

Women's consumption relations with luxury handbags

Relações de consumo de mulheres com as bolsas de luxo

Rosana Dias Guedes de Moraes^I , Ana Christina Celano Teixeira^{II} 

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study investigated the consumption relations of high-income Brazilian women with genuine handbags from international luxury brands. Inspired by the Itinerary Method, in-depth interviews were conducted with the owners of these objects, addressing the purchase, use, and disposal stages. The analysis of these reports was conducted based on the five main motivations pointed out by the literature for the consumption of luxury items — perceived quality, perceived uniqueness, perceived conspicuity, perceived hedonism, and perceived self-expression. The results show the presence of these personal and nonpersonal factors in the respondents' views on the concept of luxury and on the brands in this category and in the various stages of their relations to these objects.

Keywords: Luxury. Luxury handbags. Consumption. Luxury brands. Consumer behavior.

RESUMO

Este estudo exploratório investigou as relações de consumo de mulheres brasileiras de alto poder aquisitivo com bolsas genuínas de marcas de luxo internacionais. Usando como inspiração o método dos itinerários, foram conduzidas entrevistas em profundidade com possuidoras desses objetos, abordando as fases de compra, uso e descarte. A análise dos relatos foi conduzida com base nas cinco principais motivações apontadas pela literatura para o consumo de itens de luxo — a qualidade percebida, a singularidade percebida, a conspicuidade percebida, o hedonismo percebido e a autoexpressão percebida. Os resultados revelam a presença desses fatores de natureza pessoal e não pessoal nas visões das respondentes sobre o conceito de luxo e sobre as marcas dessa categoria e nas diversas fases de sua relação com esses objetos.

Palavras-chave: Luxo. Bolsas de luxo. Consumo. Marcas de luxo. Comportamento do consumidor.

^IInstitute of Communication, School of Social and Human Sciences, Universidade Nova de Lisboa – Lisbon, Portugal. E-mail: rosanadgmoraes@gmail.com

^{II}IBMEC Rio – Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Brasil. E-mail: ana.teixeira@ibmec.edu.br

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INTRODUCTION

This study investigated the consumer relations between a group of Brazilian women and genuine handbags from international luxury brands, through in-depth individual interviews, addressing the stages of purchase, use, and disposal and also their perceptions about luxury and luxury brands.

The definition of these objectives results from the growing interest that luxury consumption has received, largely because of the instigating subjective issues that it involves. Overall, contemporary consumers attribute symbolic values and meanings to goods and services — even the most simple and mundane —, which often exceed their practical uses (LEVY, 1959; ROCHA, 2012; DOUGLAS; ISHERWOOD, 2013; MORAES, 2019). These subjective aspects are especially relevant in luxury consumption, whose goods involve, in an even more intense way, meanings filled with intangible factors, making their acquisition more for what they mean than for what they actually are (AAKER; KELLER, 1990).

The interest is also stimulated by the sector's representation in the economy. The global revenue of the ten main luxury products and services segments exceeded 1.3 trillion euros in 2021, of which products classified as personal use alone totaled more than 288 billion euros (BAIN & COMPANY, 2022). In Brazil, in 2018, the various categories in the sector totaled BRL 26 billion (RIVEIRA, 2019).

For the present research, we adopted an eminently qualitative approach, which enables to “explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem” (CRESWELL, 2010, p. 26, free translation). The 11 participants were from social class A (ABEP, 2019) and lived in the cities of Rio de Janeiro (RJ) or São Paulo (SP), and information was collected using a semi-structured script. Subsequently, we compared the obtained data with the bibliography and analyzed them in an interpretive and inductive manner (CRESWELL, 2010).

The research results contribute to the academic environment by addressing a specific theoretical and methodological approach in the universe of consumer phenomena. In the corporate environment, they can also assist companies dedicated to offering luxury products and services in their understanding of their consumers to better direct their strategies.

In addition, the findings may benefit society by stimulating reflection and discussion on a specific type of consumption in the context of social behavior. After all, according to Canclini (1999), consumption can be considered as a “space for thinking and in which a large part of the economic, sociopolitical, and psychological rationality is organized in societies” (CANCLINI, 1999, p. 14, free translation). In this context, if on the one hand social relations are one of the sources of influence on consumption (BOURDIEU, 2007) and help to understand it, on the other, consumption contributes to the understanding of a society (DOUGLAS; ISHERWOOD, 2013).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Luxury goods

Although subjective, the concept of luxury seems to be somewhat stable and has been present since the oldest human societies linked to ideas such as

ostentation, pleasure, superfluity, sumptuousness, splendor, abundance, and refinement (FERREIRA, 1999; CASTARÈDE, 2005; PASSARELLI, 2010). However, people's perception of its representations may change according to time, place, culture, and individual variables (CASTARÈDE, 2005; STREHLAU, 2008; GHOSH; VARSHNEY, 2013).

Despite these variations, academic bibliography usually associates luxury goods with terms such as exclusivity, scarcity, rarity, superfluity, high prices (BERRY, 1994; NUENO; QUELCH, 1998; CASTARÈDE, 2005), superior quality, high aesthetic level, production focused on craftsmanship, and history (NUENO; QUELCH, 1998; VIGNERON; JOHNSON, 2004; PASSARELLI, 2010). Moreover, Kapferer and Michaut (2015) point out that these products present the image of being timeless, which differentiates them from those goods perceived as fashionable, as ephemeral.

Consumers commonly associate these goods with terms such as class, high prices, good taste, uniqueness, quality, attractiveness, aesthetics, scarcity or limited accessibility, self-pleasure, history, and superfluity (DUBOIS; LAURENT, 1994; DUBOIS; PATERNAULT, 1995; DUBOIS; LAURENT; CZELLAR, 2001; DE BARNIER; RODINA; VALETTE-FLORENCE, 2006). Consumers demonstrate that they find, in these products, meanings full of intangible components linked to feelings and sensations, which makes the dynamics of their consumption marked with social, cultural, and individual aspects, in choices driven more by subjectivity than objectivity (DUBOIS; PATERNAULT, 1995; KAPFERER; MICHAUT, 2015).

Motivations for the consumption of luxury goods

According to the literature, the behavior of each consumer results from the arrangement of a set of factors, in varying proportions of importance (STREHLAU, 2008). In addition, two people may have different motivations for purchasing luxury goods, and even a single individual may have different reasons for consumption, depending on the category of the product in question (GHOSH; VARSHNEY, 2013).

Vigneron and Johnson (2004) listed the five most recurring dimensions to explain this type of consumption. Three of them reflect nonpersonal aspects: perceived conspicuity, perceived uniqueness, and perceived quality. The other two have a personal character: perceived extended-self and perceived hedonism.

Among the dimensions of nonpersonal character, perceived conspicuity is based on the search for social distinction and the demonstration of high status by display and ostentation of objects (MASON, 1981; BEARDEN; ETZEL, 1982; VELEN, 1988; BOURDIEU, 2007). The "conspicuous consumption," a term coined by Veblen (1988) at the end of the 19th century, aims to display one's wealth and thus give them prestige and social recognition, bringing them closer to the higher classes and distinguishing them from the lower classes. Conspicuous consumption is, therefore, guided by the effect on others, and the high price of luxury goods reinforces the appearance of high status by indicating wealth (STREHLAU, 2008).

Perceived uniqueness is related to the need of individuals to feel unique and to differentiate themselves from others (FROMKIN; SNYDER, 1980), which also leads them to the desire to own or do something before others. Driven by this desire, the person who acquires new objects or adopts new customs leaves them aside when they become more common.

Still on this subject, Brock (1968) states that “any commodity will be valued to the extent that it is not available” (free translation), an idea supported by Lynn (1991), when he says that scarcity emphasizes the value of anything that may be owned, especially among consumers who demonstrate a greater need for exclusivity (LYNN, 1991). In this context, the perception of scarcity, of rarity, makes the sumptuous good more attractive and reinforces its identification as a luxury (BEARDEN; ETZEL, 1982; DUBOIS; PATERNAULT, 1995; VIGNERON; JOHNSON, 2004), and the reduction of this perception may cause this status to be lowered (KAPFERER, 2012). As individuals’ possessions contribute to the creation of their identities and reflect them, a product that is hardly available can also be perceived as a metaphorical representation of individual uniqueness (TUAN, 1980; BELK, 1988).

Conversely, the dimension of perceived quality is based on the belief that a sumptuous object must have, in addition to its subjective meanings, superiority over others in terms of its use value (VIGNERON; JOHNSON, 2004; LIPOVETSKY, 2009). Therefore, prestigious brands and high prices often provide greater certainty for the choices of those consumers who are more inclined to rationality, acting as another indicator of superior quality (VIGNERON; JOHNSON, 2004). Some authors categorize the quality of luxury goods into two perspectives: the objective, practical, utilitarian, functional; and the subjective, represented by aesthetics (FLOCH, 1990; ALLÉRÈS, 1999; LIPOVETSKY, 2009; VIGNERON; JOHNSON, 2004).

Among the dimensions of personal character, the perceived extended-self takes into account the desire of consumers to use luxury objects in the creation of their identity (BELK, 1988; SPROTT; CZELLAR; SPANGENBERG, 2009). According to this idea, these goods play an important role in consumers’ self-understanding, self-concept, and self-expression (HEMETSBERGER; VON WALLPACH; BAUER, 2012). The term *extended-self* was first introduced by Belk (1988), who considers that, in modern life, individuals know themselves, define themselves, and remember who they are through all their possessions, often seen as parts of their own bodies. According to the author, “our belongings are among the most important factors when reflecting on our identities” (BELK, 1988, p. 139, free translation).

Leibenstein (1950) added two effects to the study of motivations for consumption, which Ghosh and Varshney (2013) relate to the search for self-expression. One of them is the bandwagon effect; and the other, the snob effect. The first would encourage consumers to buy a product because other people also own it, as part of the effort to belong to a particular group (LEIBENSTEIN, 1950). In this case, the brand would serve as a “certificate of credibility and support of the personal image” (STREHLAU, 2008, p. 84, free translation) to adapt the individual to the social or professional environment. In contrast, the snob effect refers to the aforementioned individual’s desire to be unique and exclusive. However, it differs from the conspicuousness described by Veblen (1988), because it is based on the fact that other people do not own a particular asset, while conspicuousness occurs according to the price of the asset (LEIBENSTEIN, 1950).

Conversely, perceived hedonism moves consumers’ choices toward their own pleasure, reward, and personal fulfillment. Such choices are, therefore, less subject to the external influences and functional attributes of the objects, and more subject to their own desire (VIGNERON; JOHNSON, 2004). Consumption is deemed

here as one of the forms of seeking pleasure through relations to material objects (PASSARELLI, 2010). One of the forms of hedonic consumption is self-gifting, which expresses the search for pleasure through feelings of fulfillment, security, enthusiasm, youth, beauty, among others, and attributes meaning of merit to personal purchases (MICK; DEMOSS, 1990). In the choices dictated by hedonism, luxury brands usually have the function of stimulating emotional states (STREHLAU, 2008).

Still regarding hedonism as a motivation for the consumption of luxury nowadays, Lipovetsky (2007) sees changes in luxury consumption toward the search for emotional and physical satisfaction, of a private nature. The author believes that this type of consumption would be increasingly connected to the search for experiences, sensations, and well-being, in parallel with differential social satisfaction. Consumption "for the other" would thus be superseded by consumption "for oneself."

Women's luxury handbags

Women's luxury handbags are objects visibly used by their consumers to express self-image and self-reward, in addition to being highly related to high quality, exclusivity, high price, and social status (KASUMA et al., 2016; CHEN; ISA; YANG, 2022).

Liu, Richard and Wong (2011) state that, in post-modernity, the handbag is not just an object for carrying belongings or a fashion accessory, but rather one of the most personal items of women's clothing. For many consumers, it represents an extension of their own identity and can reveal who they are or would like to be (KING, 2016).

When analyzing the consumption of luxury handbags by middle-class Brazilian women, Hor-Meyll, Schorr and Pessoa (2012) considered that the possession and ostentation of these objects give their consumers status and prestige in their reference groups, in addition to the feeling of being accepted in their aspiration groups, raising their self-esteem, and contributing to their perceived professional success.

On the part of luxury brands, women's handbags have assumed great importance in their international market positioning strategies, considering that they are used as differentiating factors in the face of competition (SOLCA; WING, 2009) and as ways to enter new markets (CHEVALIER; MAZZALOVO, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

Considering that consumer relations in the luxury universe depend on characteristics specific to the culture of each place (TIDWELL; DUBOIS, 1996), that different categories of products and services impact purchasing decisions and the meanings of their consumption in various ways (DUBOIS; PATERNAULT, 1995), and also that the socioeconomic class occupied by the person also impacts their view of luxury (MORAES, 2019), this study aimed to investigate the consumer relations of a specific group — Brazilian women with high purchasing power — to a particular object — genuine handbags from international luxury brands.

For the present research, the authors adopted an eminently qualitative approach, which enables "to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem" (CRESWELL, 2010, p. 26, free translation). Qualitative research methods provide the possibility of generating insights about a new or emerging

phenomenon based on the participants' views and perceptions (WOODSIDE; WILSON, 2003; CRESWELL, 2013), as is the case of this study. In addition, qualitative studies can generate rich narratives by addressing real-world configurations and allowing researchers to draw meaningful and relevant conclusions from the data (PATTON, 2002; FOROUDI *et al.*, 2017). Hence, the adopted methodology seems appropriate for the development of a theory based on qualitative data on a social reality that has not yet been investigated, and which therefore has no theoretical explanation (GEHMAN *et al.*, 2018).

To achieve the objectives of this study, a qualitative literature review was first carried out regarding the characteristics of luxury goods and the motivations for their consumption and luxury handbags specifically. In a second stage, interviews were conducted with Brazilian consumers of these objects.

In order to compare the information contained in the literature with the reports of the social group in question and to investigate aspects that may not have been reported before, data were collected from the participants by in-depth individual interviews, using a semi-structured script, which allowed us to map and explore the participants' world and to better understand the beliefs, attitudes, values, and motivations behind their behavior (GASKELL, 2004). The material resulting from these reports was then analyzed and interpreted in the light of the bibliography.

As luxury may or may not be associated with brands and products, and it is also possible to be related to more subjective dimensions, such as experiences and attitudes (LIPOVETSKY; ROUX, 2005), the interviewees were initially encouraged to talk about their perceptions of the term *luxury* in a more comprehensive manner.

Luxury products are now predominantly represented by brands that gather sets of meanings with which consumers identify themselves and which they acquire together with the products (PINHO, 1996; STREHLAU, 2008). Taking this into consideration, the participants were also asked to discuss the characteristics they attribute to the brands they consider luxurious and their feelings toward them.

Finally, the respondents were encouraged to talk about their relations to luxury handbags. Douglas and Isherwood (2013) consider that the essential function of consuming products lies in their ability to make sense, which makes it essential to research "how they are used" (DOUGLAS; ISHERWOOD, 2013, p. 108, free translation). To this end, inspiration was sought from the itinerary method (DESJEUX, 2004), which understands consumption as a system of interconnected actions that precede and follow the moment when the product or service is purchased and which are worthy of investigation (CASOTTI; SUAREZ; CAMPOS, 2008, p. 114).

The itinerary method presupposes the real observation of consumer practices over the participant's discourse and "favors the universe of objects and practices, at the expense, for example, of the symbolic dimension of brands and representations" (CASOTTI; SUAREZ; CAMPOS, 2008, p. 113, free translation). However, due to the nature of the object of this study — luxury handbags —, whose consumption process takes place in different locations which the researcher cannot access, and also because of the relevance of brands in this context, the authors considered the respondents' discourse as well as the importance they attribute to brands.

Nevertheless, the scope suggested by Desjeux (2004) with regard to consumption stages was maintained, here summarized as purchase, use, and disposal.

The analysis group consisted of 11 self-reported class A consumers based on the Brazilian Association of Research Companies (*Associação Brasileira de Empresas de Pesquisa – ABEP*) criterion (ABEP, 2019), residents in the two cities with the highest consumption of luxury products and services in Brazil — São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (GFK; MCF CONSULTORIA, 2013) — and who purchased at least one handbag with the aforementioned characteristics in the 24 months prior to the interviews. Chart 1 consolidates

Chart 1. Profile of the interviewees (coded names).

Name	Age	Marital status	Children	Residence	Occupation	Education
CB	40	Divorced	1 B	Laranjeiras, Rio de Janeiro	Businesswoman	Marketing Technologist
C	51	Married	3 G	São Conrado, Rio de Janeiro	Not currently working	Graduate Degree in Mathematics
E	45	Single	-	Arpoador, Rio de Janeiro	Employee at Petrobras enterprise	Graduate Degree in Business Administration
K	50	Divorced	-	Leblon, Rio de Janeiro	International pharmaceutical laboratory representative	Graduate Degree in Administration
L	48	Married	1 B	Jardim Botânico, Rio de Janeiro	Employee at BNDES enterprise	Master's Degree in Business Administration
MG	65	Married	2 B 1 G	Higienópolis, São Paulo	Not currently working	Graduate Degree in Business Administration
M	49	Married	1 G	Barra da Tijuca, Rio de Janeiro	Not currently working	Graduate Degree in Business Administration and Interior Decoration
N	49	Divorced	1 B	Barra da Tijuca, Rio de Janeiro	Psychologist	PhD student in Psychology
RQ	49	Married	1 B 1 G	Higienópolis, São Paulo	Not currently working	Graduate Degree in Nutrition
R	50	Married	2 B	Barra da Tijuca, Rio de Janeiro	Retired	Graduate Degree in Business Administration
S	39	Married	2 G	Moema, São Paulo	Businesswoman	Graduate Degree in Advertising

B: boy; G: girl; BNDES: Brazilian Development Bank.

the profile of the participants, whose characteristics were also described along with the first quote of each of them, seeking to facilitate the personification of the reports during the reading. The sample was defined by convenience, as indicated by acquaintances of the authors, and dimensioned by saturation. Before the interviews, the participants were informed about the objectives of the study and gave consent to the use of their answers, keeping their names confidential.

The interviews, which lasted approximately one hour each, and which exceeded 11 hours in total, were conducted by one of the authors between November and December 2016, at the respondents' homes or in quiet commercial establishments, according to the participants' convenience, and through a semi-structured script.

The reports were recorded and later transcribed over 93 pages. Subsequently, the answers were grouped by topics to compare the different perspectives presented, and compared with the literature, based on the main motivations identified for the consumption of luxury goods, listed in the theoretical framework.

The collected data were analyzed in an interpretive and inductive manner, in which case the researcher's interpretations cannot be separated from their origins, history, contexts, and previous understandings. Therefore, the researcher's role should not be assumed to be totally neutral (CRESWELL, 2010). In addition, when collecting qualitative data, "the researcher's presence may influence the answers." Therefore, it was up to the authors to "interpret the broader meaning of the data" that were collected (CRESWELL, 2010, p. 217, free translation).

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

In this section, we present the analysis of the participants' responses in the light of the literature. In order to facilitate the investigation, we considered as reference points the main dimensions of the consumption of luxury goods, listed in the theoretical framework.

Dimensions of nonpersonal character

Perceived conspicuity

The association between the consumption of luxury handbags and perceived conspicuity can be observed with great frequency in the speeches of the respondents, who showed that the display and ostentation of a luxury handbag can be a symbol of social distinction and a demonstration of high status, bringing individuals closer to the higher social classes and distinguishing them from the lower ones (MASON, 1981; BEARDEN; ETZEL, 1982; VEBLEN, 1988; BOURDIEU, 2007). In this sense, the consumption of a luxury handbag would have as one of its objectives the effect it has on other individuals by indicating wealth (STREHLAU, 2008), as demonstrated in the following excerpts from the account of respondent CB, 40 years old, divorced, marketing technologist, businesswoman, and resident in the Laranjeiras neighborhood, in Rio de Janeiro:

For example, the Michael Kors [brand]. I can't identify with this brand, because it actually targets a wider audience and I like exclusivity. [...] But it's not about social class, it's social status, which are completely different things.

Louis Vuitton was very concerned about what happened with Neverfull, which are those larger, lower-priced bags. I believe that because of a marketing strategy they launched this product. I had it. I bought it, I was over the moon, and all of a sudden you start noticing that the copy, counterfeiting industry started to strongly pressure these bags, 'cause it reached a more humble audience, who can afford to buy a bag worth BRL 4,000. And I started to feel bad, not because it was a cheaper bag, I don't wanna seem shallow (CB).

Regarding the purchase stage, participant M, 49 years old, married, business administrator and interior designer, who was not working at the time of the interview and lives in the Barra da Tijuca neighborhood, in Rio de Janeiro, also indirectly demonstrates a conspicuous attitude when commenting on her satisfaction when leaving a luxury boutique with the packaging of the handbag she has just purchased: *"I wanna go out with that huge packaging bag, hang out in the mall, everyone looking at the bag and thinking 'what did she buy?'"* (M).

However, overall, the respondents referred to conspicuous behaviors related to luxury handbags always attributed to third parties, disregarding this attitude on their part. The following excerpts illustrate this situation: *"Most people use it to symbolize a status, they want to show it off. Not me"* (L). *"I realize that, in Brazil, there's the use as an ostentation move. [...] What I see among friends is that they buy mostly because of social status and ostentation. Not me"* (CB). And also in the excerpts:

But I don't want that handbag status thing. I want the quality, the tradition, the beauty of the handbag. 'Cause, nowadays, I see status a lot in people. It's about how much you have, what you are by the handbag status. This even made me stop buying it for a while, in addition to the prices, which exponentially increased. [...] For my stepdaughter, it's about status. [...] She's 43 years old, she's already mature. But she has another vision of luxury, she wants attention, she wants more (M).

'Cause if you buy a designer handbag just to display it, it's not my case, that's not why I buy it. [...] Some people, if they buy an expensive handbag, want it to draw attention, it's the power of the brand. As I see it, it's different, I'm more of a classic person, I buy something that draws less attention. [...] I don't use it to display it to people. I choose [the handbag] according to the way I'm dressed (N, 49 years old, divorced, psychologist and PhD student in Psychology, resident in the neighborhood of Barra da Tijuca, in Rio de Janeiro).

It should be considered that it may be delicate for some of the participants to assume a conspicuous consumption behavior on their part or, possibly, that the desire for differential social satisfaction takes place unconsciously. This could explain the fact that, although the subject has come up very frequently in the reports, it has always occurred in relation to other people.

Perceived uniqueness

The association of perceived uniqueness (most mentioned by the respondents as exclusivity) was very present in the interviewees' statements about luxury brands, in line with what has already been pointed out by several authors (BERRY, 1994; NUENO; QUELCH, 1998; CASTARÈDE, 2005).

The desire for differentiation through the use of luxury handbags was also present in the respondents' reports about their consumer relations to these objects during the purchase (choice) and use stages. Respondents showed that they prefer exclusive brands and models, as if they wanted the scarcer availability of handbags to reflect their own uniqueness (TUAN, 1980; BELK, 1988).

Thus, reinforcing the idea that, when wanting to feel unique, different, and exclusive a person tends to abandon objects and customs that they consider luxurious when they become more common, there were answers such as: *"If I notice that everyone is using it, I avoid it. I don't want something that everyone has, I discard it"* (S, 39 years old, married, publicist, businesswoman, resident in the Moema neighborhood, in São Paulo).

It should be noted that the desire for uniqueness is present even in some situations in which the objects in question belong to renowned and expensive brands, in a movement of differentiation even in relation to other women with purchasing power similar to that of the respondents, as suggested by the excerpt:

The other day, I was lunching with some women and, at the entrance, there was a table with handbags. There were only Birkin bags, of all colors and patterns. The richest [woman] had crocodile pattern, the poorest [woman] had the usual one. So, you don't quite understand what kind of luxury this is, it's kind of weird. 'Cause, that way, it shows that you paid well, but there are 20 others there (MG, 65 years old, married, business administrator, who was not working at the time of the interview, resident in the neighborhood of Higienópolis, in São Paulo).

Conspicuous components can also be perceived in some cases related to the desire for uniqueness, when the object becomes more common and its perception of luxury — and thus of its status — decreases (KAPFERER, 2012). This is what the following excerpt seems to point out: *"I identify with Prada handbags, I've always liked them. A bit because it's not exactly the handbag that everyone buys"* (C, 51 years old, married, mathematician, who was not working at the time of the interview, resident in the São Conrado neighborhood, in Rio de Janeiro).

Perceived quality

The importance attached to quality emerged in the respondents' speeches, both associated with the broad concept of luxury and with their views on brands in the sector and also about the consumer relations they develop with their luxury bags. These women seem to show the expectation that these goods will be endowed with superiority over those of brands that they do not consider luxurious, as anticipated by the literature (VIGNERON; JOHNSON, 2004; LIPOVETSKY, 2009).

Mentions of quality appear in the respondents' statements both from the objective perspective, represented by functionality, and from the subjective perspective, represented by aesthetics (FLOCH, 1990; ALLÉRÈS, 1999; LIPOVETSKY, 1999 and 2009; VIGNERON; JOHNSON, 2004).

It is noteworthy that the aspect of objective quality related to durability recursively appears in the participants' responses as a prerequisite for goods that they consider luxurious, a characteristic that is part of their expectations even before purchase, and not a differential affecting their choices among goods in this category. The idea can be illustrated by the statement: *"Quality is a premise. If I'm buying at these stores, it's because I know that the quality is indisputable"* (E, 45 years old, single, business administrator, civil servant, resident in the Arpoador neighborhood, in Rio de Janeiro).

Conversely, other objective aspects of quality, such as functionality, usefulness, practicality and versatility, seem decisive in the stages of purchasing (choosing) the bag, among others also considered luxury, according to the participants' speeches, such as in the statement: *"I think about a few things. For instance, I don't like handbags, just shoulder bags, it has to do with functionality"* (C). And also in the following excerpt:

The first thing I think about is whether it will suit me in terms of functionality, depending on the occasion. And, of course, in its beauty. But I always think about practice, about a color that won't clash with much. 'Cause I also don't change bags much, I spend some time using it. [...] This Hermès is very practical for traveling. It has two compartments, it's open, and leaves our hands free (K, 50 years old, divorced, business administrator, international pharmaceutical laboratory representative, resident in the Leblon neighborhood, in Rio de Janeiro).

When discussing the stage of use of the already-purchased handbag, the objective quality is resumed by the respondents when they deny establishing restrictions on the use of their handbags, using them interchangeably for work, leisure, travel, or social events, as is the case in the following excerpts, related to versatility: *"I use it every day, I even take it to the gym"* (C); *"The same handbag that I use for work, I use for the office, where I have to dress up [to go], to have dinner with friends, when attending a conference, a lecture, I make no distinction"* (N).

Subjective quality, linked to aesthetics, also seems to be a factor of great importance when choosing the luxury handbag model, which can be exemplified in the statement: *"Design. You just have to look at it"* (M); and also in: *"It's always the aesthetic that attracts me, the beauty. It's always the visual aspect first. I buy it because it's beautiful. The brand is important, but not as important. It's not to say it's a Chanel, it's because I like the handbag, because it's beautiful"* (MG).

Although it was not directly mentioned as a consequence of quality, the way in which the respondents described disposing of their luxury handbags seems to be a consequence of this issue. Donating it to relatives or close people, who they consider that will value them, or to charity, is the form of disposal most frequently mentioned by the participants, and there were mentions of the possibility of selling it. The

answers seem to point to the assessment that these objects are considered special in some way, “unusual” goods, as Castarède (2005, p. 24, free translation) points out. Apparently, the high objective (functionality, durability) and subjective (beauty) qualities, in addition to their high prices, make that, even when they decide not to use the handbags anymore, the interviewees do not dispose of them as they do with any object; they give them suitable destinations for valuable goods, as the excerpt suggests: “I prefer to give it, generally to those closest to me” (C); and also in:

I give it as a gift to people who would like to have it and cannot, and also to an association that cares for children with cancer and has charity shop. There are people who sell it, but I think that, since I'm in a different position, I can do something for someone (MG).

Dimensions of personal character

Perceived extended-self

The desire for self-expression and the creation or reinforcement of identity through the consumption of luxury handbags could be observed in the participants' statements. Apparently, they consider that the handbag is capable of transferring symbolic meanings from the brands with which they identify themselves, helping them to bring them closer to what they are or want to be (KLEINE; KLEINE, 2000; HEMETSBERGER; VON WALLPACH; BAUER, 2012; DOUGLAS; ISHERWOOD, 2013). The following excerpt portrays this perspective: “The designer handbag must have your personality. It widely varies depending on taste, more classic, more modern. But it defines your personality, it defines you, it helps to express [your] personality” (S). And also:

When you identify with the brand, you incorporate that elegance displayed by it. For example, a Birkin bag, my consumer dream. I see elegant women going to meetings in movies. [...] I identify with the brand because it expresses my personality (CB).

The participants see the luxury handbag as a way of expressing the personality of its user to some extent, as Belk (1988) points out, also when observing other people. Several of the respondents reported that they tend to infer a lot about other women by looking at their handbags. The following excerpts illustrate the idea: “Yes, absolutely. More pretentious, more boring, more practical... [...] And as I look, I also look at the bag” (K); and “The handbag speaks for the person” (L, 48 years old, married, master in business administration, civil servant, resident in the Jardim Botânico neighborhood, in Rio de Janeiro).

The bandwagon effect, described by Leibenstein (1950) as part of the effort to belong to a particular group, is suggested in the following excerpt:

The handbag has a lot to do with society, with the other. Since everyone you interact with uses that, you end up fitting somehow. And when you say “now I'm only going to buy handbags from Brazil” you get a little left out, you don't fit in (C).

Perceived hedonism

In the interviewees' statements regarding the concept of luxury, as well as in the consumption stages of purchase and use of handbags, the reference to feelings of pleasure, characteristic of hedonic consumer behavior, was recurring (VIGNERON; JOHNSON, 2004; STREHLAU, 2008).

When discussing what they considered luxury, broadly speaking, the participants repeatedly used terms such as "living well," "comfort," "time," "travels," "culture," "quality of life," "executive travel," "meeting cool people," and "eating well." The idea can be exemplified by the excerpt:

Luxury has a lot to do with comfort. You may be staying at a hotel in the same location as another, but there are differences in the type of mattress, duvet, quality of the sheet, the towel. It's completely different (C).

When mentioning her consumer dream in her vision of luxury, one of the respondents even mentioned traveling in the first place: "I even prefer not to have the handbag if I can travel more. I'd even let go of the bag, which is something I like" (M).

These views seem to reinforce the idea of Lipovetsky (2007) that contemporary luxury is increasingly related to the search for sensations and experiences, to the appreciation of "living," of "experimenting," more focused on private satisfaction, often at the expense of distinctive purposes.

Hedonistic consumer behavior also emerged in reports of feelings of pleasure and fulfillment resulting from the purchase of handbags, including the self-gifting situation (MICK; DEMOSS, 1990), as shown in the excerpt: "I give myself a gift every two years. And it's usually a handbag, like this Hermès. But it doesn't have to be my birthday. It's more like, I'm worth it!" (K).

When reporting the purchase stage, one of the respondents indicated the search for pleasure, not only by purchasing an asset she wants, but also including the stages before and after the purchase and the service received at luxury brand boutiques: "It's nice to buy, to browse, to observe it, see if the price is good, if you have the money, it's an achievement, you know? It's very nice" (M).

The same respondent adds, when asked about the possibility of purchasing a luxury handbag online:

I didn't buy it and I wouldn't buy it. I'm going to spend a fortune, I want to sit down, to drink champagne, I enjoy every bit! [I want] To have a moment of luxury, of wealth, madam-like. Not because of trust, but purely because of the feeling. I buy other things. But the handbag, I wanna go out with that huge packaging bag, hang out in the mall, everyone looking at the bag and thinking 'what did she buy?'" (M).

Mentions of pleasure could also be observed in the participants' reports about the stage of using their luxury handbags. Several of them described positive feelings when using them such as happiness and fulfillment.

In line with the findings of Livramento, Hor-Meyll and Pessôa (2011), there were respondents who consider that luxury handbags are capable of bringing positive

feelings and sensations in relation to themselves. Sirgy (1982) defines self-concept as the set of beliefs that an individual has in relation to oneself and self-esteem as the positive form of this assessment. The participants listed feelings, such as self-confidence, power, beauty, and sensuality, when using their luxury handbags, which indicates that these objects can contribute to raising their self-esteem (SIRGY, 1982). This is the case with the excerpt: *"My husband asks 'who are you dressing like this for?' And I answer: 'For myself!'. There's also the thing that if you have a better handbag, better clothes, you feel sexier, better"* (L).

CONCLUSION

In this study we investigated the consumer relations between a group of Brazilian women with high-purchasing power and genuine handbags from international luxury brands and their perceptions about luxury and luxury brands.

Our results indicate that the expectations indicated by the main motivations according to the literature for the luxury consumption — perceived conspicuity, uniqueness, quality, extended-self, and hedonism — are somewhat reflected in the various stages of the consumption of luxury handbags, in the reports of the investigated group. It should be noted that these factors are arranged in varying proportions of importance for each consumer (STREHLAU, 2008) and may vary according to individual characteristics (GHOSH; VARSHNEY, 2013).

Apparently, for these women, from a nonpersonal point of view, a luxury handbag would be able, to some extent, to symbolize high status in the face of the social groups to which they belong or wish to belong, to express their uniqueness, to offer quality — objective and subjective — higher than that perceived in objects not considered luxurious. From a personal point of view, this object would contribute to their self-expression and create or reinforce their identity, in addition to providing pleasure and raising their self-esteem.

We suggest other research possibilities. One of them is the opportunity to investigate other consumer groups and relevant segments in the luxury sector, considering the variations that can be observed in different cultures, socioeconomic classes, individuals' age and stage of life, and product categories (BERRY, 1994; CASTARÈDE, 2005; MORAES, 2019).

There also seem to be opportunities for further research on the activities of selling and renting secondhand luxury handbags, a phenomenon mentioned by some of the interviewees in this research and which has been increasingly observed in consumer relations.

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About the authors

Rosana Dias Guedes de Moraes: PhD in Communication Sciences from the School of Social and Human Sciences of Universidade Nova de Lisboa; Master's in Business Administration from IBMEC Rio de Janeiro.

Ana Christina Celano Teixeira: PhD in Business Administration from EBAPE – Fundação Getúlio Vargas.

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