

Luxury consumption can fuel 'impostor syndrome' among some buyers

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Boston College Carroll School of Management Associate Professor of Marketing Nailya Ordabayeva and her colleagues have identified 'imposter syndrome' among luxury buyers whose purchases feel inauthentic, the team reports in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. Credit: Boston College

Purchasing luxury goods can affirm buyers' sense of status and enjoyment of items like fancy cars or fine jewelry. However, for many

consumers, luxury purchases can fail to ring true, sparking feelings of inauthenticity that fuel what researchers have labeled the "impostor syndrome" among luxury consumers.

"Luxury can be a double-edged sword," write Boston College Carroll School of Management Associate Professor of Marketing Nailya Ordabayeva and her co-authors, Harvard Business School doctoral student Dafna Goor, Boston University professor Anat Keinan, and Hult International Business School professor Sandrine Crener. "While luxury consumption holds the promise of elevated status, it can backfire and make consumers feel inauthentic, producing what we call the 'impostor syndrome from luxury consumption.'"

That's how Ordabayeva and co-authors explain the crux of the projects' findings, published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. The team draw their conclusions based on nine studies, encompassing surveys and observations of patrons of the Metropolitan Opera and shoppers at Louis Vuitton in New York City, vacationers on Martha's Vineyard, and other luxury consumers.

In contrast to previous studies in this area, "we find that many consumers perceive luxury products as a privilege which is undue and undeserved," according to Ordabayeva and her co-authors.

As a result, consumers feel inauthentic while wearing or using these products, and they actually act less confident than if they were sporting non-[luxury items](#). For example, "one participant said she felt very shy when she wore a gold necklace with diamonds that she owned because it is not in her character to wear luxurious jewelry," even though she could afford it.

This effect is mitigated among consumers who have an inherently high sense of entitlement, and also among non-entitled-feeling consumers on

occasions that make them feel special, such as their birthday.

"Luxury marketers and shoppers need to be aware of this psychological cost of [luxury](#), as impostor feelings resulting from purchases reduce consumer enjoyment and happiness," said Ordabayeva. "But boosting consumers' feelings of deservingness through sales tactics and marketing messages can help. Ultimately, in today's age that prioritizes authenticity and authentic living, creating experiences and narratives that boost people's personal connection with products and possessions can yield lasting benefits for [consumers](#) and marketers alike."

More information: Dafna Goor et al, The Impostor Syndrome from Luxury Consumption, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2019). [DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucz044](#)

Provided by Boston College

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