Social Effects of Wearing Luxury Goods

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Abstract

Conspicuous consumption of luxury items is a constant in modern capitalistic societies. Previous research has been conducted on how wearing luxury products can lead to better employment chances, better service in public, and a variety of other direct benefits. The current study sought to examine the effects of luxury products on perceived social status and likeability. Participants (N = 31) in the study were college students at a large Midwestern college in the United States, and were selected through affiliations with various student organizations due to availability of communication channels, but otherwise random. Results indicated that luxury products increased social status but decreased likeability. These results demonstrate how important choice of brands is to a person's image, and that people should consider how their outward appearance may impact their perceived ability to achieve a specific outcome.

Keywords: luxury brands, consumption, social status, likeability

Social Effects of Wearing Luxury Goods

The effects of appearance and dress on important life experiences, such as interpersonal relationships and job-related success, has long been documented (Johnson et al., 2014). Contemporary consumer culture is focused on conspicuous consumption as a means of establishing and defining social relationships (Nelissen & Meijers, 2010). Previous research indicates that even impoverished people in developing countries who struggle to afford basic needs are willing to pay a premium for branded products in order to keep up with appearances and fit in (Van Kempen, 2004). These compiled findings can be tied to the halo effect, whereby an impression created in one area can influence opinion in another area. They also relate to the mere exposure effect, which is a psychological phenomenon where people tend to develop a preference for things merely due to familiarity. Through better understanding the effects of luxury product consumption and its related cognitive biases, people may achieve greater social success.

Prior research has illustrated the importance of luxury goods as a signaling mechanism of status. A study by Lee, Ko and Megehee confirmed that luxury goods play an important factor in the job hiring process, where candidates wearing luxury logos were perceived as being more competent, more likely to be offered preferential treatment and more deserving of a higher hourly wage than their non-luxury wearing counterparts (Lee et al., 2015). The participants of the study were recruited from students at a large urban university in Seoul, South Korea. In a different study at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business, an experiment was conducted to test the relationship between logo prominence on products and price setting by luxury houses. The study demonstrated that luxury brands charge more for products with less flashy logos, with the results spanning uniform across shoes, handbags and

cars (Han et al., 2010). Yet another study on luxury consumption in Malaysia showed that luxury buyers favoring flashy logos care about impressing others, while luxury buyers of preferring less flashy logos pursue a sense of accomplishment and social recognition (Bagheri, 2014). The findings from these two studies were counterintuitive; if luxury goods serve as a signaling mechanism, then products with more prominent logos should be more valuable and thus priced higher. Together, these studies suggest that while prominently wearing luxury products can increase social value, there are disadvantages of conspicuous consumption. The current study seeks to better understand what the conflicting information may be a function of.

The hypothesis of the current study is that wearing luxury products decreases likeability while increasing perceived social status. The rationale behind the hypothesis is that individuals, including impoverished people are willing to pay a price premium for branded products, meaning that luxury goods provide social status (Van Kempen, 2004). However, wearing luxury products did not affect interviewee likeability in job interviews, and increased perceived educational levels and proficiency (Lee et al., 2015). In the study, participants are shown two questionnaire packets with repeated pictures of subjects both wearing and not wearing luxury products. Participants rate subjects' likeability and social status through questions based upon the Reysen likeability scale and a Likert-type scale.

Method

Participants

Undergraduate students (19 women, 12 men, M_{age} = 21.3 years, SD = 1.11, age range: 19 - 23 years) at a large public Midwestern college were sent a link to a Qualtrics survey. Participants were asked to participate in a short study on the effects of wearing luxury goods on the likeability and perceived social status of an individual. With regards to race, 19 of the

participants identified as Caucasian (61.3%), 2 of the participants identified as African-American (6.5%), 3 of the participants identified as Latino-Hispanic (9.7%), 3 of the participants identified as South Indian (9.7%) and 4 of the participants identified as Asian (12.9%). Participants were recruited using convenience sampling through involvement in student group chats for Ross class sections and Greek Life. Potential participants were sent the survey link via social media and invited to take part in the survey.

Procedure

This study was designed as an experiment, with one independent variable and two dependent variables. The independent variable was consumption of luxury brands, which was operationalized through whether the subject depicted was wearing a recognizable luxury product, while the two dependent variables were likeability and perceived social status, which were operationalized through questions derived from the Stephen Reysen Likability scale and the MacArthur scale of Subjective Social Status. Participants were first contacted Online by the experimenter to take part in a survey, without being provided any information about the context or purpose of the survey. After giving either verbal or written agreement to take the survey, the participants were sent a link to an anonymous survey that had 15 questions.

Participants were assigned control and experimental groups randomly through Qualtrics. For participants in the control group, they were presented with a picture of a man wearing a navy suit, and then asked to answer six questions with respect to the picture, half of which measured likeability and half of which measured perceived social status in fixed order. Participants were then presented with a picture of a woman carrying a non-branded bag, and asked to answer the same six questions as before. Finally, participants were asked about their gender, age and ethnicity. Participants in the experiment group had the same questions as those in the control

group, but were shown different pictures. The picture of the man in a navy suit was replaced by a picture of a man in a navy suit wearing a Rolex watch, while the picture of a woman carrying a non-branded bag was replaced by a picture of a woman carrying a Chanel bag (Appendix A).

Materials

The four pictures from the two survey blocks were Creative Commons images downloaded from Google. All of the pictures only displayed the torsos of subjects and not their faces, and included both a male and a female subject for each condition. This was an attempt to reduce any personal bias in the survey responses, which could be influenced by subjects' facial structures, expressions or gender. The luxury brands chosen for the experimental group were Rolex and Chanel, both of which are established luxury powerhouses. By choosing widely-known luxury products, the experiment attempted to eliminate the risk that participants would not be able to recognize the brand names. It was important for the participants to recognize the brands as that affects the operationalization of the independent variable.

Measures

The two survey blocks had the exact same questions. The three statements to test likeability were "This person is likable", "This person is friendly" and "This person is warm". These were derived from the Likability scale pioneered by Stephen Reysen (Appendix B). Participants answered the questions in forced single choice format on a Likert-type scale. There were 7 balanced responses to choose from, ranging from "Very strongly disagree" to "Very strongly agree", with a "Neutral" midpoint. The three statements to test perceived social status were "This person is powerful", "This person commands attention" and "This person is respected". These were loosely derived from the MacArthur scale of Subjective Social Status – Adult version (Appendix C). To assess this social status, the same Likert-type scale was used.

Results

All participants were included in the final dataset (N = 31). An analysis of reliability tells us whether a measure will yield the same result every time we administer it. Internal consistency reliability uses responses at only one point in time and all items measure the same variable. The likeability scale had acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.79$). This finding suggests that the likeability scale is good at measuring subjects' personal likeability and that the questions have high interrelatedness. The perceived social status scale had good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$). This finding suggests that the perceived social status scale is good at measuring subjects' personal likeability and that the questions have high interrelatedness.

A bivariate correlation was conducted to test the association between wearing luxury goods, likeability and perceived social status. The three variables ran were the luxury scale, likeability scale and social status scale. There was significant positive correlation between wearing luxury products and social status, $r = 0.77$, $p < 0.01$. This finding suggests that there is a strong positive relationship between wearing luxury products and perceived social status. There was moderate significant negative correlation between wearing luxury products and likeability, $r = -0.53$, $p < 0.01$. This finding suggests that there is a moderate negative relationship between wearing luxury products and likeability.

Discussion

The results supported the original hypothesis, demonstrating that there is a negative relationship between wearing luxury products and likeability, but positive relationship between wearing luxury products and perceived social status. These findings have important implications on how luxury companies should market their products and how people should dress to be conscious of their projected image. Luxury companies should emphasize the increased social

status their goods can provide in their advertisements and promotions, while downplaying the negative effects on likeability. For example, it would be more effective for a Rolex commercial to show the increased respect a CEO receives by wearing their watch around the office, rather than his rapport with his employees. Similarly, people who are invested in increasing their social status should conspicuously wear luxury products, such as carrying around a Chanel handbag. However, they should be cognizant about the brands they are wearing if they are trying to win a popularity contest in a social setting.

The external validity of this study was enhanced by the even gender distribution of the participants which matches that of the school population and the U.S. population. In addition, the independent variable of wearing luxury products was well operationalized as the brands are well known to the general public. The method was also presented clearly so that if the experiment were to be repeated by someone else, there would be no confusion in terms of carrying out the steps.

Some limitations would be that the external validity still could have been improved on because every participant in the population was a college student in a specific geographical area, which makes it difficult to generalize the results to other populations with different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, the internal validity of the experiment could have been improved upon as the experiment was only conducted once. Other than that, while the subjects in the control and experimental group pictures were selected to be as similar as possible other than the luxury branding, they were not entirely similar owning to difficulties from COVID-19, which impacted the anticipated in-person component of the experimental design and method. Similarly, the method of recruiting participants could have been improved, as the survey

link was sent to Ross and Greek Life student group chats only. The homogeneity of the participants could have led to self-selection bias.

In future research, the experiment should include participants with a wider demographic and more diverse backgrounds. Similarly, the experiment should be repeated multiple times to check if there are any confounding variables affecting the results. The experiment could also have included more "rounds" showing a greater variety of luxury brands in the pictures, just in case some participants were unfamiliar with specific common luxury brands. Better methods of recruiting participants, such as through Amazon MTurk, should also be implemented.

This research contributes to our knowledge of consumption patterns and the rationale behind paying a premium for luxury brands. It also provides valuable insight for consumers as to how conspicuous consumption can affect their perceived social status and likeability, and in turn influence their purchase habits in order to control their perceived personal image.

References

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Appendix A

Psych303 Survey

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q1
Take a look at this picture. Then select an option below based on how strongly you agree with each statement.

This person is likable.

- Very strongly disagree (1)
- Strongly disagree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Neutral (4)
- Agree (5)
- Strongly agree (6)
- Very strongly agree (7)

Q2 This person is friendly.

- Very strongly disgree (1)
- Strongly disagree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Neutral (4)
- Agree (5)
- Strongly agree (6)
- Very strongly agree (7)

Q3 This person is warm.

- Very strongly disagree (1)
- Strongly disagree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Neutral (4)
- Agree (5)
- Strongly agree (6)
- Very strongly agree (7)

Q4 This person is powerful.

- ○ Very strongly disagree (1)
- ○ Strongly disagree (2)
- ○ Disagree (3)
- ○ Neutral (4)
- ○ Agree (5)
- ○ Strongly agree (6)
- ○ Very strongly agree (7)

Q5 This person commands attention.

- ○ Very strongly disagree (1)
- ○ Strongly disagree (2)
- ○ Disagree (3)
- ○ Neutral (4)
- ○ Agree (5)
- ○ Strongly agree (6)
- ○ Very strongly agree (7)

Q6 This person is respected.

- Very strongly disagree (1)
- Strongly disagree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Neutral (4)
- Agree (5)
- Strongly agree (6)
- Very strongly agree (7)

Q7
Take a look at this picture. Then select an option below based on how strongly you agree with each statement.

This person is likable.

- Very strongly disagree (1)
- Strongly disagree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Neutral (4)
- Agree (5)
- Strongly agree (6)
- Very strongly agree (7)

Q8 This person is friendly.

- Very strongly disgree (1)
- Strongly disagree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Neutral (4)
- Agree (5)
- Strongly agree (6)
- Very strongly agree (7)

Q9 This person is warm.

- Very strongly disagree (1)
- Strongly disagree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Neutral (4)
- Agree (5)
- Strongly agree (6)
- Very strongly agree (7)

Q10 This person is powerful.

- Very strongly disgree (1)
- Strongly disagree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Neutral (4)
- Agree (5)
- Strongly agree (6)
- Very strongly agree (7)

Q11 This person commands attention.

- Very strongly disgree (1)
- Strongly disagree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Neutral (4)
- Agree (5)
- Strongly agree (6)
- Very strongly agree (7)

Q12 This person is respected.

- Very strongly disgree (1)
- Strongly disagree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Neutral (4)
- Agree (5)
- Strongly agree (6)
- Very strongly agree (7)

Q13 What is your gender?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other (3)

Q14 What is your age?

_____

Q15 What is your race?

- Caucasian (1)
- African-American (2)
- Latino-Hispanic (3)
- South Indian (4)
- Asian (5)
- Other (6)

End of Block: Default Question Block

Start of Block: Experimental Group

Q1

Take a look at this picture. Then select an option below based on how strongly you agree with each statement.

This person is likable.

- ○ Very strongly disagree (1)
- ○ Strongly disagree (2)
- ○ Disagree (3)
- ○ Neutral (4)
- ○ Agree (5)
- ○ Strongly agree (6)
- ○ Very strongly agree (7)

Q2 This person is friendly.

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- Strongly disagree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Neutral (4)
- Agree (5)
- Strongly agree (6)
- Very strongly agree (7)

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- Strongly disagree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Neutral (4)
- Agree (5)
- Strongly agree (6)
- Very strongly agree (7)

Q4 This person is powerful.

- ○ Very strongly disagree (1)
- ○ Strongly disagree (2)
- ○ Disagree (3)
- ○ Neutral (4)
- ○ Agree (5)
- ○ Strongly agree (6)
- ○ Very strongly agree (7)

Q5 This person commands attention.

- ○ Very strongly disagree (1)
- ○ Strongly disagree (2)
- ○ Disagree (3)
- ○ Neutral (4)
- ○ Agree (5)
- ○ Strongly agree (6)
- ○ Very strongly agree (7)

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- ○ Very strongly disagree (1)
- ○ Strongly disagree (2)
- ○ Disagree (3)
- ○ Neutral (4)
- ○ Agree (5)
- ○ Strongly agree (6)
- ○ Very strongly agree (7)

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- Very strongly disagree (1)
- Strongly disagree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Neutral (4)
- Agree (5)
- Strongly agree (6)
- Very strongly agree (7)

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- Strongly disagree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Neutral (4)
- Agree (5)
- Strongly agree (6)
- Very strongly agree (7)

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- Strongly disagree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Neutral (4)
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- Strongly agree (6)
- Very strongly agree (7)

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- Disagree (3)
- Neutral (4)
- Agree (5)
- Strongly agree (6)
- Very strongly agree (7)

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- ○ Strongly disagree (2)
- ○ Disagree (3)
- ○ Neutral (4)
- ○ Agree (5)
- ○ Strongly agree (6)
- ○ Very strongly agree (7)

Q12 This person is respected.

- ○ Very strongly disagree (1)
- ○ Strongly disagree (2)
- ○ Disagree (3)
- ○ Neutral (4)
- ○ Agree (5)
- ○ Strongly agree (6)
- ○ Very strongly agree (7)

Q13 What is your gender?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other (3)

Q14 What is your age?

_____

Q15 What is your race?

- Caucasian (1)
- African-American (2)
- Hispanic-Latino (3)
- South Indian (4)
- Asian (5)
- Other (6)

End of Block: Experimental Group

Appendix B

Likability Scale

Instructions: Circle how strongly you agree with each statement.

1. This person is friendly.

Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree

2. This person is likeable.

Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree

3. This person is warm.

Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree

4. This person is approachable.

Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree

5. I would ask this person for advice.

Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree

Appendix C

INSTRUCTIONS

Respondents view a drawing of a ladder with 10 rungs, and either read or hear that the ladder represents where people stand in society. Respondents further read or hear: "At the top of the ladder are the people who are the best off, those who have the most money, most education, and best jobs. At the bottom are the people who are the worst off, those who have the least money, least education, worst jobs, or no job. Please place an 'X' on the rung that best represents where you think you stand on the ladder."

Some researchers also include a second item that asks respondents to rank themselves on the ladder relative to other people in their community.

Appendix D

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Statistics			
		What is your gender?	What is your gender?
N	Valid	17	14
	Missing	14	17
Mean		1.59	1.64
Std. Deviation		.507	.497
Minimum		1	1
Maximum		2	2
Percentiles	25	1.00	1.00
	50	2.00	2.00
	75	2.00	2.00

Frequency Table

What is your gender?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	7	22.6	41.2	41.2
	Female	10	32.3	58.8	100.0
	Total	17	54.8	100.0	
Missing	System	14	45.2		
Total		31	100.0		

What is your gender?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	5	16.1	35.7	35.7
	Female	9	29.0	64.3	100.0
	Total	14	45.2	100.0	
Missing	System	17	54.8		
Total		31	100.0		

```
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	Cases Used	Statistics are based on all cases with valid data.
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	Elapsed Time	00:00:00.01

Statistics			
		What is your ethnicity?	What is your ethnicity?
N	Valid	14	17
	Missing	17	14
Mean		2.14	2.00
Std. Deviation		1.406	1.658
Minimum		1	1
Maximum		5	5
Percentiles	25	1.00	1.00
	50	1.50	1.00
	75	3.25	3.50

Frequency Table

What is your ethnicity?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Caucasian	7	22.6	50.0	50.0
	African-American	2	6.5	14.3	64.3
	Latino-Hispanic	2	6.5	14.3	78.6
	South Indian	2	6.5	14.3	92.9
	Asian	1	3.2	7.1	100.0
	Total	14	45.2	100.0	
Missing	System	17	54.8		
Total		31	100.0		

What is your ethnicity?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Caucasian	12	38.7	70.6	70.6
	Hispanic-Latino	1	3.2	5.9	76.5
	South Indian	1	3.2	5.9	82.4
	Asian	3	9.7	17.6	100.0
	Total	17	54.8	100.0	
Missing	System	14	45.2		
Total		31	100.0		

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  /ORDER=ANALYSIS.
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Frequencies

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	Elapsed Time	00:00:00.02

Statistics

		What is your age?	What is your age?
N	Valid	31	31
	Missing	0	0

Frequency Table

What is your age?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		14	45.2	45.2	45.2
	19	3	9.7	9.7	54.8
	20	1	3.2	3.2	58.1
	21	5	16.1	16.1	74.2
	22	5	16.1	16.1	90.3
	23	3	9.7	9.7	100.0
	Total	31	100.0	100.0	

What is your age?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		17	54.8	54.8	54.8
	20	3	9.7	9.7	64.5
	21	4	12.9	12.9	77.4
	22	7	22.6	22.6	100.0
	Total	31	100.0	100.0	

```
RELIABILITY
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  /SCALE('Likability') ALL
  /MODEL=ALPHA.
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Reliability

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Scale: Likability

Case Processing Summary			
		N	%
Cases	Valid	14	45.2
	Excluded[a]	17	54.8
	Total	31	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.792	6

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RELIABILITY
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Reliability

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	Split File	<none>
	N of Rows in Working Data File	31
	Matrix Input	
Missing Value Handling	Definition of Missing	User-defined missing values are treated as missing.
	Cases Used	Statistics are based on all cases with valid data for all variables in the procedure.
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Scale: Social Status

Case Processing Summary			
		N	%
Cases	Valid	14	45.2
	Excluded[a]	17	54.8
	Total	31	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.874	6

```
COMPUTE Likability=Q1+ Q2+Q3+Q8+Q9+Q10.
VARIABLE LABELS  Likability 'Likability'.
EXECUTE.
COMPUTE SocialStatus=Q4+Q5+Q6+Q10+Q11+Q12.
EXECUTE.
COMPUTE Luxury=Q1+Q2+Q3+Q4+Q5+Q6+Q7+Q8+Q9+Q10+Q11+Q12.
VARIABLE LABELS  Luxury 'Luxury'.
EXECUTE.

CORRELATIONS
  /VARIABLES=Likability SocialStatus Luxury
  /PRINT=TWOTAIL NOSIG
  /MISSING=PAIRWISE.
```

Correlations

Notes		
Output Created		30-APR-2020 23:08:06
Comments		
Input	Data	C:\Users\ivoryang\Downloads\Psych303 Survey_April 30, 2020_00.36.sav
	Active Dataset	DataSet2
	Filter	<none>
	Weight	<none>
	Split File	<none>
	N of Rows in Working Data File	31
Missing Value Handling	Definition of Missing	User-defined missing values are treated as missing.
	Cases Used	Statistics for each pair of variables are based on all the cases with valid data for that pair.
Syntax		CORRELATIONS /VARIABLES=Likability SocialStatus Luxury /PRINT=TWOTAIL NOSIG /MISSING=PAIRWISE.
Resources	Processor Time	00:00:00.03
	Elapsed Time	00:00:00.04

Correlations				
		Likability	SocialStatus	Luxury
Likability	Pearson Correlation	1	.136	-.531*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.644	.003
	N	14	14	14
SocialStatus	Pearson Correlation	.136	1	.765**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.644		.001
	N	14	14	14

Luxury	Pearson Correlation	-.531**	.765**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	.001	
	N	14	14	14

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).