

You make me want to buy it: The influence of global brand ambassadors on Generation Z's purchase intention of luxury fashion products

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Introduction: In recent years, luxury fashion brands have engaged diverse celebrities as global brand ambassadors to court a new consumer segment born between 1997 and 2012: Generation Z (Chitrakorn, 2021; Dimock, 2019; Islam & Singh, 2020; Socha & Zhang, 2021; Yang, 2022). This generation, in particular, is recognized for having a great interest in celebrities (Nielsen, 2017; OC&C, 2019; YPulse, 2021). However, little is empirically known about Gen Z consumers' attitudes toward global brand ambassadors and the impact of these individuals on Gen Z's purchase intention of luxury fashion products.

Recruitment of global brand ambassadors by luxury fashion brands also speaks to a larger shift in the state of luxury. Presently, Gen Zers represent approximately \$360 billion in purchasing power, with the majority of this generational cohort aiming to buy luxury fashion (Schneider & Lee, 2022). They are also purchasing their first luxury fashion products earlier in life than previous generational cohorts, which has positively contributed to the growth of the luxury market (Bain & Company, 2022). These digital native consumers often turn to social media and engage with friends, family, brands, and celebrities during their purchase journeys (OC&C Strategy Consultants, 2019; Schneider & Lee, 2022). However, further research is needed to explore the role of global brand ambassadors in Gen Z's decisions to purchase fashion goods from traditional luxury brands. The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the influence of Gen Z consumers' attitudes toward global brand ambassadors on their purchase intention of luxury fashion goods, as well as to identify the key factors that affect Gen Zers' attitudes toward global brand ambassadors.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses: Source credibility theory, comprising trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990), was adopted as the theoretical framework for this study. Per the theory, it is suggested that the credibility of a brand ambassador is an important factor in influencing the attitudes and behaviors of targeted consumers (Yang, 2018). To be deemed credible, the target audience must believe that the celebrity is being honest about the brand rather than simply promoting it for their self-interest; that the celebrity is knowledgeable about the brand and its products; and that the celebrity is physically attractive (Ohanian, 1990; Umeogu, 2012). In the present study, it was postulated that source credibility would positively influence Gen Z consumers' attitudes toward the global brand ambassador (*H1*).

Studies (e.g., Halim & Kiatkawsin, 2021; Um & Jang, 2020) have found that celebrity worship, or a feeling of great attachment to a celebrity (McCutcheon et al., 2002), can impact consumers' attitudes toward brands and celebrities, leading to purchase intention. The entertainment-social level of celebrity worship, which includes people who enjoy reading about,

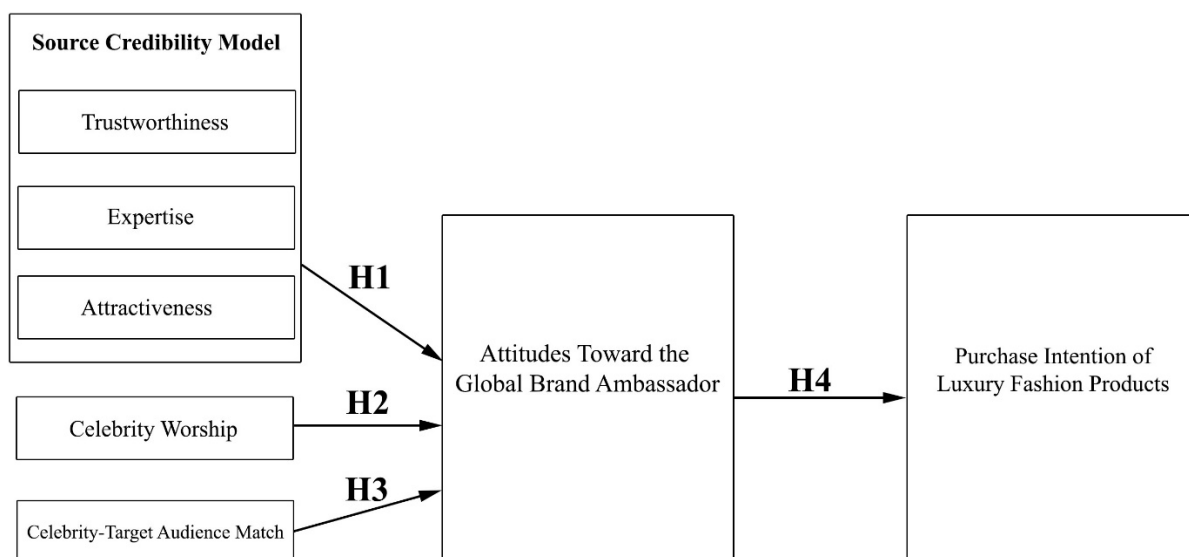
listening to, and watching their celebrity interest (McCutcheon et al., 2002; McCutcheon & Maltby, 2002) may be particularly relevant to Gen Zers who regularly engage with their favorite celebrities and share their interest with peers (OC&C Strategy Consultants, 2019; Socha & Zhang, 2021). Therefore, it was hypothesized that celebrity worship would positively influence Gen Z consumers' attitudes toward the global brand ambassador (**H2**).

It has also been suggested that consumers who perceive certain celebrities as matching their ideal self, or the person they want to be, may be more likely to purchase from brands that hire those celebrities (Choi & Rifon, 2012; Sirgy, 1985). Marketing professionals have described this celebrity-target audience match as the most important factor when selecting a brand ambassador (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016). Accordingly, it was posited that celebrity-target audience match would positively influence Gen Z consumers' attitudes toward the global brand ambassador (**H3**).

Previous studies (e.g., Chin et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2012; McCormick 2016; Wang & Scheinbaum, 2018) have shown the positive influence of attitudes toward brands and advertisements on consumers' purchase intentions. McCormick (2016) also asserted the need for consumers to have a positive attitude toward the celebrity promoting the brand. Therefore, it was hypothesized that Gen Z consumers' attitudes toward the global brand ambassador would positively influence their purchase intention of luxury fashion products (**H4**). (See Figure 1 for the proposed research model)

Figure 1

Proposed Research Model: Factors Influencing Gen Z Consumers' Attitudes Toward Global Brand Ambassadors and Purchase Intention of Luxury Fashion Products



Materials and Methods: This study utilized a quasi-experimental survey design (Guthrie, 2010; Head & Harsin, 2017; McGregor, 2018). Stimulus materials consisted of full-color images of three celebrities, Jimin (a K-pop idol), Emma Chamberlain (an online celebrity), and Zendaya (an actress), accompanied by text that identified each individual as an ambassador for a major luxury fashion brand. An online survey was developed using Qualtrics, with self-developed questions and reliable scale items included from Ohanian (1990), McCutcheon et al. (2002), Malhotra (1981), and Spears and Singh (2004). Demographic information was also collected at the end of the survey. A pretest was conducted with three graduate students to ensure face validity (Hesse, 2017). An email was sent to fashion, events, and hospitality professors at a Midwestern university requesting their students' participation in the study. Participants needed to be at least 18 years old, be a member of Generation Z (i.e., born between 1997 and 2005), and be familiar with traditional luxury fashion brands. 134 responses were deemed usable.

Results: Descriptive statistics offered insights into participants' luxury consumption habits and celebrity preferences. With regard to their luxury purchases, the following categories were reported: fragrances (60%), handbags (54%), apparel (47%), shoes (42%), jewelry (39%), and a luxury product outside of these categories (4%). Online celebrities (67.15%) were ranked as having the most impact on Gen Zers' luxury purchase intentions over actors/actresses and K-pop stars.

Multiple regression analysis revealed that a linear combination of the independent variables was significantly related to participants' attitudes toward the global ambassador: $F(3, 130) = 65.539, p < .001$. Specifically, source credibility ($\beta = .657, t = 10.174, p < .001$) and celebrity worship ($\beta = -.195, t = -3.019, p < .05$) significantly predicted participants' attitudes toward the global brand ambassador. Celebrity-target audience match was not significant in the model ($p > .05$). Simple linear regression revealed that the overall model was statistically significant ($R^2 = .129, F(1, 132) = 19.498, p < .001$), with attitudes toward the global brand ambassador significantly predicting purchase intention of luxury fashion goods ($\beta = .36, p < .001$).

Implications, Limitations, and Future Studies: The results established the significance of source credibility and celebrity worship in influencing Gen Z's attitudes as well as found attitudes toward the global brand ambassador significantly predicted purchase intention of luxury fashion goods. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on Gen Z consumption habits. From a managerial perspective, luxury brands can refer to our findings as an initial analysis of Gen Z's purchasing behavior and celebrities' roles in their purchase journeys.

Limitations include the use of convenience sampling, the lack of generalizability to other generations or product types, a focus on just three celebrity categories, and potential bias due to respondents' prior familiarity with luxury brands. Future research should analyze a larger, more diverse sample and consult with Gen Zers to select relevant celebrities for inclusion in the study. In addition, researchers may explore different variables that can explain variance in purchase intention of luxury fashion goods.

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