthy that all those brands originate from

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<sup>4</sup> Slater, D. (1997), Featherstone, M. (1991)

<sup>5</sup> see Appendix for luxury imports p.47, high market share in women’s wear and accessories p.48

Western countries such as from France, USA, Italy or the UK<sup>6</sup>. Many of those luxury products are displayed in public, and therefore I will focus mainly on publicly visible prestige brand goods. Moreover I have chosen to look more into detail why especially women purchase luxury goods since it has been suggested<sup>7</sup> that around 94 percent of young women in the urban metropolis Tokyo own luxury products.

In particular I intend to study and understand in the Japanese context (1) the cultural factors underlying the extensive luxury consumption, (2) the social factors that make the luxury consumption possible for consumers, and (3) the perceived conspicuous, social, unique, emotional and quality prestige brand values which form part of my framework.

With the intention of gaining deeper understanding for the craze for luxury goods I adopt a theoretical approach where my cases and respondents merely should be viewed as illustrative expressions of consumer culture. By no means do I intend to argue that the investigated cases are representative of all Japanese consumers. They should rather be seen as examples of some people's consumer experience / behaviour through which I intend to understand the underlying structure.

## **1.5 What is luxury?**

The English word 'luxury' derives from the Latin term 'luxus' and is defined as 'the state of great comfort and extravagant living and an inessential but desirable item'<sup>8</sup>. However, we should keep in mind that we are experiencing one of the greatest shifts in consumer buying habits and tastes since the 1950's according to the Boston Consulting Group and thus also a redefinition of luxury is required, provided by consumer's luxury experiences as Dubois and Czellar (2002) suggested.

While often 'prestige' and 'luxury' are used synonymously, Vigneron and Johnson (1999:2) established 'three types of brands which were categorized as prestigious: up-market brands, premium brands and luxury brands, respectively in an increasing order of prestige.'

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<sup>6</sup> see Appendix p.49

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.jetro.go.jp/en/market/attract/retail/luxury.html>

<sup>8</sup> Compact Oxford English Dictionary (2005)

**FIGURE 1**  
**Defining Three Levels of Prestige**



Source: Vigneron and Johnson (1999:2)

Therefore, in accordance with Vigneron and Johnson, I will refer to prestige brands when discussing the brand category whereas use ‘luxury’ when relating to the extreme end of the prestige brand category (Figure 1). However, people will always have different perceptions on levels of prestige but as long as we are aware of those differences I will be guided by my interviewee’s perceptions on luxury.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Explaining versus understanding**

Many texts regarding consumer behaviour tend to explain rather than understand the phenomena both in economical as well as sociological terms. While this is a valid approach I aim to understand instead of explain the world: my research is constructed upon my understanding of the interviewees’ utterances. Yet, due to the researchers bias it is not possible to make objective statements. However, I try to understand the phenomena from the inside since anything else would be a generalization. My methodological point of departure is of an interpretive nature since this perspective attempts to gain understanding within the context rather than establishing general laws and rules.

While there are two major approaches to research methods in social sciences, namely qualitative and quantitative studies, my study is a qualitative study since it is a ‘sensitive method for capturing experiences and lived meanings of the subjects’ everyday world’ according to Kvale (1997:70). In my study I talked to people in order to grasp their understanding of the phenomena rather than looking at quantitative components such as: *How many people and with which frequency do they buy?*

I used an inductive approach since it is of a more open-ended and exploratory nature. With inductive reasoning one starts with specific observations, begins to detect patterns, formulates some tentative hypotheses, and finally one ends up developing some general conclusions or theories. Adopting a deductive approach would imply the application of a ‘westernized’ consumer theory upon the Confucian tradition culture. In doing so I might miss important factors that influence the luxury consumption in the Japanese context.

### **2.3 Qualitative techniques for data collection**

My empirical material was collected in a five-week field work stay in Tokyo, Japan and my research material constitutes interviews, observations from shopping districts in Tokyo, as well as written material in form of women’s magazines and posters, many of which are documented with the help of camera images.

### **2.4 Case Study**

One method of qualitative research is carrying out a case study which I have chosen to do in my research since, according to Yin (1994:13), it is a possible way of investigating a ‘contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident’. Other research strategies such as an experiment or a survey have been considered but Yin (1994:3) drew to my attention that with an experiment research I can not control the behavioural events while with a survey research I might not answer the ‘how’ and ‘why’ question but rather the ‘who’ and ‘what’ question. Thus, a case method aids me in finding out the origin of the phenomenon, as well as exploring processes of change through the method of interviews.

## **2.5 Empirical material: Interviews, observations and magazines**

### **2.5.1 Interviews**

My paper’s sources of data include primary data from people and documents. I collected a total of 12 interviews with participants aged between 20 and 50 years old, with high educational status, from Tokyo or urban environments. One interview was carried out by a Japanese person; still I led the interview and also received constant translation.

Due to the language issue and due to the limited time factor I chose interviewees from within my social network that I built up prior and during my fieldwork stay in Japan. A distinction amongst interviewees shall be made: while informants usually are sources outside the process such as representatives or academics, respondents are usually involved in the process, which in my case means that they are luxury consumers.

I acquired four interviews with respondents at Waseda University and four interviews with young professional single women (22/28 years old). Coincidentally all 8 respondents have had living abroad experiences in diverse countries such as the USA, Hong Kong, Germany or Australia.

Furthermore, I got access to four informant interviews: a) a manager (~40) of a sports company launching luxury sport items, b) a senior researcher (~late 30's) at a Japanese research institute, c) a manager (~50) of a Japanese designer firm and d) a sales assistant (28 years old) at the Louis Vuitton store in the *Ginza*, Tokyo. It has to be added that my informants not only responded as representatives of their company but also as consumers themselves, yet we have to bear in mind that their view might be biased due to their involvement in the phenomenon.

My motives and criteria for the choice of my respondents were based largely on a) whether they spoke a language we had in common, b) I got access to them via networking or letters of request and c) whether they were consumers and owned at least one prestige brand goods.<sup>9</sup> Three of my respondents helped me get access to another four interviewees via the snowball sampling method, meaning among their acquaintances they knew someone else who I interviewed. All interviews were semi-structured and as such I used leading questions that allowed for the natural flow of questions.

Also I aimed at information-oriented sampling by using paradigmatic or prototype cases as is the case with the eight respondents: all four students have part time jobs which allow them to pay for 'extra-necessities' and live at home with their parents (one lives abroad but is on a scholarship). Furthermore, all four young professional women are exemplar

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<sup>9</sup> This criterion was not required from my informants; however, all four owned a prestige brand good.

cases of so called *wagamama* (=selfish, wilful) women: they are all single, live by themselves and work, attributes that allow for the expenditure on luxury items.

### **2.5.2 Magazines**

My primary data also included magazines such as *Non-no*, *Baila* and *Ginza Magazine* since all seven female interviewees stated that they read those frequently with the objective of getting to know the newest trends in fashion. Magazines act like ‘shopping guides’ to them and therefore I included this medium into my research. However, due to my insufficient Japanese reading skills I did not focus on the written text but on the visual elements being used which I shall nevertheless regard as ‘text’ since Parker (1999:3f) defines text as a collection of sentences, figures or images that convey meaning.

### **2.5.3 Observations**

Furthermore, passive observation in Tokyo’s shopping areas<sup>10</sup> also form part of my empirical material. Through observation I was placed in the position of the spectator at the site of research by closely observing people purchasing luxury goods or displaying them. Since prestige brands often use external visible labels on their goods, observation seemed a good way to capture consumer behaviour. Some of those observations were also documented with the help of a camera.

### **2.5.4 Other sources of data**

Newspaper articles, statistics (see appendix) as well as previous research on the subject also form part of my primary data sources, latter of which shall be discussed in the analysis section (see 3.1 and 3.2).

## **2.6 Reliability and Validity**

Not only does reliability deal with the reliability of the source (the interviewee) but also that of the interviewer, one’s transcriptions and analysis of the information, each of which can affect the consistency of the research results<sup>11</sup>. Subjectivity, relativism,

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<sup>10</sup> *Ginza, Omotesando, Harajuku, Shinjuku, Aoyama*

<sup>11</sup> Kvale, S. (1996:235)

interviewers' bias<sup>12</sup> as well as my relationship with the informant, my personal background, the settings, my gender, and age might also have influenced my data. According to Holme and Solvang (1997:94f) validity refers to getting results that accurately reflect the concept being measured and how truthful the research results are. To minimize problems with reliability I sought a triangulation of methods in order to get multifaceted information, hence the interviews allowed me to gain insight into the subjects' thoughts first hand which I then cross-checked with other data or theory by social scientists in the field of (luxury) consumption as well as with my observations. In triangulation different methods work together and advantages of one method even out disadvantages of the other.

## **2.7 Ethical considerations**

All participants contributed voluntarily to my research, always knowing the purpose behind my interviews, and gave their consent to the use of their utterances for academic purposes. The material collected is confidential and the participant's identity will not be disclosed.

## **3. Analysis**

### **3.1 Overview of research on consumption**

Around 2300 years ago the Greek philosopher Epicurus was already concerned with the ethics behind the important question of how to achieve happiness and approved of the hedonistic way of increasing pleasure through luxury. According to Van Gorp (2005:3) the consumer used to be regarded as a rational human being with already given tastes and preferences, who makes independent choices, judges products based on objective qualities. Thorsten Veblen (1899) marked a shift from economist to social definitions of class and popularized the notion of 'conspicuous consumption'.

The views on the interplay of supply and demand also changed after WWII since in the 'golden sixties' supply was assured<sup>13</sup>. Researchers became sensible for cultural

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<sup>12</sup> Paker (1999:23)

<sup>13</sup> Van Gorp (2005:3)

boundaries in populations and sociological approaches stepped forward since the relation between individuals and consumption started to be taken into account.<sup>14</sup>

### **3.1.1 Distinction – dress to impress**

While before people consumed according to rank in society, people in modern times consume competitively, as if searching for their ‘lost’ social distinction which some claim forms part of human nature.

Mason (1981) cited in Van Gorp (2005:9) argued that even though ‘real hierarchies’ are less apparent in our society, they have not disappeared – nor has their influence on consumer behaviour. Warde et al. (1999) claimed that contemporary society is one of loose ‘hierarchy boundaries’ and recognized that structures in it are never definitely fixed. Wilk (2002:6) suggests that in modern society people use goods for display since their social roles are no longer prescribed by birth or class.

Owned goods can thus be seen as symbols of distinction, yet what really makes us visually distinct from others are the clothes we wear. Turner (1985:1) argued that human bodies are essentially dressed bodies: ‘dress is a basic fact of social life, an individual act that prepares the body for the social world’. Clothes then are *the* means to socially define, distinguish and group one’s self.

In exploring Pierre Bourdieu (1984) the importance of two main concepts can be highlighted: he offers a model of social structure in which individuals hold two main types of capital: economic and cultural. While economic capital captures the wealth through money income in the labour market or through inheritance, cultural capital refers to the wealth based on social status and education through knowledge accumulation. Bourdieu reviewed in Trigg (2004:402f) argues that the ability of individuals to symbolize to others a high cultural stock of knowledge depends on their social origin and educational background. One’s success in society depends largely on the ability to absorb cultural ethos (what Bourdieu named *habitus*) of the dominant class. Bourdieu further argued that the taste of necessity (or *popular taste*) is not directly linked to income but is determined by *habitus*, ‘the social conditioning associated with particular combinations of economic and cultural capital and the social origin of a person’ (ibid.). For Bourdieu

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<sup>14</sup> i.e Douglas and Isherwood (1980)

the taste of luxury by people of the higher social strata is to establish symbolic difference between themselves and necessity: 'social identity is defined and asserted through difference' (1984:172).

Jean Baudrillard (1988) however argued that we can not operate within a theoretical framework based upon needs, economic class or social status groups since there is no way for us to determine what are 'basic needs'. For him, buying is interpreted as the consumption of signs; consumption becomes an important articulation of a sense of identity. However, signs do not have a pre-existing meaning to the consumer, instead, they are generated within the system of signs.

Hence Baudrillard does not consider consumption as a material process. He suggests that we become the beings that we desire to be by purchasing things which will signify that we are X to ourselves and to others who share the same 'coded language' of meaning. Consumption is a 'systematic act of the manipulation of signs' that signifies social status through difference. The object itself is not consumed but rather the idea of a relation between objects.<sup>15</sup> Thus cultural theorists see consumption as a symbolic behaviour, laden with meaning where people use goods to communicate to others or to express feelings.

### **3.1.2 Identity**

Research on identity often looked at people's professions, ethnicity and interpersonal relations. While there is no agreement<sup>16</sup> between scholars about what identity exactly entails, consumption has taken a special role in one's identity so Holt (2000).

Identity is some abstract, ungraspable concept that connects one's personality with the social environment. It has also been suggested by Malhotra (1981) that there are several types of identity such as the real identity, the identity perceived by others, the identity one wishes to have<sup>17</sup> and lastly the non-wanted identity.

Many academics have agreed that people use the consumption of brands and goods to define, build and maintain identities so Belk (1988). We have discussed above that the

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<sup>15</sup> Baudrillard (1988:16)

<sup>16</sup> Abdelah et al (2003) in Van Gorp (2005:4)

<sup>17</sup> which Ogilvie (1987) called 'ideal identity'

symbolic value or sign value has become of prime importance, pushing the exchange value into the background to give way to a new symbolic communication of goods. Yet, just like people can decode symbols, signs may also be misinterpreted since consumers might not always intend to ‘communicate’. One of the major critiques on this consumption as communication theory is the fact that it has been difficult to adequately test as Campell (1997) pointed out.

### **3.2 Luxury Consumption in Confucian societies**

As I have argued in the introduction, almost all theories on consumption are based on Western societies while East Asian societies have hardly been taken into account. Although there have been cross-cultural studies on the *Self* by Markus and Kitayama (1991) as well as by Kashima et al (1995) with perspectives from individualism – collectivism research and a cross-cultural study on Japan and the United States in terms of the self-concept by Abe et al (1996), little has been published about the luxury perception and consumption in East Asian societies. Wong and Ahuvia (1998) are one of the first ones to deeply engage in this question. They warn of the ‘Western-style materialism conceptualization’ and propose a different approach which I will adopt in my study.

In accordance with Brannen cited in Wong and Ahuvia (1998:424) ‘the abundance of ostensibly Western products in Japan leads many people to assume that corresponding Western materialist values have been imported along with the ‘Western’ goods’. Yet, buying the same products does however not necessarily mean that the purchase reasons are the same or that products fulfil the same social functions in each society. Thus we need to understand that although ‘Western’ luxury goods are being consumed, Japan shares a Confucian collectivist cultural tradition.

Western scholars<sup>18</sup> tend to conclude that globalization may have fostered a global ‘materialistic fever’ and jeopardized traditional values yet, in a recent study by Yan et al (2005) it has been shown that many (not all) traditional values are vital despite modernization. We also have to be careful not to paint all Asian cultures with the same broad (collectivist) brush, warns Yan et al (2005:8), which would result in the neglecting

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<sup>18</sup> Pollay et al (1990)

of subtle differences in how Confucian values are viewed across different Asian countries. Therefore, awareness of those differences amongst South East Asian Confucian traditions will help us to better understand the phenomenon at hand.

### **3.3 Cultural and Social Framework**

I shall now proceed by proposing a framework of the underlying cultural and social factors that influence the prestige brand consumption in the Japanese context (Figure 2, p.23).

I have reviewed the propositions from Wong and Ahuvia (1998) and Vigneron and Johnson (1999) and integrated them in my research findings.

Five values of prestige have been recognized by Vigneron and Johnson although for my country specific study, I have identified three main motivations: a) perceived conspicuous value; b) perceived social value and c) perceived quality value. The other two values, namely d) perceived unique value and e) perceived emotional value may also be applicable (or may be applicable in the future) but to a lesser extent as will be discussed later. Rather than viewing each perceived prestige value in the framework as separate, we suggest that it is the interaction between one or more components (multiple motivations) that account for the prestige brand consumption behaviour in Japan. My framework in addition to the prestige values accommodated social factors such as demographics, reference group influence, environment and media exposure in order to understand what makes luxury consumption possible in first place. More importantly, my framework incorporates the interdependent construal of self predominant in Confucian tradition societies.

### **3.4 Cultural influences**

Culture is not an easy term to define since it can represent a nation, a social group or an ethnical origin etc. Yet, cultural features are intrinsic to understanding the patterns of consumption in any society. 'One culture' exists because the 'other' exists and as such we have a reference to compare with. However, this is not to suggest that we can compare consumption *per se*: even if the products in one culture were the same as in the other, we still would have to take into account the different cultural dimensions. In order to understand those dimensions better in the Japanese context, I would now like to

discuss some aspects<sup>19</sup> of Confucian tradition which are of particular importance for understanding the underlying factors of prestige brand consumption in Japan.

### **3.4.1 The independent / interdependent construals of self concepts**

Markus and Kitayama (1991) outlined that there are two types of construals of *self*: namely the interdependent and independent. While the former set is often attributed to women and people in Southeast Asian collectivist cultures, the latter set is assigned to men and people in the Western individualist cultures.

For those with independent construals of self, people consider themselves as distinct and separated from each other, each one with unique attributes and own sets of feelings, thoughts or actions and as such the inner self (tastes, personal values or preferences) are most significant in regulating behaviour. In contrast, interdependent construals of self are based on the connectedness of one person to another. In Japan, there is a tendency for people not wanting to disturb the ‘*wa*’ or harmony by which they mean the harmonious flow of interpersonal relations<sup>20</sup>.

Experiencing interdependence entails seeing oneself as part of a social relationship: one’s identity lies in one’s familial, professional or social relationships. This view of the *self* and its relationship with others sees the human being not as separate from social context – people need to find a way to ‘fit’ in with others and to fulfil their obligations. For this reason, when asked “who are you?”, a Japanese person is more likely to answer in terms of which company they are working for, what family relationships or social roles they are in while a ‘Westerner’ is more likely to answer in terms of their internal attributes such as intelligence, attractiveness, openness etc. Interestingly enough, the word *self* in Japanese (*jibun*) means ‘one’s share of the shared life space’<sup>21</sup>, thus the identification with others and belongingness are extremely important in the Japanese culture. The Japanese anthropologist Lebra<sup>22</sup> claimed that for Japanese people the worst nightmare is exclusion which means that one has failed to connect to others.

All the points regarding interdependent and independent construals of self can not be seen as totally clear cut, rather they ‘lie on opposite ends of a continuum’ as Wong and Ahuvia

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<sup>19</sup> Wong and Ahuvia (1998:425)

<sup>20</sup> The author is drawing on personal experience.

<sup>21</sup> Hamaguchi (1985) in Markus and Kitayama (1991:228)

<sup>22</sup> Markus and Kitayama (1991:228)

(1998:426) suggest. The outline given is just to orientate us, yet we know that cultures are not homogeneous and people within a culture vary to a great extent.

### **3.4.2 Balance between group and individual needs: Group affiliation versus 'standing out'**

The interdependent and independent views of self are very closely linked to relationships between groups and individuals.

While in Western societies people are taught to be assertive, speak their own minds and stand out from the crowd, the exact opposite holds true for Japanese society. There is a famous saying in Japan: 'the nail that sticks out gets hammered down'. Conformity to a group is seen in a more positive light because their concept of *self* includes others within the *self*. In the Western context, people who conform are often said not to be true to their own opinion or to copy others. In Confucian tradition however, the individual freedom is seen in relation to costs and benefits to the group.

Since the interdependent self-concept merges the individual with the group, it is not surprising that people from interdependent cultures accept the legitimacy of judging individuals based on group identifiers.

### **3.4.3 Hierarchy**

One theme central to Confucianism is that of relationships: Individuals are held to simultaneously stand in different degrees of relationships with different people such as a younger person in relation to their parents and elder siblings, or as a senior in relation to their children, younger siblings, students, and so on. Respect for one's parents, filial piety and reciprocity derives from the human bond between parent and child and denotes the respect and obedience of the child on the one hand, and on the other the benevolence and concern toward the child from the parent.

### **3.4.4 Humility**

In Confucian cultures the value of humility has always had an important role, but with modernity it has been difficult for its values to resist. Although humility is stressed, there is room for a more 'elaborate consumption if that is seen as appropriate to one's social

status'<sup>23</sup> and it almost seems that wealth as an achievement has undermined the value of humility.

### 3.5 Social influences

I will proceed by explaining some of the social factors that allow for the prestige brand consumption in Japan. In terms of demographics I have looked into age, income, gender, marital status and location when conducting my interviews.

All student interviewees had part-time jobs which is very common in Japan and permits students to pay for 'extras' such as prestige brand goods which might have the effect of acting as a reward for the hard work. Japan is characterised by an ageing population, low birth rates, low marriage rates and a rising number of single-person households<sup>24</sup>.

My interviewed young professionals were single, lived on their own and earned roughly 3.6 Million (~€3,200) *per annum*. They represent the *parasite singles*, with the difference that they live on their own instead of living with their parents, maybe inspired by their living abroad experience. In terms of income, statistics by Euromonitor International (2005) have shown that the mean gross income is expected to increase from slightly over 3 Million Yen (~€19,330) in 1990 to 4 Million Yen (~€25,770) *per annum* by 2015. However, while the average male income has been declining, the average female disposable income grew by 22.7% between 1990 and 2003 (ibid, 2005:46) which might also account for the high prestige brand sales. According to a survey of single men and women in the Tokyo metropolitan area, monthly spending averaged between 70,000Yen (€450) for men, and between 80,000-100,000Yen (€15-650) for women<sup>25</sup>.

In the 1980's a new term was coined for those Japanese who came of age<sup>26</sup>-*Shinjinrui* ('new human breed')-those young people showed a different set of values in their work and leisure behaviour<sup>27</sup>. They have had little exposure to the postwar traumas their parents encountered and have experienced Japan only as a rich country. For this generation, the idea of a devoted 'workaholic' to the company and country were alien concepts. Instead, they expressed image consciousness, travelled abroad and enjoyed a

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<sup>23</sup> Wong and Ahuvia (1998:428)

<sup>24</sup> Shimasawa (2004)

<sup>25</sup> Yamada (2000:49)

<sup>26</sup> 20 years old

<sup>27</sup> Goy-Yamamoto (2004:274)

‘good life’. This generation has experienced the bubble economy, became more leisure conscious, enjoyed and still enjoy economic affluence which allows them to ‘distinct’ themselves with luxury brands. The *Shinjinui* are today between 40-50 years old (ibid), and are likely to have only one child as the declining birthrate demonstrates according to the Euromonitor database (2005).

With one child per family it is easy to start spoiling children in terms of consumer goods. It has also been said that Japanese children have ‘11 pockets’, meaning that they get (money) gifts not only from their parents, but also from their grandparents, uncles and aunts. This in turn allows already young children to indulge into the ‘consumption fever’ at an early age.

Two of my informants mentioned the huge children’s fashion boom with the example of *Oshare Majo Love and Berry* which was launched by Sega in 2004. The premise of the game is to become one of the fashion witches, Love or Berry, by collecting magic cards like hair/make-up or dressing up cards, and battle each other by dressing up and dancing. While this game is popular among girls, boys tend to love *Mushiking* (King of the Beetles) but similar to *Love and Berry* children desire the ‘real’ outfits which are sold for ~40,000 Yen (~€280) per piece according to my respondents. With expensive fashion being introduced at an early age through fantasy games, is it then surprising that fashion becomes such an integral part of peoples’ lives?

In Japan today, women’s role is pivotal and twofold in terms of leading the *shohi shakai* or consumer society: it is women who are the primary consumers and it is to women that most advertising is directed<sup>28</sup>. Yet, ‘in a society where women’s social roles and public voices are otherwise highly restricted, women are (...) either allowed to be, or coerced into being the primary players of consumerism’, according to Creighton (1997:238). By looking at the large amounts of consumer offerings available, it is not surprising that some of my female interviewees feel pressure to look ‘nice’ all the time. This socially ascribed pressure is reinforced through media messages which the example of Love and Berry showed. Later I will also discuss the impact of magazines and advertising on

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<sup>28</sup> Skov and Moeran (1997)

female readers. Other influences such as reference group will also be discussed as an integral part of the discussion on the framework.

I shall now proceed with applying the cultural and social influences discussed above onto my framework and discuss theory and data at the same time.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Social influences</u></b></p> <p>Demographics Peer / parental influence University/ work environment Media</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Cultural influences</u></b></p> <p>Confucian tradition society Interdependent Construal of Self</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">- <b>Perceived conspicuous value</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b><u>Focus on external self</u></b> Publicly visible possessions 'Face': what others think of you becomes important</li> <li>- <b><u>Hierarchy</u></b> Individual vertically located in social hierarchy More symbolic value when publicly consumed Filial Piety</li> </ul>
	<p style="text-align: center;">- <b>Perceived social value</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b><u>Group conformity</u></b> Product choices reflect social norm Social pressure: you have to consume</li> <li>- <b><u>Group affiliation</u></b> Legitimization of group judgments</li> <li>- <b><u>Gift exchange: reciprocity</u></b></li> </ul>
	<p style="text-align: center;">- <b>Perceived quality value</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b><u>Products technical superiority</u></b></li> <li>- <b><u>Product's country of origin</u></b> of importance</li> <li>- <b><u>Brand name / history</u></b></li> </ul>
	<p style="text-align: center;">- Perceived unique value (Snob effect)</p> <p>Non-conformity</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">- Perceived emotional value (Hedonist effect)</p> <p>Hedonic value gratifies private self</p>

Figure 2: Interplay of social and cultural factors and perceived prestige values that affect the prestige brand consumption in Japan

## **3.6 Perceived conspicuous value**

### **3.6.1 External Self**

In general there is a tendency for people to direct attention inward or outward according to Fenigstein et al in Vigneron and Johnson (1999:3) and as such two types of self-conscious people are recognized: 1) publicly self-conscious people (external self) are concerned with how they appear to others and 2) privately self-conscious people (internal self) are concerned with their inner feelings. There is also a third notion, social anxiety which expresses the degree of discomfort one feels in the presence of others.

The interdependent self-concept emphasizes social roles and public perceptions as a central part of one's identity. Here the notion of 'face' comes in, which seems very important in Confucian cultures. To 'keep face' means to maintain one's status by signalling it through the consumption of prestige brands. In the following statement my respondent (4)<sup>29</sup> shows his concern with other people's perceptions which at the same time creates high levels of social anxiety.

Male, 27 year-old student (4): "there is a lot of pressure to fit into a group. A brand is like a sign...if you have this brand, that means I have money, I am fashionable...and once you are in a brand consuming group, there is pressure to buy more".

Abe et al (1996:117) have shown that the Japanese experience higher levels of social anxiety and exhibited lower levels of private self-consciousness than their American counterparts. This then would explain the fear of losing 'face' in front of others due to the social pressure. A strategy to avoid 'losing face' is to keep consuming in order to stay in the 'in-group' as my respondent (4) stated.

### **3.6.2 Reference groups: Publicly versus privately consumed luxuries**

'[Reference groups are] groups that people refer to when evaluating their [own] qualities, circumstances, attitudes, values and behaviors' according to Thompson and Hickey (2005). Studies on reference group influence only date back to the early 1980's and have shown that the 'conspicuousness of a product was positively related to its susceptibility to

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<sup>29</sup> The number in parenthesis serves for the identification of the respondent for the author. See bibliography for further information about each respondent.

reference-group influence<sup>30</sup>. Bearden and Etzel cited in Childers and Rao (1992) found that the ownership of publicly consumed luxury products as well as the brand choice is strongly influenced by the reference group. In addition, publicly consumed luxuries are more likely to be conspicuous/ visible than privately consumed luxury products. Gregory and Munch (1996) state that people in collectivist cultures feel the importance to belong and conform to in-groups and because of this need individuals are correspondingly more inclined to be influenced by members of that same in-group.

The following statements illustrate the peer influence nicely:

Male, late 30's (10) "it could happen because one of your friends has Louis Vuitton so you might want one too"

Another respondent (4) explained an interesting point: He said that whenever he buys new clothes, he thinks about the 'stream' = *hayari*.

Male, 27 year old (4) "the Japanese want to be the same like anybody in the group but at the same time want to be different and original. But they do not want to be too different...because if you are too fashionable, you belong to a different group."

For this respondent too extraordinary clothes (very different to his groups') would harm his status in the group which would make him stick out. Sticking out of the crowd is however not a goal in the Japanese mind, instead, 'fitting in' is aimed at. The same respondent made his point very clear by arguing that once one has found an 'in-group' it is better to stick to their fashion norms / rules but within the frame of the rules, one should try to be as unique as one can.

(4) "Following the stream (*hayari*) means, not to deviate from the rules and within the stream, try to be as unique as you can".

This was also suggested by another informant (10) saying that although some friends might have a Louis Vuitton bag, "you don't want the same identical bag...but maybe a different design". The very title of this thesis 'Enjoy the freedom but follow the rules' thus reflects the social pressure to conformity: as long as one subscribes to societal rules, within the rule system one can enjoy apparent freedom.

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<sup>30</sup> Vigneron and Johnson (1999:4)

### **3.6.3 Hierarchy**

Since the individual is located vertically within the social hierarchy, ‘a need’ is almost created for people to be placed within this hierarchy. One’s place in the hierarchy is often marked by positions of employment and as such wealth becomes a social marker. This is also interlinked with the concept of conformity. In Japan, ‘conformity does not mean everyone should be like everyone else, but rather that everyone should conform to the classificatory status and role to which they are assigned’ according to Creighton (1997:239). In the next statement we can sense the respondents’ desire to conform to her ‘corresponding’ location within the socio-economic hierarchy.

Female, 28 year old (6) “I don’t feel obliged to own luxury goods but I feel that it is better to own such things once you get older because it shows status”

Although this respondent did not claim to feel obliged to own luxury goods she demonstrates her conformity to the changing social rules with age.

In case of claiming an ‘inappropriate’ location within the hierarchy, we can hear critical voices:

Female, 20 year old (1) “I don’t think it’s ok for students to take expensive things with them [to university]. At university one should live the student life; outside of it it’s ok to have such things”.

For this interviewee the socially perceived rules of conformity mean living a down-to-earth-student life whilst at university. Outside of this environment she feels people are free to wear whatever they want. She disagrees thus with students not conforming to their assigned roles.

### **3.6.4 Belonging**

My respondents placed more importance on the symbolic value, being concerned with other people’s perceptions, especially when consuming products in public.

The way of realising this attitude was through questions about visits to outlet malls, second hand stores, fake goods and travels abroad as well as emotions perceived in luxury stores. All my female respondents mentioned uneasy and uncomfortable feelings in prestige brand shops since they were afraid to touch things or ask for the price. They also mentioned that sales assistants seemed very cool and distant.

Female, 22 years old (3) “assistants wear suits and gloves...it is a very tight atmosphere”

Nonetheless, a senior sales assistant at one of the main Louis Vuitton stores in Tokyo told me how she has to wear a standard uniform, not dye her hair, not paint her finger nails red and keep jewellery down to the simplest in order to make the customer feel as the ‘main’ character in the purchase transaction. Therefore the sales person should be simple and not more ‘sophisticated’ than the customer. Thus the view on tight, cool and distant atmosphere by my respondents was striking. Yet, there is another factor that might influence this perception, that being language. In high end retail stores sales assistants are obliged to use ‘*keigo*’, the use of very formal Japanese, which may come across as the ‘tight atmosphere’.

In order to avoid such uncomfortable situations but still being able to purchase luxury products, one female customer, 28 years old (8) said:

“I go to Max-Mara, Louis Vuitton and Prada only to window-shop...whenever I have been to luxury stores, I feel uneasy, that’s why I go at Narita airport (into the stores) so I can avoid the looks of ‘oh she does not belong here’. If I go window-shopping I just want to see the trends, but it depends on your looks whether the shop assistants take you seriously or not. Abroad, if they see Japanese, they treat them nicely because people think they might purchase something”

According to this respondent one has to ‘belong’ to a certain society group in order to enjoy shopping at stores like Louis Vuitton. Since she is an occasional shopper she prefers to buy at duty-free stores or abroad. This therefore confirms that it is the symbolic public meaning of the product that becomes of importance, not the indulgence of going into a luxury store itself. In a study<sup>31</sup> by Dubois, Laurent and Czellar (2001:12) they mentioned customers loving the atmosphere, décor, music, and the way the products are displayed in luxury stores as well as the interaction with the salespersons. For them shopping in such an environment becomes an experience of indulgence. For my respondents however those attributes did not seem so important although things might change in the future with the booming business of nail, hair and beauty spas. Not only women but also men have started taking extra care of their body image by attending unisex nail salons and aesthetic salons according to two male respondents (4) and (10).

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<sup>31</sup> Believed to be set in France

Also, my informant from the research institute argued that top prestige brands are losing momentum since people are getting tired of having brand logos stamped all across their clothes or accessories. Could this mark a shift to luxury experience instead of only ownership?

With so many Western prestige brand stores in town, it might be only a question of time. In the meantime, as for material goods, the product as a sign still matters. This can be clearly seen in the following statement about discount shops. Some interviewees did not seem to be bothered about buying luxury goods in discount shops or second hand stores. Fake or not, the brand written on the product matters, so it seems.

Female, 28 years old (7) “I go to discount shops like Daikokuya in Ueno and Shinjuku but we are never sure if the products are fake or authentic. A friend bought a bag there but she is not sure if it’s fake...and we also don’t care.”

### **3.7 Perceived social value**

#### **3.7.1 Conformity**

Leibenstein (1950) created the term *bandwagon effect* which conceptualizes the idea that people often do (or believe) things because many other people do (or believe) the same. The effect is also referred to as *herd instinct* where people tend to ‘follow the crowd’. It has already been argued that group affiliation is of important character in Japanese society. Group membership is achieved by ‘fitting in’ which in turn means that one has to keep up to the groups’ prescriptions. If a group ‘prescribes’ expensive and luxurious possessions as socially appropriate, then it is almost the members ‘obligation’ to subscribe to such public display of wealth as long as ‘fitting in’ is achieved.

In the West, generally speaking, conforming people are seen in a more negative light indicating the lack of self-confidence. Wong and Ahuvia (1998:433) have suggested that while there is a consistency between public consumption and internal values in Western cultures, such consistency is not expected in East Asian cultures where ‘external roles are seen as legitimate’. Furthermore they argued that interdependent cultures see the ability to set one’s personal preferences aside in order to conform as a sign of strength and maturity. Thus, the social pressure to conform has often the consequence that luxury consumption becomes a MUST rather than a WANT which two male interviewees

acknowledged in the following statement: “there is a lot of pressure for women to look nice”, (4), (9).

It has to be stressed however, that conformity exists in every culture, yet it is the degree that may vary.

### **3.7.2 Mismatching**

In an interview with a representative (11) of a famous Japanese designer brand I was told how in the “90’s people looked for something new and never seen in fashion while nowadays the majority of people look for something neat, smart, easy to understand, with good quality and nothing strange (...) however, there is also a fad so to speak... Hip Hop guys wearing Louis Vuitton shirts and bags combined with rapper pants...this is very Japanese *mismatching*...like a *kitsch* idea of enjoying fashion.” This *mismatching* then can be seen as a ‘new trend’ amongst the Japanese youth crowd by using luxury goods from the West but adding originality:

(3) “the Japanese take other cultures, imitate, improve things and add originality and make out of it some own culture”.

Male, 27 year old, (4) “many people who have brand bags are not so rich actually....so one can easily see a person with a Louis Vuitton bag in a 100Yen/ 1\$ store.” In fact I observed many consumers in 100 Yen stores buying everyday goods including cheaper food, stationary or make up, yet wearing a 200,000 Yen (~1300 Euros) prestige brand bag and a fitting wallet. People seem to ‘trade up’ to expensive visible goods while at the same time ‘trade down’ to cheap privately consumed goods.

### **3.7.3 Omiyage – gift giving**

Another excuse for shopping provides the Japanese tradition of *omiyage* which are local specialities that are brought home to friends, colleagues, family from a trip, be it of private or business nature. *Omiyage* can be seen as the sharing of a travel experience with others and as a maintaining of social ties. Gifts in general are of great importance in Japan<sup>32</sup> and can act as a repayment or ‘investment’ for future favours and should therefore not be too small nor too big as not to embarrass the receiver. Small luxury goods often represent the perfect gift for someone who one appreciates. They also provide the gift giver with social

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<sup>32</sup> The author is drawing on personal living experience in Japan.

status of being able to afford gifts like those, thus gifts are beneficial for the gift giver as well as for the recipients. According to my informants (5), (10) this is the reason why luxury stores in Japan have very high sales rates on small luxury goods.

### **3.8 Perceived unique value**

The so called *snob effect* (Leibenstein, 1950) has its origin in both interpersonal as well as personal effects. It refers to the desire to own exclusive or unique rare goods which often have a high economic, but low practical value. The snob effect can occur in two types of situations: a) as soon as a new prestige product is on the market, the ‘snob’ will acquire it. So, the less an item is available, the higher its *snob value* or b) status sensitive consumers start rejecting a product because it hit the masses. So, the more a product is available, the less is the desire to acquire it. Although this effect forms an integral part in Vigneron and Johnson’s framework (1999), my interviewees did not show this particular prestige brand value. Luxury products such as the Louis Vuitton bags are seen on every street corner and are not being rejected even though thousands of people are wearing them.

However, throughout my research I asked myself about the ‘real rich people’ and I found that the LVMH group has created a private club called *Celux* on top of the Omotesando Louis Vuitton building where only members are allowed to enter. Exclusivity and first-hand access to limited collections are aimed at. Unfortunately, interviews to club members were not achieved and amongst my interviewees no one had ever heard of the club.

#### **3.8.1 Independent of consumption of others?**

So far I have discussed three prestige values, namely, perceived conspicuous, social and unique value.

The following two values, perceived emotional value and quality value have been classified by Vigneron and Johnson (1999) as personal effects taking into account consumers’ motivations when independent of the consumption of others.

However taking cultural factors from the Japanese context into account means that interdependent societies focus more on the external self through publicly visible goods relative to Western societies according to Wong & Ahuvia (1998). The cultural

implications of the self-concept regard perceptions of others as extremely important. With this in mind, I suggest that Japanese consumers are in fact never as independent of the consumption of others when consuming publicly prestige brand goods as their independent society counterparts.

### **3.9 Perceived emotional value**

Products can be seen as offering three types of values: instrumental (owning a bag to carry things), symbolic (when a Louis Vuitton bag conveys social status) and hedonic value (when purchasing or carrying it becomes a pleasurable experience). The hedonic value primarily gratifies the internal, private self<sup>33</sup> and thus, Wong and Ahuvia (1998:430) have argued that ‘relative to Asian consumers, Western consumers place greater importance on hedonic experience’. Cheng and Schweitzer (1996) confirmed this finding by showing that American TV ads focus more on enjoyment and pleasure than did Chinese advertising. This result seems understandable taking into account that the internal self is not of primary importance for Confucian tradition cultures.

My interviewees did not mention words such as pleasure, enjoyment or feelings towards a product to a great extent either.

### **3.10 Perceived quality value**

#### **3.10.1 Pricing**

Various studies, amongst them studies by Rajeev Batra (2000) and Groth and McDaniel (1993) mentioned in Vigneron and Johnson (1999:8) have shown that consumers use ‘price’ as an indicator to judging the product’s quality when choosing between different brands, making the product more ‘desirable’ since often higher prices are associated with prestige.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, consumers use price to judge quality after the motto: the higher the price, the better the quality.

When I asked one of my respondents to describe luxury, the 28 year old female (6) responded: “luxury is expensive....also high quality and gives you satisfaction”.

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<sup>33</sup> Wong and Ahuvia (1998:430)

<sup>34</sup> Lichtenstein et al (1993) in Vigneron and Johnson (1999:4)

Another male informant said: (10) “Everyone knows what Louis Vuitton and Gucci is...they know it’s famous. People think it’s famous because it’s good. It’s good because it’s famous”

### 3.10.2 Country of origin

Academic research on country of origin effects stems from the 1970’s and has shown that a brand’s country of origin (COO) is used by customers as a cue in inferring its quality and acceptability.<sup>35</sup> Yet most of the research has only examined the COO as a ‘quality halo construct’ that influences beliefs about product quality while only recently non-quality related effects on purchase intentions are being examined. There are various factors that can influence the evaluation of a brand: economic, political or cultural perceptions<sup>36</sup> of the country of origin in question influence the buyers’ brand assessment.

All my interviewees argued that the origin of today’s clothes stems from the West and therefore, the import of ‘Western’ goods is ‘normal’. They stated that Western style clothes are better quality and are more fashionable in comparison to Japanese brands. “Fashion in fact *is* Western style”, so respondent (4) and (3).

The reason behind this ‘Western quality superiority’, according to my interviewees, is the fact that in Japan for a long time only Japanese clothes such as the kimono have been fabricated and Western style clothes do not have a long tradition.

Yet, Friedman in Wong and Zhou (2005:2) suggested that consumers ‘prefer to buy foreign brands as it enhances their self-image as being cosmopolitan, sophisticated and modern.’ In a sense, wearing luxury garments shows oneself and others that you are able to afford the ‘best’ the ‘West’ has to offer. Owning foreign luxury brands adds intangible value and prestige to peoples’ self-image, so it seems. My observations and some interviews have also shown that people like foreign things *per se*. According to the following interviewee (10) the ‘crave for imports’ started with the bubble economy:

“All imports were expensive for the Japanese. All imports equalled exclusiveness, even Coca Cola. That was the mentality back then but even now, if you go into a store and buy a glass, they stuff it with French newspaper...it makes it stylish”.

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<sup>35</sup> Batra (2000) citing Baughn and Yaprak (1993)

<sup>36</sup> Klein et al (1998)

Moreover, when asked which Japanese brands they knew or owned, most of my respondents could not think of many Japanese brands.

Female, 28 year old (7) “I can not think of any Japanese brands. It is so easy to find Western brands.”

However, there are many Japanese brands<sup>37</sup>, but have not yet been given by consumers the same prestige value Western brands have earned in Japan.

Hardly anyone however seemed to be bothered by the fact that many so called ‘Western’ clothes manufactures actually produce their clothes in Asia (i.e China). When asked about the label ‘Made in China’ all informants associated China with badly made / bad quality products which would not last long, get damaged and were not pretty.

Male, 23, (2) “when I buy something expensive I watch where the product comes from...I am only sceptical with things from China”

Female, 22 year old (3) “I feel almost all brands are from abroad, only cheap clothes come from China. Material is rare in Japan and only Japanese clothes (kimono) are made out of Japanese material. Western style clothes come from abroad, so that’s normal”

In developing countries anthropological research has shown that ‘consumers use the COO as determining a brand’s desirability for symbolic, status-enhancing reasons (status preference), in addition to suggesting overall quality’, so Batra (2000:2). The reason why the COO effect is stronger in developing countries is due to the status display concern since interpersonal relationships are of prime importance and often income disparities are high (Belk, 1988). Without wanting to classify Japan within the same paradigm (since it is a developed country) I have argued above that for Japanese people interpersonal relationships are also of high importance and that status in society is often shown with publicly conspicuous luxury goods. In addition, imported goods usually carry high taxes and as we have discussed previously, higher prices make products often more desirable. Thus, nonlocalness can be very favourable, especially if the products’ country of origin is from a Western or developed country. Now, Japan is a developed country and often is integrated into the ‘western world’ when talking about economics, yet Japanese people feel a longing for foreign Western things which might be linked to Japan’s national identity feeling.

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<sup>37</sup> Such as Bathing Ape, Beams, Edwin, Hanae Mori

Japan as a former colonial power has long been exerting cultural influence on the rest of Asia, articulating the distinct ‘Japaneseness’ of being a homogeneous country<sup>38</sup>. Japan’s national identity however is constructed with the comparison of itself with the ‘West’<sup>39</sup>, thus placing itself in a subordinate position while in turn, Japan constructed an ‘oriental Orientalism’ against ‘inferior’ Asia, which is seen as a geographical location Japan does not belong to. This perception which places the Japanese race somewhere ‘in the middle’, has shaped the view with which they perceive other nationalities. Some respondents referred to the ‘looking up to the West’ as a result of the ‘inferiority complex the Japanese feel’:

Male, 23 year old (2) “...there is still no self-confidence in our own culture. The Japanese need proof and self-affirmation.”

A male, ~40 year old (9) “Self-confidence is lacking, maybe only in electronics they are aware of their abilities, but for clothes, shoes and accessories they believe in the long European tradition and history. The Japanese are very proud people; however, they lack self-confidence which is the main reason for consumption.”

The continued association with foreign lifestyles some interviewees claimed to adore, imparts status to their owners and supposedly a feeling of superiority. This has been expressed by my interviewees (3),(7),(10) through the sensation of security and safety a luxury product would give them.

Female, 28 year old (7) “One feels safe and secure if others like your things”

Male, 30’s (10) “It (luxury goods) gives you a sense of safety...assurance”

While many of the reasons of this Japan-West-Asia triangulation stem back from history or politics, I will now engage in the yearning to Western brands / products through the exposure of media, particularly through magazines.

### **3.11 Magazines in Japan: Enjoy the freedom but follow the rules**

Magazines provide a source of news critical to the self-image and relationships young people cultivate. They also act as ‘buying guides’ for teens as well as adults. In fact, there are magazines such as ‘Brand Mall Mini’ available for 500Yen (3.5 Euros) that are only

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<sup>38</sup> Which in turn was reinforced by the ‘Nihonjinron’, Iwabuchi (2002)

<sup>39</sup> Iwabuchi (2001)

devoted to the description and display of new luxury brand products such as goods from Louis Vuitton.

Merry White (1993) mentioned that the 'reading for pleasure' time in Japan is double<sup>40</sup> amongst Japanese teens in comparison to American teenagers. Furthermore, the interest of young people in reading magazines lies in the fact that Japan has one of the highest literacy rates, that teens can afford to purchase magazines, that due to their limited space and time (smaller apartments and less time due to exhaustive school work) reading represents their prime escape. Also, relationships with others are very important for Japanese people and therefore information on such topics are sought in magazines.

Once again, in order to 'fit in' with others, one has to stay informed which creates a pressure to always keep up the 'standard'. The Japanese market shows a high turnover of different magazines; especially magazines targeted at women play an important part in the Japanese print media.

My empirical material showed that all female interviewees read magazines regularly and therefore, I decided to look at frequently mentioned women's magazines, especially at *Non-no*, *Baila* and *Ginza Magazine*.

### **3.11.1 Women's magazines**

Women's magazines fulfil several roles in Japanese consumer behaviour: on the one hand they may be seen as 'tools' which provide useful information (supposedly freedom of consumer choice) about the latest trends in consumption, but on the other hand they can also be viewed as 'commodities themselves' as the sociologist John Clammer (1997: 115) argued. By commodity we mean diversion and the possibility of momentary withdrawal from work and family responsibilities in everyday life. Taking a closer look I found that magazines are subject to rules and regulations to which their readers are subtly encouraged to adhere. Especially the magazines *Baila* and *Non-no* included entire sections on 'how to do make-up, how to style, how to dress, how to behave' giving the reader exact descriptions of what to do in each situation. This in turn gives the reader the security of doing things the 'right way' which one can 'apparently' achieve by purchasing advertised products. Thus the reader is subject to the pressure of performing

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<sup>40</sup> 3 hours per week

the way society prescribes them to act. Women's magazines also reinforce age segmentation and have an enormous influence on the identification of consumer groups. Magazines such as *Ginza Magazine* reflect the existence of the upper class women who exhibit a distinguished taste with regards to consumer decisions. Thus, within a 'supposedly homogeneous society' the identification of subgroups in consumer behaviour is a striking phenomenon, which suggests that Japanese society is indeed more fragmented than was generally supposed. Many of the glossy lifestyle magazines focus on very expensive brand goods that the majority of their readership cannot afford.

Thus, Japanese women's magazines show many contradictions: Magazines seem to suggest almost unlimited freedom of consumer choice and provide for readers a source of inspiration and information but at the same time stress the importance of conformity and societal expectations under the motto: 'Enjoy the freedom but follow the rules'.

Magazines provide precise rules about the appropriate way to make use of the products advertised in the magazines on the other.

Studying the three magazines mentioned above, I found that Japanese women / models are portrayed as either 'cute or *kawaii*' or 'chic or sophisticated'. This view has also been suggested by Skov and Moeran (1995) and Sharon Kinsella (1995).

### **3.11.2 Kawai bunka - Cuteness culture in magazines**

The 'kawaii bunka' which is now associated with 'cute looking and behaving' started as a nation-wide phenomenon in 1978 where it was expressed in handwriting style. Today, young women in their early twenties are going crazy over pink baby doll dresses, white lace dresses, and other clothing with sugary detailing. This *motekawa* style (from the words *moteru*, to be sought after, and *kawaii*, cute) also contains cute make-up and usually curly hair and encompasses gestures and behaviour. Inspiration and entire 'how-to sections' can be found in young women's magazines like *Non-No* or *CanCam* which feature not only articles on 'how to look and behave cute' but also on all the cute articles out on the market to buy. Kinsella (1995) has argued that the 'idolizing' of childhood rejects adulthood in a society where adulthood does not mean freedom and independence but control, strictness and harshness. Maybe the fewness of luxury goods featured in such magazines reflects the refusal of behaving like their luxury obsessed 'Shinjinrui' parents.

Instead, more 'affordable' goods are displayed which can also be ascribed to the young age of the readership.

### **3.11.3 Chic women in magazines**

In *Ginza magazine* and *Baila*, a 'dream world' is constructed that emphasizes a sophisticated lifestyle for the young (unmarried) career women with themes like fashion, make-up and hairstyles. *Ginza magazine* also features restaurants, literature, and interior design and uses unlike other magazines almost entirely Caucasian models posing for Western prestige brand goods in advertisements as well as in featured stories. It has been suggested by Johansson (1999:378) that the use of foreigner models can give a sense of additional prestige and quality to the product, representing the 'West'. Yet, what kind of 'West' they represent and how, is another issue.

In Western visual culture, women are often represented in a manner that encourages fetishism of body parts such as lips, legs or feet. (ibid.) The image of the Western woman seen through the Western prism has become synonymous with 'consumption', as well as an object for male visual consumption. In Japanese advertising however, Caucasian models are represented differently from Japanese models. While Japanese models are portrayed as shy, delicate, and covered, Western women are represented as strong and nude. Although I have not done an exhaustive content study, it can still be argued that Japanese women in *Baila* are often portrayed as the 'cute girl next door'<sup>41</sup> and look very 'westernized' with very soft Asian features while Western girls are portrayed as strong and mature with straight into camera gazes, boldly meeting the eyes of the beholder and serious facial expressions. It seems that Western women are portrayed as sophisticated, strong and non-subordinate, displaying bodily postures found in representations of men. Without wanting to go any further in the female fetish discussion, I wanted to highlight the difference in the representation of models. The extensive use of Western white models<sup>42</sup> then might serve on the one hand as a role model for the sophisticated single Japanese career women but on the other reinforces the Japan-West-Asia triangulation discussed above.

Magazines then reflect society's consumption characteristics by providing images which

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<sup>41</sup> Frith (2006:156)

<sup>42</sup> Ashikari (2005)

reinforce identities and help creating reference groups. Advertising can manipulate social roles by encouraging the ‘desire to keep up’ with higher status groups. Advertisements then associate certain brands or products with certain social groups’ lifestyles.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The primary goal of this study was to understand the cultural factors underlying the extensive luxury consumption in Japan with the help of interviews conducted during a field work stay in Tokyo, Japan. I found that although Japanese people consume Western luxury goods this does not imply that purchase reasons are the same or that luxury products fulfil the same social functions. Japan shares a Confucian collectivist cultural tradition in which the interdependent construals of *self* are of prime importance. This implies that Japanese people value more highly the connectedness to others, group affiliations and group goals in comparison to their independent construal of *self* societies more dominant in the West. Since the interdependent construal of *self* focuses more on the external *self*, publicly visible possessions become even more important social markers of distinction as they communicate social status to others. Discussing perceived values of prestige and taking into account culture as an integral part of understanding social behaviour, I have theorized that Japanese people are never as independent of the consumption of others when consuming publicly prestige brand goods as their independent society counterparts. Future research may examine this proposition more closely in a cross-cultural framework.

While existing theories of conspicuous consumption, distinction and signification provide useful guidelines since they incorporate the significance of culture, they are in need of fine-tuning in terms of specific cultures. Thus, when applying them in research one has to be aware that in Confucian cultures luxury consumption has different meanings.

Luxury consumption places emphasis on the symbolic value in the West as is does in Japan. Different however in my study are for instance the hedonistic feelings towards the act of consumption itself and towards the purchased goods. My respondents did not stress enjoyment, instead mentioned discomfort in luxury stores placing importance only on the product as a sign.

While reference groups are influential everywhere, they take a special position in the interdependent Japanese culture since opinions and values of others are often regarded as more important. Fitting into in-groups often implies the subscription to the public display of wealth regardless of personal tastes. Therefore, although the act of consumption might be the same, the practice is shaped by cultural orientations.

Many luxury brands stem from the West and as such consumers use the country of origin as a cue to inferring quality and acceptability. My respondents preferred to buy foreign brands perceiving them as self-image enhancing and part of a sophisticated lifestyle.

For them, fashionability equals to Western goods, maybe also due to the extensive exposure of not only Western goods but also Western 'role models' found in young women's magazines like *Ginza Magazine and Baila*.. Magazines seem to suggest almost unlimited freedom of consumer choice, yet at the same time stress the importance of conformity and provide precise rules to which their readers are subtly encouraged to adhere. Luxury goods play an integral part of those magazines and offer to indulge into a materialistic world. This 'apparent' materialism, seen through the Western prism, may not always take after personal tastes but instead reflect the value placed on social conformity under the motto 'enjoy the freedom but follow the rules'.

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## **Interviews**

(1) Megumi (20 year old. Economics student at Waseda University, Tokyo) Notes taken during interview, July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

(2) Yukinori (23 year old, Cultural Studies student at Waseda University, Tokyo). Notes taken during interview, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

(3) Maho (22 years old, Cultural Studies student at Waseda University, Tokyo). Notes taken during interview, July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2006.

(4) Yasu (27 years old, Phd student at Waseda University, Tokyo) Notes taken during interview, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2006.

(5) Marie (28 years old, Sales assistant at Louis Vuitton Ginza Tokyo). Notes taken during interview, July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

(6) Eriko (28 years old, Program Coordinator). Notes taken during interview, July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

(7) Pseudo name (28 years old, works for Japanese Animal Organization). Notes taken during interview, July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

(8) Pseudo name (28 years old, Semi-conductor). Notes taken during interview, July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

(9) Yoshihisa (~40's, Marketing Manager of Amer Sports). Notes taken during interview, July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2006.

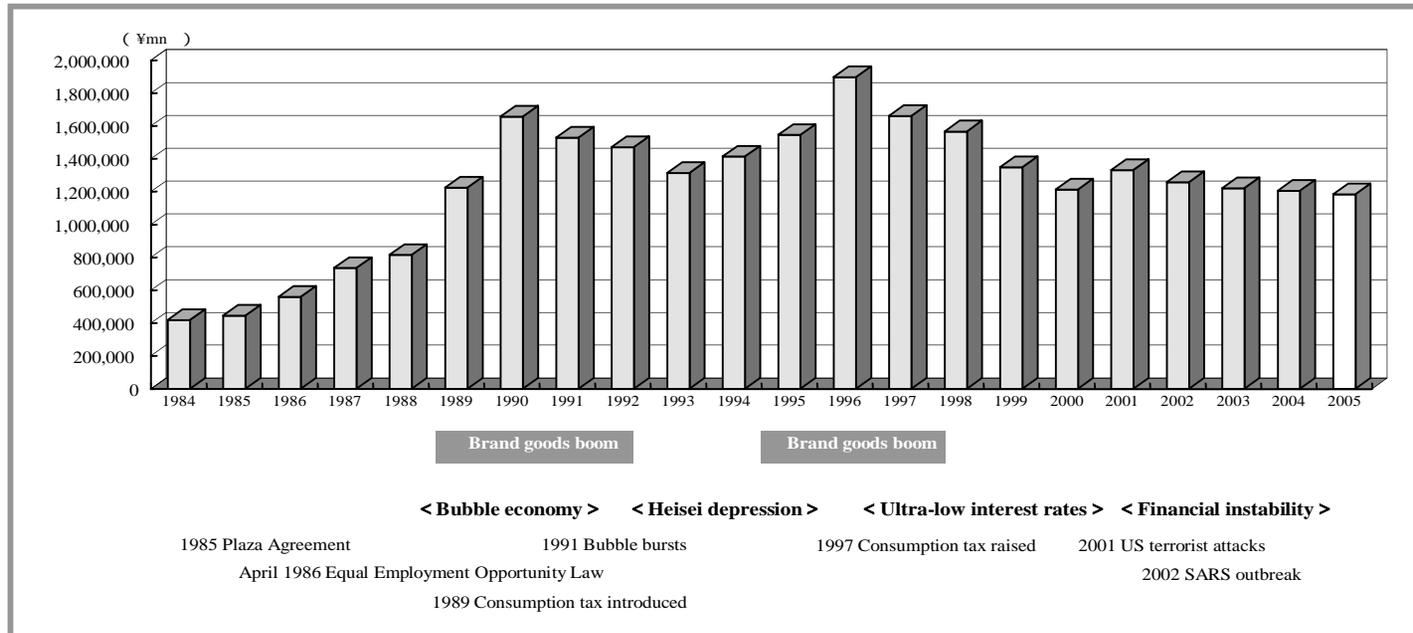
(10) Wataru (~30's, Senior Researcher at Yano Research Institute, Tokyo). Recorded interview, July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

(11) Kunihiko (~50's, Manager Corporate PR for Issey Miyake Inc.). Recorded interview, August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006.

(12) Chako (22 years old, Ericsson Tokyo). Notes taken during interview, July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

# Appendix

## Imported fashion clothes/accessories retail market trends



(Unit: ¥mn)

	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1991	1992	1993
Total market	418,110	446,285	559,572	734,367	815,391	1,224,770	1,656,738	1,528,039	1,528,039	1,470,951	1,313,952

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
	1,414,201	1,546,356	1,897,13	1,661,200	1,567,435	1,347,740	1,213,712	1,331,188	1,257,784	1,220,744	1,205,090	1,169,530

Retail Market for imported luxury clothing and accessories: Yano Research Institute Ltd. 2006

	2005			2004			2003			2002		
		YoY	Percentage									
Womenswear	259,736	92.0	22.2	282,449	97.1	23.4	290,802	92.7	23.8	313,843	93.4	25.0
Kids wear	1,843	96.5	0.2	1,91	118.8	0.2	1,608	139.1	0.1	1,156	116.9	0.1
Menswear	136,013	99.0	11.6	137,375	95.2	11.4	144,323	90.5	11.8	159,491	84.0	12.7
Handbags, bags, leather goods	517,637	99.6	44.3	519,841	99.6	43.1	521,898	101.9	42.8	512,167	96.7	40.7
Shoes and other footwear	149,628	94.5	12.8	158,34	100.5	13.1	157,482	95.7	12.9	164,577	97.1	13.1
Neckties	33,323	100.1	2.8	33,287	100.3	2.8	33,175	100.9	2.7	32,879	104.0	2.6
Scarves, shawls, handkerchieves	25,243	94.3	2.2	26,778	92.3	2.2	28,998	97.3	2.4	29,803	97.3	2.4
Leatherwear	17,995	90.6	1.5	19,853	91.3	1.6	21,745	86.7	1.8	25,074	92.4	2.0
Belts	24,697	115.4	2.1	21,409	125.0	1.8	17,128	117.6	1.4	14,563	129.2	1.2
Gloves	3,414	88.7	0.3	3,848	107.3	0.3	3,585	84.7	0.3	4,231	103.3	0.3
Total	1,169,530	97.0	100.0	1,205,090	98.7	100.0	1,220,744	97.1	100.0	1,257,784	94.5	100.0
	2001			2000			1999					
Womenswear	336,195	108.7	25.3	309,258	82.7	25.5	373,893	78.0	27.7			
Kids wear	989	87.6	0.1	1,129	72.1	0.1	1,566	63.1	0.1			
Menswear	189,86	96.6	14.3	196,613	82.0	16.2	239,65	81.8	17.8			
Handbags, bags, leather goods	529,835	114.9	39.8	461,289	100.7	38.0	457,986	97.5	34.0			
Shoes and other footwear	169,541	109.4	12.7	154,943	86.4	12.8	179,295	91.1	13.3			
Neckties	31,624	109.8	2.4	28,808	83.3	2.4	34,591	76.5	2.6			
Scarves, shawls, handkerchieves	30,644	106.2	2.3	28,86	85.4	2.4	33,779	70.6	2.5			
Leatherwear	27,133	123.3	2.0	22,01	148.8	1.8	14,789	99.9	1.1			
Belts	11,272	131.5	0.8	8,57	91.1	0.7	9,406	64.8	0.7			
Gloves	4,095	183.5	0.3	2,232	80.1	0.2	2,785	74.5	0.2			
Total	1,331,188	109.7	100.0	1,213,712	90.1	100.0	1,347,740	86.0	100.0			

## Luxury brand market ranking (FY2004)

( Unit: ¥100mn, % )

Rank	Brand name	Country	Corporate	Format	Sales in FY2004	
					( Goods )	YoY %
1	Louis Vuitton	France	LVJ Group	Import	1,560.0	102.0
2	Burberry	UK	Sanyo Shokai, others	License	1,267.5	97.5
3	Polo Ralph Lauren	USA	Polo Ralph Lauren Japan, others	License	1,095.0	102.0
4	Gucci	Italy	Gucci Group Japan	Import	614.0	108.9
5	Hermes	France	Hermes Japon	Import	510.0	102.0
6	Daks	UK	Sankyo Seiko, others	License	505.0	96.5
7	Tiffany	USA	Tiffany & Company Japan	Import	485.0	90.9
8	Cartier	France	Richemont Japan	Import	480.0	98.0
9	Coach	USA	Coach Japan	Import	405.0	132.8
10	Chanel	France	Chanel	Import	357.0	104.1
11	Paul Smith	UK	Paul Smith Japan, others	License	318.0	98.5
12	Giorgio Armani	Italy	Giorgio Armani Japan	Import	311.1	102.0
13	BVLGARI	Italy	Bulgari Japan	Import	256.0	116.6
14	Aquascutum	UK	Renown, others	License	254.0	100.5
15	Prada	Italy	Prada Japan	Import	218.0	96.0
16	Max Mara	Italy	Max Mara Japan	Import	201.0	96.6
17	Dior	France	Christian Dior	Import	170.0	118.1
18	Ferragamo	Italy	Ferragamo Japan	Import	140.5	93.5

Note: Giorgio Armani also includes Emporio and Collezioni

