

The Influence of Gender Roles in the Drivers of Luxury Consumption for Women: Insights from the Gulf Region

Abstract

Luxury consumption is a complex phenomenon that has been shown to convey prestige, signal wealth, boost self-esteem, and express self-concept and identity. Many of the earlier studies have been conducted in Western societies, and lack a detailed understanding of how demographics such as culture and gender may influence such consumption. In this exploratory study, we unravel the complexity further, and explore the drivers of luxury consumption among Arab women from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Utilizing focus groups comprising 31 GCC Arab females, we gain a deeper understanding of luxury consumption and evaluate the respective drivers in this context. Grounded in social role theory, we find a striking contrast between our results and the drivers that would be expected to influence GCC female luxury consumers according to extant theory. Specifically, GCC women displayed a number of independent and agentic behaviors in their luxury consumption, which contrasts to their social role in the GCC society that is often more communal and interdependent. We suggest a number of theoretical and practical implications from our study.

1. Introduction

Luxury brand consumption has been the focus of considerable research examining the reasons for lavish expenditure on luxury goods. Researchers argue that key reasons why consumers buy luxury brands are to convey their level of prestige, boost their self-esteem, express their identity, and signal status (e.g., Belk, 1985; Han et al., 2010). Globalization has had a major impact on the luxury goods industry worldwide, allowing unprecedented accessibility to global luxury brands. As a result, people tend to adopt uniform consumption habits, as well as break from traditional codes (Kjeldgaard and Askergaard, 2006). This trend is becoming particularly apparent in the Gulf Arab world. Arab men and women are large consumers of Western luxury goods and are targeted with similar advertising and marketing messages as their Western counterparts. But while this assumes that they share similar drivers of luxury consumption to their Western peers, there is no account taken of differences between Western and Arab consumers. For example, there are well-documented differences to the West concerning socially- and culturally-embedded gender roles of Gulf Arab men and women, which is important, since gender is known to impact individuals' consumption behaviors (Saad and Gill, 2000). However, how gender and prescribed gender roles may influence behaviors regarding luxury consumption has received very little research attention. In particular, if, and how, the drivers of luxury consumption for women in the Gulf Arab region conform to those expected from their culturally-relevant gender role prescriptions, is an area warranting further research. This directly addresses calls in the literature for more investigation of luxury driver consumption in non-Western (particularly collectivists) cultures (Hudders, 2012).

Social role theory posits that there are fundamental, stereotypical gender-role expectations, or prescriptions, where men take the role of the provider and women take the role

of the caregiver. These lead to differences in personality and social behavior, where men assume more agentic behaviors, while women are more communal (Eagly, 1987). Underpinned by particular socialization patterns (Moschis, 1985), male and female gender roles are thought to be universal across cultures (Saad and Gill, 2000), but with some variation in strength of gender role prescription across cultures. That is, some cultures have strongly prescribed gender roles, while others are less strongly prescribed (Putrevu, 2001). Arab culture has strongly prescribed gender roles; women living in the GCC have a very strong cultural identity and view family traditions, religious values, and the family's position in society as extremely important factors in their daily lives (Alserhan and Alserhan, 2012). This affects their decision-making process, especially for luxury products (Sobh et al., 2010; Vel et al., 2011). At the same time, they try to mitigate the struggle of balancing the desire to embrace the Western world and that of preserving their local identity (Sobh et al., 2013). For example, Gulf Arab women have been shown to accommodate Western luxury advertising messages that may violate female role norms in their society (such as modesty and conformity), by interpreting, reconstructing, and representing the messages in ways that are socially acceptable (Al-Mutawa, 2013). It is also contended that the women cover such indulgences under “the cloak of invisibility” of their abaya, (Sobh et al., 2014).

Against this backdrop, and acknowledging that there is still scant research examining luxury buying behavior in the Gulf Arab region, the objective of this study is to examine the drivers of luxury consumption among female Gulf Arab consumers. We focus on the Gulf Arab citizens who usually wear their national dress – abaya for females – a plain black cloak worn by Gulf Arab women, and kandoora (plain white cloak worn by males) which differentiates them from other Arab consumers (from the Levant area for example, Makkar and Yap, 2018a). We

focus specifically on female consumers for their ability to embellish their abayas with luxury accessories as opposed to the kandoora for males, which leaves no room for indulging in luxury apparel or accessories (Sobh et al. 2014). In addition, our study aims to explore whether or not conformity to female gender role expectations is reflected in these drivers. Gaining a better understanding of drivers of female luxury consumption in the GCC is important because the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) represents one of the world's wealthiest and fastest growing consumer segments (Cervellon and Coudriet, 2013). Male and female consumers in the GCC spend approximately between \$6 billion and \$14 billion per year on luxury products (Pivac, 2014), making it a very lucrative, yet understudied market.

Our study draws upon social role theory, as well as the established Western, and emerging Arab, literature on luxury consumption. In so doing, we aim to contribute to the luxury consumption literature in several important ways. First, while gender differences have been widely explored in the general marketing literature (Wolin, 2003), as well as, more recently, in luxury marketing (Stokburger-Saur and Teichmann, 2013; Roux et al. 2017), the issue of gender roles in the consumption of luxury goods is a vastly under-explored area. Research has not considered how social gender roles influence the drivers of luxury consumption. The influence of gender roles is important to understand, since the motives for luxury consumption are known to differ between men and women. However, little is known about if, and how much, the motives of female luxury consumers are constrained or enhanced by their prescribed gender roles in society. For example, motives, such as, status-seeking, prestige and uniqueness may be more or less evident, depending on the prescribed role behaviors for women, and the strength of that prescription in the particular society and culture. Second, we extend social role theory in a new cultural context. To our knowledge, there is no such research

in the context of Arab luxury brand consumers, despite their significant influence on the luxury market globally. Research suggests that gender roles are intertwined with national, cultural, and social structures (Eagly, 1987), and these are particularly important in the Arab region (Jayashree and Lindsay, 2016). Our application of social role theory to Gulf Arab female luxury consumers adds to this body of knowledge and reinforces the importance of this study. Our final contribution is that we explore the research question from an ‘emic’ perspective, by living, and working in the Arab culture. Typically, researchers are external to the culture and approach the research question from an ‘etic’ perspective. Many argue that the applicability of findings and theories from studies in Western cultures may prove to be problematic in non-Western cultures (e.g. Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Ger and Belk, 1996). We, therefore, add new insights from being culturally immersed in the Arab region, which enables some new and unique cross-cultural perspectives on luxury consumption to emerge.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Luxury Consumption

The consumption of luxury products worldwide has grown to an estimated market size of €1.06 trillion per annum (Bain and Company, 2016). Luxury products are relatively expensive products whose possession provides increased prestige and status, without necessarily offering any enhanced functional utility (Grossman and Shapiro, 1988). Previous research has shown that there are two main theoretical drivers for luxury consumption: (1) social and interpersonal values where luxury consumption is a marker used to conspicuously recreate social stratification and signal luxury for others (Godey et al., 2013 Vigneron and Johnson, 2014), and (2) a very strong personal and hedonistic component, where luxury is acquired for oneself rather than

others (Kapferer and Bastien 2009, Vigneron and Johnson, 2014). Based on the notion of self-concept, drivers for luxury consumption can also be generally categorized into independent or interdependent (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2012). Consumers with an interdependent self-concept (focusing on the opinions and reactions of others) seek luxury consumption based on social drivers in which consumers buy lavish items as a means of display to others, a concept known as conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899). As such, people seek luxury products to signal important information to others (Richins, 1994) such as self-identity (Belk, 1988) level of wealth and prestige (Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996), a social identity with, or conformity to, a certain social class (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; White and Dahl, 2007). For others, psychological need for self-integrity acts as a motivator for luxury consumption. For example, income-constrained consumers (Banerjee and Duflo, 2007), and those with bruised self-esteem (Svinathan and Pettit, 2010), may seek high status goods to restore their sense of self-worth. Here, consumers resort to a conspicuous luxury consumption and are more prone to purchase products with higher brand prominence (Han et al., 2010) in order to convey to others that they are ahead (Ordabayeva and Chandon, 2011) revealing more extrinsic values such as the Veblenian and Bandwagon effects (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999).

On the other hand, consumers with an independent self-concept (focusing on self-related goals and needs) demonstrate more individual and psychological drivers for luxury consumption, whereby consumers buy luxury products for hedonistic, utilitarian, self-communication, and self-enhancement goals. Here, luxury consumption provides a better sense of self, and is believed to lead to happier and more fulfilled lives (Belk, 1985; Makkar and Yap, 2018b), and therefore consumers resort to an inconspicuous luxury consumption (Makkar and Yap, 2018a), without overtly displaying wealth and social status (Wu et al., 2017) and enhancing and signaling their

own individual identity (Makkar and Yap, 2018b). More specifically, consumers have a higher need to purchase products with subtle designs and uniqueness (Eckhardt et al., 2015) and are willing to pay higher prices for such products (Berger and Ward, 2010). In this regard, inconspicuous consumption is the result of intrinsic motivations such as perfectionism, snob, and hedonistic drivers (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999)

It has been suggested that men are more likely to demonstrate independent motives (reflecting an independent self-concept), while women are more likely to demonstrate interdependent motives (reflecting an interdependent self-concept). In accordance with this and some of the few additional studies on gender roles in luxury consumption (e.g. Hudders, 2012; Roux et al, 2017), this division reflects the values and behaviors associated broadly with the agentic and communal gender roles of men and women, respectively, as posited by social role theory. However, drivers for luxury consumption in the Gulf Arab region may be more complex. Research on the Gulf Arab world highlights that the Gulf region in general and the UAE in particular has experienced major social changes ranging from political reforms to an integration in the global economy, the influx of Westerners, exposure to global mass media (Alsharekh, 2008) as well as the country's leaders' willingness to adopt Western lifestyles (Sobh and Belk, 2011). This has caused some tension for GCC Arab females where they struggle to find a balance between modesty and indulgence (Sobh et al., 2014). In this regard, we question whether GCC Arab females have only communal values with interdependent drivers for luxury consumption or are there independent drivers to their luxury choices.

2.2. Social Role Theory and Gender

Social role theory occupies a key position among the broader metatheoretical, social structural theories applied to explain the differences in social behaviors of men and women (Eagly and Wood, 1999). The key assumption of a social structural theoretical approach to understanding the behaviors associated with the different roles played by men and women in society, such as occupation (Shelton, 1992), is that “because men and women tend to occupy different social roles, they become psychologically different in ways that adjust them to these roles” (Eagly and Wood, 1999, p. 408). Accordingly, men and women “adjust to sex-typical roles by acquiring the specific skills and resources” (Eagly et al., 2000, p.126), and adapt their behavior, in order to perform their role successfully.

In this regard, men will occupy roles that afford them greater power and status, reflecting behaviors that are assertive, individually-oriented directive, and autocratic – termed *agentic* behaviors (Eagly, 1987). Women’s social behaviors, on the other hand, are less assertive and more caring and nurturing – termed *communal* behaviors (Eagly, 1987). Thus, women occupy roles with less status and power (Ridgeway and Diekema, 1992) and accommodate more interdependent roles, signaling a greater concern for others than for self. The shared expectations of society concerning the respective social activities and behaviors result in widely accepted gender roles, which become stereotypical of men and women in society (Eagly et al., 2000).

While there are alternate views, Eagly and Wood (1999) maintain that culture can influence social behavior, and that culture, along with social structure, constrains the social and physical environments of individuals. Indeed, House (1995) indicates that culture is reflected in social structure, with the latter setting “bounded patterns of behavior and interaction among people or positions” (House, 1995, p. 390). Eagly and Wood (1999) thus argue that gender roles are manifestations of both culture and social structure. How much individual preference as to the

roles occupied by men and women depends partly on how much the cultural context imposes gender roles i.e. how strongly prescribed are the roles. Generally, social systems overall play a significant part in shaping self-concept, skills, beliefs, and values, such that individuals seek out behaviors that meet the expectations of the roles assumed. The independent versus interdependent self-concept distinction is, therefore, important when considering the influence of gender roles on the drivers of luxury consumption, since the latter will reflect the individual's self-concept and associated luxury consumption behavior.

While social role theory offers an appropriate theoretical lens to explore gender-influenced luxury consumption, surprisingly, very few luxury marketing studies have utilized this theory (an exception is Roux et al., 2017). Social role theory and the closely related socialization theory (Moschis, 1985), have been utilized in a number of general marketing studies examining the influence of gender; for example, in the satisfaction/loyalty link (Walsh et al., 2008), marketing communications (Putrevu, 2001), and purchase intentions (Vogel et al., 2003). With some exceptions, very few studies have drawn on social role theory to explain gender differences found in luxury consumption behaviors.

2.3 Gender and Luxury Consumption

The influence of gender has been studied in the broad marketing literature in the context of both marketing and consumption. For example, differences between men and women in respect to their purchase behavior, consumption motives, and brand choices have been highlighted (Saad and Gill, 2000). Also, from the perspective of the marketer, marketing promotion, branding communications, and product/service characteristics are often targeted differently to men and women (e.g., Meyers-Levy, 1988; Prakash 1992). In the general

marketing literature, the rationale for such observed gender differences is often explained by theories concerned with gender roles, including social role theory (Eagly, 1987), socialization theory (Moschis, 1985), and evolutionary psychology theories (Saad and Gill, 2000).

Only relatively recently have scholars started investigating how gender influences luxury consumption, based on the premise that luxury products and services satisfy needs that are different to those associated with non-luxury products and services (Stokburger-Saur and Teichmann, 2013), and different between men and women (Roux et al, 2017). Therefore, it is reasonable to propose that luxury consumption motives will differ between men and women, based largely on prescribed gender roles and associated preferences of the consumer.

2.4 Culture and Luxury Consumption

To date, the majority of the literature on luxury consumption has been developed in the context of (broadly defined) Western culture, with individualism and masculinity being the characteristic cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1980). While acknowledging that this overview does not reflect the many differences between and within national cultures, this broad characterization, is, nonetheless, largely reflected in the current literature. As noted by Saad and Gill (2000), this literature converges around the view that, in keeping with the ubiquitous nature of luxury and luxury products and services, consumers around the world are driven by the same basic sets of motivations and share similar experiences from their encounters with luxury consumption. In response to this assumption, the global strategies of brand managers also tend to be generic (Wiedmann et al., 2007).

Recently, scholars have started to question this perspective, suggesting that (national) culture might influence how consumers perceive and value a luxury product or service (Siu et al., 2016). This has led to studies on luxury marketing and consumption in a range of non-Western countries, with findings generally supporting the importance of specific cultural contexts. For example, in their study of luxury hotels in China, Wu and Yang (2018) suggest that luxury marketing should capture a unique blend of Western materialism and Chinese non-materialistic culture, to better reflect the purchase motives of Chinese consumers. Also, in China, Siu et al. (2016) examined brand equity among local luxury brand consumers and found that face-saving was an important culturally driven consumption motivation. The assumed cross-cultural validity of Western luxury consumption motivations has also been questioned in research on other largely collectivist cultures. In a study of East Asian luxury consumers, Monkhouse et al. (2012) found face-saving to be a strong predictor of hedonistic behavior and conspicuous consumption, while in Iran, Teimourpour and Hanzae (2011) found the evaluation of luxury value dimensions to be influenced by the country's cultural and religious context. Given these and other similar insights, several calls for research into luxury marketing and consumption in collectivist cultures have been made, in order to highlight and explain differences in findings to the Western context (Hudders, 2012, Siu et al., 2016).

Culture's influence on gender roles is well established (Eagly and Wood, 1999). Social role theory (Eagly, 1987) and the closely associated socialization theory (Moschis, 1985) rationalize that men and women assume different roles in society based on the division of labor and society's expectations, or prescriptions, along with socialization influences. Cultures with strong gender role prescriptions expect gender role behavior commensurate with the prescription (Putrevu, 2001), such that women will display communal, rather than agentic, behavior. As this

translates into luxury consumption, women would demonstrate more interdependent (rather than independent) motivations, and place less emphasis on status and power (Roux et al., 2017)

2.5 Arab Context: Culture, Gender and Luxury Consumption

In the Arab world, women's social roles are strongly prescribed (Sobh et al, 2014), and have been built on a strong tradition that clearly delineates the roles that men and women play in the family and society. This has evolved in tandem with strong socialization influences, where women are raised to follow communal values and behaviors, while men are raised to be more agentic. The local Arab family structure plays a significant role in influencing the behavior of luxury consumers (Farah and Fawaz, 2016; Vel et al., 2011). In Arab society, family is considered a central pillar around which personality, beliefs, and ethics are built (Barakat, 1993; Vel et al., 2011) and consistent with wider societal patriarchal values, reflects a patriarchal system where men in the family have authority and power. Thus, the family influences the individual's behavioral pattern, and, in Arab society, this behavior reflects directly back on the family. Given this, family plays a significant role in the choice of luxury goods by family members (Daghestani, 2013), because such consumption is a reflection of the family's respectability in society. This often means demonstrating a luxurious lifestyle, because consumers are concerned with societal approval and being accepted by others (Farah and Fawaz, 2016; Riquelme et al., 2011; Vel et al., 2011). In engaging in luxury consumption, the Arab female is therefore able to maintain her status in her collectivist peer group.

Some studies on luxury consumption by Arab consumers have also highlighted drivers that are more independent (individualistic) in nature. For example, hedonism is shown to be an important driver for luxury consumers in the Arab region (Al-Khatib et al., 2005, Farah and

Fawaz, 2016). Further, Arab women attach status to the brand, based on their own perceived status in society - accorded by the name and status of their family. Thus, if a woman chooses to consume a luxury brand based on her individual interpretation and reconstruction, her own social status will be conferred on the brand. This provides not only an opportunity for the display of status (of family and its social standing (an interdependent driver) through conspicuous consumption of the luxury brand, but also fulfills a personal need for status affirmation (Dittmar, 1994), as an independent driver.

The social context may also provide an opportunity for female Arab luxury consumers to exercise both independent and interdependent self-concept behaviors. In a qualitative study of private and public spaces in Arab homes, Sobh and Belk (2011) found that women were able to ‘show off’ their luxury possessions freely in family-only spaces in the home, fulfilling an independent need for status affirmation, as well as an interdependent one through status signaling to their peers.

The culture and social structure of the Arab region influence Arab men and women differently from their Western counterparts, particularly in how they impact their different social roles in Arab society. Alserhan and Alserhan (2012) contend that family traditions and values reign supreme for Arab women – consistent with their prescribed communal gender roles. Well-documented research on the social roles of Arab women in the context of careers and leadership (Tlaiss, 2014a, b; Jayashree and Lindsay, 2016) confirms that Arab women are generally perceived as communal and living in strongly traditional and patriarchal societies; they experience early socialization into communal social roles within strong family and community settings (Teimourpour and Hanzae, 2011). This consumer group of Arab women is also known

for its appreciation of luxury consumption and represents one of the world's fastest growing and wealthiest consumer segments (Cervellon and Coudriet, 2013; Alserhan et al., 2015).

Existing literature suggests that modesty is appropriate for Muslim female consumers who are from strongly traditional families (Al-Olayan and Karande, 2000). The idea of display and attention, which fashion culture is based upon, appears to be at odds with this viewpoint. However, luxury fashion brands continue to be consumed by young Muslim women (Sobh et al., 2014). Indeed, younger generation consumers have known wealth since birth and are consumers of luxury from a very early age. But they are driven by conflicting aspirations; on the one hand, they are searching for individual expression and personal style (Sobh and Belk, 2011), while, on the other hand, they are bound to strong social codes and traditions (Chalhoub Group, 2013; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006). Sobh et al. (2014) and others argue that this reflects the development of a new type of 'hybrid' cultural identity, which serves to minimize the tension and validate the luxury consumption behaviors of young Arab women.

These and other studies (e.g. Farah and Fawaz, 2016) are increasingly reporting the apparent tensions between individualistic social needs and traditional societal expectations for Arab women. Although a range of explanations have been proposed, including mimicry (Sobh et al., 2014), cultural bricolage (Visscher et al., 2018), and cultural hybridization (Fitzsimmons et al., 2017), how traditional (and stereotypical) female gender roles interact with contemporary drivers of luxury consumption by Arab women is still not clear. However, existing studies help to lay the foundation for exploring the relationships between the drivers of luxury consumption by Arab women and their prescribed female gender roles – the focus of this study. As such, we aim to examine the interaction between traditional gender roles and modern luxury consumption drivers in the context of women's luxury consumption in the GCC region. Specifically, we

address the question of how women navigate between the strongly prescribed female social roles embedded in the local culture and tradition, and the influence of Western culture in their luxury consumption behavior. We ask how these apparent tensions shape the motivations of local GCC women to consume luxury products. From a theoretical standpoint, the study will provide insights into the extent to which social role theory can explain these phenomena, and how culturally-based gender roles may become modified in the process of women consuming luxury products in seemingly opposing contexts.

3. Methodology

The methodological approach used in this study involved qualitative insights into luxury consumption of Gulf Arab females in the United Arab Emirates. Due to the complexity of the under-researched phenomenon of luxury consumption, it was felt that qualitative methods of inquiry would provide richer and deeper insights (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Flick, 2014). It was also felt that qualitative methods would enable a holistic view of the interaction of luxury consumption and social role theory, and also unravel some of the cross-cultural complexity in international consumer behavior (Belk 2007; Douglas and Craig 1997). Due to the lack of empirical studies on luxury consumption in the Arab world, we used a qualitative abductive approach for the study, whereby existing theoretical perspectives were utilized in approaching the empirical context (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). Abductive reasoning refers to an inferential creative process of producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence that does not fit existing theories (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). Researchers move from old to new theoretical insights, rather than theory development that is often associated with purely inductive studies (Ketokivi and Choi, 2014).

Our initial interest in the study arose from informal observations of students who were observed consuming expensive luxury accessories while at a university in the UAE. In particular it was noticed that the luxury consumption was prevalent among female GCC Arab consumers who were ‘covered’ in their traditional cultural clothing – black abaya, and shayla. Several luxury products of handbags, watches, and jewelry were being consumed quite conspicuously, which contrasted with the typical ‘modesty’ shown by the GCC females while wearing their similar black clothing. In some cases, a luxury branded abaya or shayla (headscarf) was also worn, suggesting further conspicuous consumption among the GCC females. While we had noticed that some GCC males displayed overt consumption of luxury goods, such as placing luxury car keys on the table in full visibility of their peers, the GCC females’ consumption of luxury accessories were much more consistent in their patterns of behavior. Further informal interviews, observations and discussions ensued with several GCC females to probe the reasons for such luxury consumption. After several months, the research team proposed a more robust framework to investigate this interesting phenomenon further.

Data were collected from a purposive sample of GCC female undergraduate students attending an international university located in the UAE. The focus of our study was the GCC females who wore traditional cultural clothing of black abaya and shayla, and who were observed to be consuming luxury accessories – mainly luxury branded handbags from European origin. Specific students were approached from the researchers’ own classes and invited to participate. In addition, willing participants were then asked to invite their friends, or family members to participate in the study, as long as they fitted the GCC female undergraduate selection criteria. While the university has a diverse mix of students from many different cultural backgrounds, we were interested only in GCC females of which there are approximately 500

total on campus. The GCC female students offered the research team an accessible and purposive sample for further investigation, and we generated a list of around 40 participants who were willing to be part of the study, and join one of the focus group discussions. In total, 31 individuals participated in the focus groups, as several invitees did not show up or canceled at the last minute.

Specifically, we conducted three focus group sessions comprised of between 8 and 12 GCC female participants. We used focus groups as the primary method of data collection, as we felt that they were appropriate for generating deep insights into a complex phenomenon (Liamputtong, 2011). Focus groups provide an environment for encouraging participants to reveal their true feelings about an issue in a way that is not revealed through other forms of questioning such as personal interviews (Krueger and Casey, 2000; Coenen et al., 2012). Parker and Tritter (2006) also note that focus groups are effective in capturing group interaction prompting a fuller and deeper discussion of issues and the triggering of new ideas.

The research objectives meant that there were likely to be multiple factors driving the consumption of luxury products, and the group environment would enable discussion and debate to unravel the complexity of the key drivers. In the collective culture of the UAE, among a group of peer GCC females, it was felt that focus groups would enable the participants to feel relaxed and comfortable, and work together to discuss their luxury consumption behaviors (Krueger, 2000). A high degree of trust among the participants would also facilitate more detailed discussion on the private and potentially sensitive issues of spending money on expensive luxury accessories. It was also felt that the focus groups would stimulate deeper discussion from the participant's own frames of reference, than from those of the researcher (Acocella, 2012; Morgan and Spanish, 1984). The group would therefore stimulate their own discussion, with

minimal moderator input beyond facilitation of the discussion. This means that the discussion is centered on the points of view of the participants rather than those of the researchers, (Liamputtong, 2011).

Participants were invited to discuss their attitudes, knowledge and experiences of the consumption of their luxury accessories while at university and also outside of the university environment. These were based on their own consumption of such items or the consumption by close others such as friends and family. The participants provided some unique observations of their conspicuous (and sometimes inconspicuous) consumption behaviors of luxury accessory products. The focus group sessions lasted around 45 to 60 minutes, and they were each audio-taped for later transcription. The focus groups were conducted in English as this was the language of choice among participants. Questions were open-ended in order to gain deep insights (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006) and to stimulate responses in the form of an interactive discussion. The researchers developed some initial broad questions to stimulate the discussions, and were guided by key themes from literature on luxury consumption incorporating several independent and interdependent factors. These included factors such as conspicuous consumption, compensatory consumption, social identity and hierarchy, self-esteem and general enhancement of sense of self (e.g. attractiveness).

The sessions started out with general questions regarding participants' views on luxury consumption such as the definition of luxury, their views on why consumers buy luxury items in general, and whether these choices are influenced by their peers. Questions then took a more specific nature as to whether GCC females signal luxury consumption, whether Gulf Arab culture played a role in such consumption decisions, and how different the culture is perceived to be from Western culture. These general questions stimulated a significant amount of discussion

on the luxury consumption, and the participants appears to be quite open, and willing to discuss their consumption of expensive handbags and other accessories. The familiarity of the group (many were friends or family members) and the closeness of the Gulf Arab community in general, meant that the participants appeared comfortable in the focus group environment. In some research contexts talking so openly about consuming a luxury branded handbag costing over USD \$8000.00 could be private, sensitive and difficult, but in our research context, it did not seem a challenge. As the discussions matured several deeper concepts emerged, and participants were probed further about the importance of status, power, self-esteem, rebelliousness, social identity, social roles and social boundaries as factors affecting their luxury consumption in the Gulf Arab context.

Following transcription of the discussions, we added the researchers' observational notes made during the focus groups, and used inductive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) of the data. Since there were no differences between the focus groups in terms of demographics and questions asked, the transcriptions were combined and a single analysis of the combined data was undertaken. The computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) program, NVivo10, was used to analyze the transcribed data (Miles and Huberman, 2004). This approach allowed a logical path of data coding and interpretation to be followed (Auld et al., 2007). The analysis followed the iterative process described in Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 10), who "define analysis as consisting of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification". The analysis was conducted with some pre-conceptualization being undertaken, such that the emerging themes and sub-themes were considered in the context of the two categories of luxury consumption drivers identified in the literature (independent and interdependent). Additional data emerging on the role of social

contextual factors were also identified and coded accordingly. Further, the data interpretation and coding process allowed for additional information and insights to be captured. Coding reliability was addressed by having two sets of two researchers concurrently coding the transcripts, and cross-tabulating each other's work for consistency and reliability. Any differences between the codes and thematic drivers were resolved by discussion and further analysis similar to many thematic studies (e.g. Makkar and Yap, 2018b). Selective quotes from the focus groups were captured to illustrate the themes and sub-themes emerging from the data.

4. Results and Discussion

We present our results according to the main themes and sub-themes that emerged from our analysis of the focus group transcripts and the existing literature. The findings relating to these themes are presented and discussed first in the context of existing research. Table 1 shows the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis; these are presented as independent and interdependent drivers, according to how they are represented in the literature, as discussed in the earlier sections. Second, we discuss the findings in the context of social role theory. We use the independent and interdependent classification of the drivers of luxury consumption to reflect the agentic and communal gender role values and behaviors (respectively) described in social role theory.

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4.1. Definition of Luxury

Despite the vast research in luxury branding and consumption, literature has yet to reach a single definition for luxury (Amatulli et al., 2016; Vigneron and Johnson, 2017). Therefore,

given that Wiedmann and Hennig's (2013) notion that the definition of luxury is based on consumers' perception, we asked our participants to define luxury from their own perspective. They defined luxury to be exclusive, a product that stands out and confers prestige and status. Consistent with previous research, respondents seemed to perceive different levels of luxury, affirming that brands are distributed along a luxury continuum (Kapferer, 1997; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Participants also indicated that, even within the same brand, there may be different degrees of luxury based on design and material used (for example, crocodile or ostrich leather).

4.2 Drivers of Luxury Consumption

4.2.1 Independent (Agentic) Drivers

Need-for-uniqueness:

Participants expressed a need for uniqueness in order to be distinctive. The women tend to choose the most expensive product within the luxury brands, as a way of showing their uniqueness. Therefore, they express uniqueness by buying limited editions and exclusive skin products offered by these brands, as they are aware of the different levels within luxury (Kapferer, 2006). Our respondents believe that, even within the same brand, there seems to be a continuum on which the degree of luxury differs, depending not only on price, but also on exotic skin and limited designs. The need for uniqueness falls across a spectrum from differentiation of self from others to assimilation (Ruvio, 2008), which reflects a leaning towards a more interdependent display of conformity. Either extreme may cause negative emotions (Snyder and Fromkin, 1980), so finding an optimal position is required to fulfill the need for uniqueness.

Other researchers have shown that consumers use products to both differentiate themselves and make inferences about others (Berger and Heath, 2008). Further, when consumers consider purchasing products that are perceived as symbolic of identity, they tend to diverge from the majority's choice (Berger and Heath, 2007). Participants in the study emphasized the importance of differentiating from their group of similar others if they are satisfied with their luxury possession, their emotional needs are met, and when differentiation provides an optimal outcome. They highlight that the only way to differentiate themselves is through their outward consumption (e.g. shoes, bags, accessories).

Indulgence (reward or compensation):

Indulgence, or hedonism, was evident as a driver, as participants described the emotional benefit sought from luxury consumption. Hedonism describes the state in which consumers seek products for their intrinsically appealing properties and subjective emotional benefits (Sheth et al., 1991), such as feelings of personal gratification and self-indulgence (Vigneron and Johnson 2004). In our study, indulgence expectations were articulated as a reward for something achieved, as well as for compensation, such as, for example, when mood is low. Other research reports consumers as indicating that possessing luxury products will make them happier and more fulfilled (Belk, 1985).

Self-esteem:

Self-esteem and self-confidence were expressed as important emotionally-based drivers for luxury consumption. Participants made a direct connection between the possession of luxury goods and self-confidence. Luxury consumption also gives them a heightened self-esteem,

which, they felt, is important in negating the need to show off. This accords with others, who indicate that luxury goods consumption helps boost self-esteem and offers a better sense of self (Belk, 1988; Holt 1998; Sivananthan and Pettit, 2010).

Empowerment:

There is a prevailing patriarchal mindset in the Arab world, where males often make important family decisions. There seems to be a strong support for daughters to enter the workforce; however, the choice of careers is limited as it directly affects the family honor and dignity (Williams, et. al., 2013; Gallant and Pounder, 2008). Therefore, not many women reach managerial ranks in the workforce. In this regard, our participants clearly indicated the feeling of empowerment rendered through the consumption of luxury goods. Some indicated that empowerment happens in the vast majority of cases, often (90% of the time) subconsciously, suggesting also that it is not necessarily a desired outcome. Other studies have shown that many luxury consumers attempt to gain social standing in the form of status and power, where social class is considered an important factor in determining the rank that consumers attain within a social hierarchy (Kraus et al., 2009). Research also shows that consumers buy luxury products, not only to signal wealth or identity, but also to signal power through status (Rucker and Galinsky, 2008).

Status Consumption (SC):

Literature differentiates between status consumption (SC), which is concerned with “valuing status and purchasing goods that provide status”, and conspicuous consumption (CC), which “concerns self-enhancement by signaling status to others through overt display (Han et al.,

2010). SC is concerned with status-seeking and CC reflects status signaling (Han et al., 2010). While the two constructs have been shown to be closely related (O’Cass and McEwen, 2004; O’Cass and Shiahtiri, 2013), they represent both independent (SC), status seeking, and interdependent (CC), status signaling, self-concepts. Participants in our study indicated that both SC and CC are important. In regard to SC, some participants suggested that they would buy a luxury handbag purely for status-seeking, even if they did not really like it. Additionally, women in the study buy luxury products because they personally associate status with the product; for example, staying with a classic brand that is still trendy and meaningful to them for its brand longevity. Research shows that wealthy consumers with a high need for status tend to choose luxury brands with prominent logos, in order to dissociate themselves from others, whereas wealthy consumers with low need for status choose luxury brands with less prominent logos (Han et al., 2010), and are less concerned with differentiation.

4.2.2. Interdependent (Communal) Drivers

Conspicuous Consumption (CC):

The signaling of status to others, or CC, was found to be an important driver for women in the study. Some women made a direct link between the particular luxury handbag and its status level perceived by others. Participants were able to identify specific features of the luxury brand that, they felt, gives them strong status-signaling power. This included the brand itself, particular colors that are recognized for their high profile and status by their peers, or the exclusiveness of the materials used to make or embellish the handbag, such as rare skins or gold. One respondent indicated that she feels like she is signaling her wealth when buying luxury brands. Han et al.’s (2010) study on status found that even consumers who identify with a low status group seek

luxury products to dissociate themselves from this group (Mazzocco et al., 2012), and associate, instead, with higher-status group in the society. Here, the display of wealth becomes a very important factor allowing consumers to climb the social ladder (O’Cass and Frost, 2002).

Need for conformity:

In contrast to indicating the need for uniqueness, participants also highlighted the importance of conforming to the (peer) group. As they described, sometimes there are situations that warrant both – for example, conforming and also differentiating within the bounds of what will retain membership in the group, such as owning higher-level models within the same brand, or having unique colors. The women in the study conform by buying well-known luxury brands. They also express uniqueness by buying limited editions and exclusive skin products offered by these brands (Kapferer, 2006). They are aware that even within the same brand, there is a continuum on which the degree of luxury differs depending not only on price but also on other factors, like exotic materials and limited designs. The need for conformity is well recognized in the literature (e.g. Amaldoss and Jain, 2005). Essentially, conformity refers to a situation where consumers are drawn to products used by other members in the group with which they associate, or aspire to associate (associative in-group), and are repelled by products used by dissimilar others (dissociative out-group; Berger and Heath, 2008; Escalas and Bettman, 2003; White and Dhal, 2007).

Self-consciousness:

Women may be self-conscious about how they are seen by others, and see self-appearance as a way in which they are evaluated; this can lead to negative perceptions (Heflick et al., 2012).

Roux et al.'s (2017) research found female Western luxury consumers to be concerned about self-appearance, and this was a driver for luxury consumption. In our study, there was very little reference to this issue – rather, a general feeling that ‘looking good’ was important, but not necessarily influenced by luxury consumption.

Contextual Social Influences:

Two kinds of social influence impacting luxury consumption were identified from the focus groups. These were socialization, including the role of tradition, and social context.

Socialization was referred to particularly in regard to the social and family influences and expectations to which the women were exposed in their early years. Social context includes the particular social settings that might influence the participants' luxury consumption drivers. An interesting finding was the statement that wearing a branded bag achieved the desired objectives (e.g. status) when wearing an abaya. But when not wearing an abaya, for example, when the participants travel abroad, the women felt that it is no longer necessary to show the brand, since they are no longer needing to conform with, or differentiate from, the ‘group’. This is confirmed by Al-Mutawa's (2013) findings, which showed that modesty (as reflected in wearing the abaya) was seen as an essential element of the motivation for luxury consumption, since covering the body focused attention on the brand, as desired, and not to other aspects of the individual, such as dress and hairstyle. When not wearing an abaya, the focus on the luxury brand, therefore, becomes less important.

4.3 A Social Role Theory Perspective

Table 2 shows a summary of our findings alongside the results that would be expected from a social gender role perspective. Notably, the findings from the Arab women in our study do not fully conform to the social role expectations of the kinds of drivers for women luxury consumers; the ‘expected’ drivers would be predominantly associated with an interdependent self-concept. While interdependent drivers were identified, numerous independent drivers, previously expected to apply mainly to men, were also highlighted. Specifically, the women revealed a need for uniqueness and differentiation, indulgence (hedonism) and reward or compensation, self-esteem, empowerment, and status (consumption). As previously discussed, these drivers are generally associated with men (e.g. Hudders, 2012), and reflect agentic values and behaviors consistent with male gender roles. As expected from social role theory, women did confirm the majority of the interdependent drivers of luxury consumption. These were status from conspicuous consumption, and a need for conformity. An exception was seen in self-consciousness, which women in the study did not indicate as a driver of their luxury consumption. The results also reveal new emerging themes specific to the Gulf Arab female. The women also indicated the influences of self-consciousness, socialization and tradition, as well as social context. Further, among the interdependent drivers, the women also subscribed to conspicuous consumption (CC), which is more commonly associated with men (Roux et al., 2017). Thus, our findings show important deviations in the drivers of luxury consumption for women from those expected if viewed through the lens of social role theory. Principally, among our participants, we see the use of drivers that are generally associated with an independent self-concept, reflecting agentic values and behaviors aligned more with male gender roles than female gender roles. Possible reasons for these differences are discussed in the next section.

*** INSERT TABLE 2 ***

5. Discussion

Social role theory purports that women adopt communal, group/society-focused behaviors, while men display agentic, individual/status-seeking behaviors (Eagly, 1987). Studies of the influence of social gender roles in Arab countries, mainly in career and leadership settings (e.g. Jayashree and Lindsay, 2016), have highlighted the importance of cultural context in understanding these influences. The culture of Arab countries is considered to be collectivist (Hofstede, 1980), in contrast to the dominant individualist societies in Western countries. Collectivist cultures are known to be associated with peoples' need for interdependence (Hui & Triandis, 1986). Thus, from a cultural perspective, it is expected that women would be influenced more by interdependent drivers of luxury consumption, relative to men. This is consistent with women occupying communal social roles, as posited in social role theory. Further, most Arab countries have a patriarchal social structure, whereby men occupy higher levels in the social hierarchy than women (Tlaiss, 2014a, b), and, correspondingly, have a higher need for status. A patriarchal social structure therefore reinforces the independent self-concept of men, consistent with the agentic behaviors described by social role theory, as well as the interdependent self-concept of women. These contextual influences of culture, therefore, reinforce the assumptions that luxury consumption by GCC Arab women is strongly based on communal values and beliefs (interdependent self-concept). This would be reflected in luxury consumption drivers that are interdependent and socially-oriented, rather than independent, status-seeking, or self-differentiating.

It is interesting that our results do not support these arguments. What we actually find is a strong leaning towards independent drivers for luxury consumption among Arab women, contrary to the expectations arising from social role theory. We propose two possible explanations for the differences in our findings.

The first is based on research which suggests that luxury goods consumption may create a sense of empowerment, compensating for a situation in which the individuals feel powerless. This is in line with previous research showing that conspicuous consumption may sometimes stem from identifying with a lower class (Mazzocco et al., 2012), or minorities with less power (Charles et al., 2009). For example, when in the aversive state of feeling powerless, or belonging to a minority group, consumers acquire products associated with status to compensate for a perceived lack of power (Rucker and Galinsky, 2008). The other possible, more likely, explanation relates to the changes that are occurring in the Arab world as a result of modernization programs and the impact of globalization (Sobh et al, 2014). There is little doubt that these influences are changing, and will continue to change, consumer perceptions and motivations, as well as societies' boundaries of behavioral acceptability. Several scholars have discussed this phenomenon, and its potential impact on luxury consumption in the Arab region.

Sobh et al. (2014) report on the changing identity of Arab (Qatari and Emirati) women in response to tensions between traditions and modernity. They propose a rationale for this based on two new forms of cultural 'hybridity': mimicry and invisibility, whereby young females use traditional clothing to display conformity with traditional norms, as well as to 'hide' Western fashion clothing and accessories underneath.

Al-Jenaibi (2011) reports on the changing perceptions of luxury consumers and society in the context of the UAE, one of the wealthier of the GCC nations. As she notes, the UAE

continues to experience rapid economic and social development, and desires to be seen globally as a cosmopolitan tourism destination, particularly targeting the wealthy. Images of local Emirati women are central to global advertising and are part of a representation of Arab women that is sometimes seen as, contrary to expected norms, creating tensions between rapid modernization and traditional roles. Al-Jenaibi (2011, p. 84) speculates that “these women will undoubtedly participate in the emergence of new gender identities.... as they seek to navigate the forces of capitalistic consumerism and its effects on identity.” In his study on Western advertising messages, Al-Mutawa (2013) notes that female Kuwaiti consumers represent and reconstruct the brand in ways that create “a synthesis of the opposing identities that comes close to giving them the best of both worlds ... [allowing them to] cope with the paradox of social prohibitions clashing with personal desires” (p. 240). Further, the association with Western images of luxury products appears to be a strong motivator for luxury consumption in some Arab countries (Kanna, 2010).

Cherrier and Belk (2015) discuss how the rapid modernization, urbanization, and materialization of Dubai (UAE) has influenced the buying and consumption practices, and identity, of Emirati consumers. Farah and Fawaz (2016) go so far as to state, “beliefs such as the assumption that group orientation plays a significant role in consumers’ decision making and that hedonism is not appreciated in Arab cultures are challenged, which indicate a slow change in the Arab cultures” (p. 139). So far, research suggests that, even though modernization is occurring, the changes are not resulting in an overall adoption of Western methods and practices when it comes to luxury consumption. Rather, in the Arab countries concerned, there is a unique integration of the cultural and social fabric of the past and present (Sobh et al., 2014). This is particularly relevant in the context of social role theory, which acknowledges the importance of

changing social environments; as Eagly and Wood (1999, p. 414) comment, male/female “differences in behavior ... reflect contemporaneous social conditions.” How the observed social changes in the Arab world unfold, and, importantly, how they will influence gender roles and the drivers for luxury consumption, are fascinating questions worthy of ongoing research attention.

6. Conclusions and Implications

Our study examines the drivers of luxury consumption among Arab women, specifically in the GCC region, as well as the influence of social gender role in determining the drivers that are important for these women. Our research sets a platform for incorporating social role theory into understanding the underlying mechanisms behind luxury consumption in the Arab region, and makes important contributions to understanding how the shifting dynamics of Arab culture and society impact luxury brand consumption by women.

Social role theory posits that consumers assign importance to consumption values that are more in line with their beliefs regarding their own gender and their own status within society (Eagly, 1987). This legitimizes the asymmetry in men’s and women’s status, as well as their own self-concepts, where men have an independent self-concept and women have an interdependent self-concept. As such, women are expected to take a communal role, where their purchase decisions are influenced by others. Indeed, Roux et al. (2017) reaffirm this assumption by showing that women’s luxury consumption is mainly driven by interdependent drivers and values. Our findings contribute to this literature by showing that the drivers for luxury consumption by Arab women in the GCC region do not fully reflect the gender roles expected from the assumptions of social role theory. Contrary to expectations and previous findings from the Western literature, such female consumers display considerably more agency and response to

independent drivers than social role theory would predict, as well as status signaling drivers, which are more usually the domain of men. Thus, our findings challenge the expectations arising from social role theory concerning the influence of female gender role on drivers of luxury consumption by Arab women.

Importantly, the findings reinforce the perspective that a unique hybridization between traditional gender roles and (Western) modernity is occurring in the GCC countries, and that this is influencing the luxury consumption behaviors of women. The findings of the study illustrate how GCC women are able to successfully navigate the tensions between the disparate cultural influences, satisfying both their Western aligned needs for independent self-concept and conformity with traditional gender role prescriptions. However, a weakening of the gender role prescriptions is suggested by the shift towards expressions of agency by the women, as reflected in their use of independent drivers.

Taking a broader and alternative perspective on self-concept may provide one explanation to these counterintuitive results. For example, Lazzari et al. (1978) show that self-concept may also take two other distinct forms: actual self and ideal self. The actual self reflects the cognitive and affective understanding of self, based on the perceived reality of oneself. Ideal self, on the other hand, is shaped by one's aspirations and goals concerning what the individuals would like to become. Both self-concepts have an impact on consumers' brand choices. However, when people are motivated to follow their dreams and reach their aspirations, they tend to choose brands that are more congruent with their ideal selves as a means for supporting their goal achievement activities (Grub and Grathwohl, 1967). Given this, we speculate that

recent advancements in the social status of women in the Arab region, especially in the UAE¹, may have contributed to our findings. Specifically, the women in our study may be exhibiting behaviors that are more consistent with an “ideal” independent self-concept, in line with a perceived “ideal” and modern agentic social role, rather than the traditional interdependent self-concept inherent in the traditional communal social role.

By applying the lens of social role theory in our study, as well as considering the contextual setting, which takes into account the collectivist cultures and patriarchal social structures of the countries in the GCC region, we offer unique insight into the influence of gender role on luxury consumption – an aspect that has received very little research attention and none, to our knowledge, in the context of the Arab world.

6.1. Managerial implications

Our findings support the belief that GCC female consumers’ drivers for luxury consumption are more complex than what have been previously shown in literature examining gender role effects on luxury (Roux et al., 2017). Marketers are increasingly interested in finding ways to develop strong and relevant brand personalities and communicate these personalities to their target market. Our findings indicate that there are two important and complementary issues for luxury marketing managers to consider when trying to reach Arab female consumers: (1) Creating relevant ideal brand personalities, and (2) developing greater communication effectiveness. Our respondents indicated that they have interdependent as well as independent drivers for luxury consumption. These findings have important implications for marketing

¹ UAE is the first country in the Arab region to have closed the gap in educational attainment among men and women (Bekhouche et al., 2014). Recent statistics also show the percentage of women in senior roles now being close to the global average (Kemp et al., 2014).

managers. Research on the Arab world supports the notion that Arab consumers view group opinion, harmony, and acceptance as crucial elements in their daily lives (Farah and Fawaz, 2016). Therefore, marketing managers can benefit from categorizing status seekers and those with high willingness to conform with their group members and target them using correctly identified trendsetters and influencers in their group to persuade them into behaving in the same manner. They may also benefit from positioning their brands promoting a sense of belonging and conformity. Tory Burch followed this strategy when introducing their exclusive for the Middle East Farida Bag. Their campaign consisted of three very famous Arab influencers enjoying an outing together (Harper's Bazaar, 2018).

However, our study shows that GCC females' luxury purchase is also driven by independent factors, such as need for uniqueness, hedonism, and enhancing the sense of self through status seeking opportunities afforded by the brand. In light of these findings, marketing managers need to recognize that drivers for luxury consumption for luxury purchases is not as homogenous as was once believed. Accordingly, many marketing managers rely on internal consistency when forming their brand personalities by aligning it with the corporate strategy and culture (Simões et al., 2005). It may be beneficial for managers to instead rely on an external consistency by assimilating their brand personalities with their target market's self-images, for example, women in leadership positions. For example, Miuccia Prada positions her brand, Prada, as creative, sensitive, and politically engaged. She understood the power of targeting the business-woman and, as such, "New York intellectuals and London business-women loved it" (Tungate, 2012, p. 17).

Our second managerial implication serves as a means for marketing managers to adapt their advertising claims. Our findings reveal a clear deviation from the literature regarding

women's own self view of their gender's social role in which they mainly rely on independent rather than interdependent factors when making luxury product purchase decisions. Many luxury fashion brands, such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton, heavily rely on sexual appeals to target consumers (Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes, 2006), which may be effective in the Western world, but, as Al-Mutawa (2013) shows, Arab women tend to generate their own representations to recreate meanings for these brands that are deemed more acceptable in the Arab culture. In contrast, claiming empowerment, elitism and exclusivity may be more appropriate for the Arab female luxury consumer. Marketing strategies should also clearly emphasize the spreading perception of hedonistic values. For instance, the latest ready-to-wear collection, J'ADIOR, by the first female artistic director for the brand Dior, emphasizes female empowerment. The female designer wanted to communicate something powerful and impactful about her experience in a fashion house that was predominantly managed by males (Marriot, 2017).

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This is an exploratory study that is not without its limitations. Our research sets out to examine Arab female luxury consumption drivers. However, we do not consider Arab male luxury consumption. Though previous researchers assert that women have more positive attitudes towards luxury brands than men (Stockburger-Sauer and Teichmann, 2013), luxury consumption by men has grown more than that of women. Therefore, it appears that luxury is not just a female thing (Roux et al., 2017). It would be interesting for future research to run cross-gender studies in which the different drivers for both genders can be compared in the Arab region. Male consumption of luxury products was perceived to be rather inconsistent, and

certainly not as conspicuous as the females when we started our initial inquiry. It would be worth investigating this further in the context of social role theory in future studies.

Results may also be different if we take other countries and cultures into consideration. For example, Godey et al. (2013) show that consumers from different cultures have different perceptions of luxury. While we have looked solely at the Arab GCC region, future research could be extended to a variety of cross-cultural settings. Another limitation of this study pertains to the small number of focus group participants. As a qualitative study, we do not aim to achieve statistical generalizability of our findings; however, a quantitative study designed to test the generalizability across different settings would be valuable. Finally, the participants in this study were young female GCC luxury consumers. Since younger consumers are associated with rebelliousness and creating their own style codes (Kjedlgaard and Askegaard, 2006), our findings may reflect such age-related behaviors. Testing for age and other demographics that are known to influence luxury consumption would also provide further clarification on the important gender-related drivers.

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TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: THEMES AND ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES

DRIVERS (THEMES)	DRIVERS (DIMENSIONS)	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES FROM FOCUS GROUPS
INDEPENDENT (PERSONAL)	Need for Uniqueness	<p>“I think people would want a mix of both, you would want those timeless pieces so you can wear them every day, but at the same time you want to be a bit unique and you want to bring out that big statement piece whenever you can when the time calls for it.”</p> <p>“I want something more different...because I don’t want something standard, everyone has, something like limited, colorful.</p> <p>“But at the same time it could be just because of the design. For example, I really like the design and it’s something different, something attracts my attention then it is something I would want.”</p>
	Need for Uniqueness / Differentiation	<p>“...or it’s just you have a certain personal style, and then a new fashion comes and it’s not that you are following because of a trend but it just appeals to your style, or you might... it gives you a new idea, so you might go for it.”</p> <p>Like for example I wear shela and abaya, so how I would be more stylish? So, the only... like when I entered, you only saw my bag right? Because everything was black and my bag is bright. So that’s the only way I can dress when I’m covering, but maybe when I go to a party or something, I don’t care about my bag as much</p> <p>“I believe it’s because we wear Abaya we can’t show anything else except a bag, and make up and the shoes.”</p> <p>“Maybe about the trends, some girls just go with the trends, and once the trend is over they wouldn’t carry that bag again. I’m against that part, like if I like something I would carry it until... I wouldn’t go with the trend”</p>
	Emotion: Indulgence (Hedonism) / Reward	<p>“[I buy luxury bags]... sometimes to reward myself after a good thing.”</p> <p>“I earn them.... By getting good grades.”</p>
	Emotion: Indulgence (Hedonism) / Compensation	<p>“... but when I feel bad, when I’m in a bad mood or something, I would like to go and shop for something.”</p> <p>“I think it will make you feel more content.”</p>
	Self-Esteem	<p>“[...ladies from this region, particularly Saudis, Emiratis, Qataris, they love buying luxury accessories, because][it gives them] ... “self-confidence.”</p> <p>“I think there’s something interest in our community, I mean okay we all wear something because its trendy but if you see something showing it off a bit, you’d say that person is shy.”</p>

	Empowerment	“[Luxury handbags - empowering women, particularly in this region?]” ... “I think it shouldn’t, but it does, yeah it does.”
		“Maybe not for us, but it happens with a lot of people.”
		“90% , it happens subconsciously”
		“I think also the money I spend on the thing I am wearing it would increase my [sense of] empowerment.”
	Status (Status Consumption – SC)	“I think it’s really hard to find [Hermes brand], it’s very prestigious, and that’s why I think the price isn’t a factor and it’s just the quality they use, for example they use ostrich, they use crocodile and embellish it with silver or diamond.
		“Sometimes some bags become more... people buy them because they indicate status and not because they’re actually pretty.”
		“Like I know people who wouldn’t see carrying Michael Kors same as carrying Chanel”
		“even if the collection is classic and stays for longer time and its trendy for a longer time, it matters”
INTERDEPENDENT (INTERPERSONAL)	Status (Conspicuous Consumption – SC)	“There’s a correlation between your handbags and the things you wear with the status.”
		“it depends on the brand as well, yeah”
		“[These brands are luxurious]... because they are overpriced, and famous worldwide.
		“Oh especially the colour - in this region, you don’t carry light colours.”
	Need for Conformity	“Because you always want to be part of a group”... yeah you don’t want to be left out.”
		“But I mean, like the environment kind of forces you to because everyone is doing it so okay I’ll do it too. I think it’s a factor too. So here, no one cares, everyone is chill so you become chill too.”
		“Honestly, sometimes people stick to brands because they want to be part of something, not to be unique.
		“I think it’s more fitting in than exclusivity to be honest.”
		“In Saudi we have the same, people that show off excessively are new money, and people that are, they pick and choose what they show off, are old money. It doesn’t have to be... They don’t have to show off
		“I think our generation cares about whether everybody knows this brand or not, like it’s not...like if everybody else is carrying it, it’s okay, it’s a nice brand. But if there’s another brand that is higher quality but no one knows about it, they wouldn’t buy it.
		“Like even if you were going to get to get a bag and for example my bag, there’s a huge D&G on the bag, I wouldn’t get it, I would go like I would buy this bag for other people to see but then there’s the D&G... I know it’s a D&G but I don’t want others to know that. I don’t care if others know that I wear D&G.”
	Self-Appearance	“...if they look good.”

CONTEXTUAL SOCIAL INFLUENCES	Socialization and Tradition	“That’s the thing, firstly growing up for example, you know when your parents give you luxury brands or accessories from a young age to get used to it and then for example I would go to any store and look for normal accessories or normal handbags I wouldn’t know what to get.”
		“Yeah, even people in high school used to wear bags that are international brands of something. So it’s something that we grew up with.”
		“[The pressure to wear luxury bags here is from] “tradition... it shows status.
		“Like the two past years, I travelled one time to an island, another time to a village, I didn’t take any of my bags, like I only wear it here. I don’t know, maybe because the people there or... it has to like do something with the environment.”
	Social Context	“But also when you travel you’re not wearing abaya, like you’re in jeans and stuff so you feel like you want to go for simpler bags because it looks nicer with jeans. When you wear statement pieces its better with abaya and stuff, when you travel simpler is nicer.”
		“It also depends on the outfit, I mean if you’re wearing a very simple outfit, a really plain outfit, you might go for a statement piece but a small one not a large one - for example that’s what I do for travel.”
		“Also it depends on occasion, like I was going to an exam I would take a wallet bag and just put my pencil, calculator and so, I wouldn’t take a huge bag because there won’t be anything in it. So it depends on the occasion.

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS VERSUS EXPECTATIONS FROM SOCIAL ROLE THEORY AND WESTERN LITERATURE

DRIVERS		FEMALE LUXURY CONSUMPTION		
THEMES	DIMENSIONS	Expectations from social role theory and Western literature	Findings from study	Luxury Literature Support
INDEPENDENT (PERSONAL)	Need for Uniqueness	X	Y	Berger and Heath (2008)
	Need for Uniqueness / Differentiation	X	Y	
	Emotion: Indulgence (Hedonism) / Reward	X	Y	Vigneron and Johnson (2004)
	Emotion: Indulgence (Hedonism) / Compensation	X	Y	Belk (1985)
	Self-Esteem	X	Y	Svinanthan and Pitt (2010)
	Empowerment	X	Y	Rucker and Galinsky (2008)
	Status (Status Consumption – SC)	X	Y	O’Cass and Shiahrtiri (2013)
	Status (Conspicuous Consumption – CC)	Y	Y	Vigneron and Johnson (2004)
	Need for Conformity	Y	Y	Amaldoss and Jain (2004)
CONTEXTUAL SOCIAL INFLUENCES	Self-consciousness	Y	X	New
	Socialization and Tradition	Y (influence on social role)	Y	New
	Social Context	Y (influence on social role)	Y	New

Key: X = not present; Y = present