Self-Categorization and Exclusivity in the Rise of Genderless Fragrances: A Study of Class a Consumers in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The luxury fragrance market has recently shifted toward genderless and identity-fluid products that challenge traditional masculine-feminine segmentation. This study investigates how Indonesia's Class A consumers perceive and purchase genderless luxury perfumes through Self-Categorization Theory (SCT), Baudrillard's Consumer Society, and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Using a mixed-method approach, 150 survey respondents and 5 in-depth interviewees participated. Regression results indicate that brand inclusivity ($\beta = 0.379$, $p < 0.001$) and sensory fit ($\beta = 0.401$, $p < 0.001$) significantly influence purchase intention, while authenticity ($\beta = 0.046$, $p = 0.482$) is symbolically appreciated but statistically insignificant. Qualitative findings reveal that consumers perceive authenticity as narrative coherence rather than factual originality, aligning with symbolic self-expression through inclusive and sensory experiences. The study contributes to understanding the symbolic consumption of luxury within identity-fluid markets, proposing a behavioral-symbolic framework for marketing in Southeast Asia.

INTRODUCTION

The luxury fragrance market is undergoing a significant and transformative evolution. Historically characterized by gender-coded branding and distinctly gendered olfactory profiles, high-end fragrance manufacturers are now boldly embracing identity-fluid narratives and adopting minimalist, abstract scent designs. For the affluent Class A consumers in Indonesia urban dwellers who are globally minded and culturally astute fragrances have transcended their traditional role as mere status symbols. Instead, they have emerged as powerful tools for self-expression and personal storytelling.

This discerning consumer group increasingly utilizes exclusive perfumes not to signal their social affiliations but to articulate their internal identities, aesthetic sensibilities, and overall lifestyle philosophies. Unlike mass-market consumers, who often feel the weight of group conformity and societal expectations, Class A individuals operate from a highly personal perspective. They search for brands that resonate with their intrinsic preferences, celebrate emotional authenticity, and reflect their unique journeys. In this new paradigm, fragrance ceases to be merely a cultural marker; it becomes a curated, intimate extension of the self, crafted to express individuality.

Social Class A consumers in Indonesia represent a particularly significant demographic. Typically residing in metropolitan areas such as Jakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya, these individuals are characterized by high income, global exposure, and refined taste preferences (McKinsey & Company, 2021).

According to Delvina and Firdausy (2025), Indonesia's fragrance industry reached an impressive value of USD 457.81 million in 2024 (1 USD: 15.864 IDR on 2024 = 7.3 T IDR), marking a significant milestone in the country's lifestyle and beauty market. The study projects steady growth through 2029, fueled by the increasing awareness of personal grooming, lifestyle expression, and digital purchasing behavior among Indonesia's urban middle- to upper-class consumers.

In parallel, Ginting and Dellyana (2023) report highlights a 3.6% annual growth rate in the national fragrance sector, largely driven by young, affluent consumers residing in major metropolitan areas such as Jakarta, Surabaya, and Bandung. These consumers

are not only more exposed to global fragrance trends but also increasingly seek products that reflect their individual identity, values, and social aspirations.

This CosmeticsDesign-Asia written by Tan (2025) also report outlines how the Asian luxury fragrance sector is experiencing rapid growth in gender-neutral and identity-based perfumes. Consumers increasingly select scents that mirror personality better, yet this personalization still operates within the boundaries of aspirational social identity. For affluent buyers, genderless fragrances function as symbols of progressiveness and cosmopolitan taste, a new language of conformity that prizes individuality as status. The report concludes that in Asia, self-identity expression enhances rather than replaces social conformity, as consumers use brand-driven individuality to reinforce their belonging to an elite cultural class.

To understand this phenomenon, the study draws on Self Categorization Theory (SCT) (Turner et al., 1987), which explains how individuals define themselves either at the social level (as members of a group) or at the personal level (as unique individuals). Within Indonesia's high-end fragrance market, SCT provides a lens to analyze how Class A consumers oscillate between these two identity frames: using luxury branding to maintain social legitimacy (social categorization) while simultaneously employing niche, genderless fragrances to construct self-identity and signal refined individuality (personal categorization). This duality—belonging and differentiation, captures the complex psychology of luxury consumption in a postmodern consumer society.

Within Baudrillard's (2016) theory of the Consumer Society, luxury goods function as sign-values, objects that communicate meaning and reinforce social hierarchies. In this symbolic economy, consumption is not merely the satisfaction of need but a performance of belonging. For Indonesia's affluent elite, the act of purchasing premium fragrance brands historically served as a form of social conformity, signaling refined taste, cosmopolitanism, and participation in the global luxury class. Through branded symbols, individuals reaffirmed their membership in a desirable social category.

In this research, these dimensions are mapped into constructs with Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) framework as follows; bridges these symbolic and psychological dimensions with behavioral intention. In this framework, authenticity aligns with attitude (evaluation of brand truth and coherence), inclusivity with subjective norms (social acceptance of fluid identity expression), and sensory fit with perceived behavioral control (confidence in achieving sensory and emotional congruence). Collectively, these constructs reveal how self-categorization, symbolic salience, and sensory alignment interact to shape purchase intention toward genderless luxury fragrances among Indonesia's Class A consumers.

Integrating SCT and Baudrillard with TPB framework, enables a multidimensional analysis of how symbolic conformity and personal self-expression coexist in Indonesia's luxury market. The core research problem therefore lies in understanding how authenticity, inclusivity, and sensory fit interact with self-categorization and symbolic consumption to influence Class A consumers' purchase intention toward genderless perfumes, an emerging category that transforms fragrance from a mere status emblem into a performative expression of self-identity and elevated class consciousness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term Class A refers to the top economic/social tier of consumers, those with high incomes, global cultural exposure, and the capacity to both shape and signal trends. Such consumers in Indonesia engage not only in the purchase of luxury goods, but in the performance of status and identity through consumption. The framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior applies: Class A consumers' attitudes toward luxury (positive evaluations), the subjective norms (peer/industry expectations), and perceived behavioral control (ability to afford, access, and utilise luxury) all shape their consumption intentions and actions.

A recent empirical study by Sun, Wang, Bai, Whyatt & Ohandi (2024) of Indonesian millennials in luxury fashion found that symbolic values (e.g., status, identity) and financial values strongly influence purchase intention in Class A-adjacent segments. Similarly Ma & Coelho (2024) identified social influence, conspicuous consumption, and brand image as major antecedents of luxury consumption tendencies, suggesting that Class A behaviors are structurally tied to status signaling and social identity.

Genderless (or unisex) perfume is a category of fragrance whose design, marketing, and usage defy the traditional binary categories of "men's" vs "women's" scents. It emphasises inclusivity, individuality, and breaks the marker of gender that historically defined perfumery. In terms of product strategy, genderless perfume utilises balanced olfactory compositions (woody, musky, citrus notes) and neutral design (packaging, branding) to appeal across gender identities.

Iseki, Motoki, Sakata, and Kitagami (2022) examined how gender labeling ("masculine" vs. "feminine") of otherwise neutral scents affects sensory perception. Their findings revealed that semantic gender cues (e.g., labeling a scent as "feminine") significantly influenced the perceived gender of the fragrance but did not affect tactile evaluation. This demonstrates the psychological potency of gendered language and implies that neutralizing such cues—central to genderless fragrance design—can reshape consumer attitudes and behaviors.

In the context of emerging markets such as Indonesia, genderless perfumes reflect a fusion of global trends and local cultural negotiations. While global narratives emphasize fluidity and autonomy, local consumers may still navigate traditional social expectations. This creates a unique branding space in which inclusivity must be framed not only around identity expression, but also around cultural sensitivity and emotional resonance (Deng & Shi, 2024).

On the visual side, Zhu and Bao (2025) undertake a comprehensive mixed-methods study focused on the intricate world of perfume bottle design, utilizing Butler's heterosexual matrix framework as their analytical lens. In light of the increasing recognition of gender fluidity within marketing strategies, their research reveals a striking reality: the majority of perfume bottles continue to adhere to traditional binary design standards, particularly in terms of color and shape. Unisex fragrances, while seemingly progressive, often default to aesthetics that align closely with masculine ideals, reinforcing established gender norms. Only a limited selection of bottles truly embodies the essence of fluidity, boldly challenging conventional gender representations through the inclusion of diverse identities. This study underscores the need for a more innovative approach in design that embraces and reflects the complexity of contemporary gender expressions.

In response to this growing trend, an emerging array of genderless perfume brands has begun to carve out a niche in the expanding market for gender-free fragrances, showcasing their unique offerings without the constraints of traditional labeling (Robin, 2025). This transformation highlights the necessity for brands to develop neutral scent profiles that resonate with a wide spectrum of consumers and to incorporate multisensory design elements that promote inclusivity and authenticity. By doing so, they can challenge long-standing gender norms and more effectively align themselves with the evolving expectations of today's modern consumers.

Thus, genderless perfume in this study is conceptualised as a fragrance offering whose key attributes are: (1) non-gendered olfactory profile; (2) inclusive branding and visual design; (3) appeal grounded in individuality rather than gender identity; (4) symbolic alignment with modern identity narratives (fluidity, self-expression).

Theoretical Overview:
1. Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) explains identity salience between personal and social levels.
2. Baudrillard's Consumer Society Theory genderless perfumes become signs of intellectual sophistication and modern individuality, reinforcing self-image while sustaining their cultural prestige.
3. Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) links intention to attitude (authenticity), subjective norms (inclusivity), and perceived behavioral control (sensory fit).

   Hypotheses 1: There is influence of brand authenticity on Class A consumers' purchase intention towards genderless fragrances.

   Hypotheses 2: There is impact brand inclusivity, framed around openness to identity rather than gender grouping, affect the purchase intention of Class A consumers.

   Hypotheses 3: There exist sensory fit effect, defined as the alignment between personal scent preferences and fragrance design, shape Class A consumers' purchase intention toward genderless fragrances.

Hypotheses 4: Construct authenticity, inclusivity and sensory fit, In description could influence and become habits in the purchase intention process of grouping in class A.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-method explanatory sequential design combining quantitative and qualitative phases to comprehensively examine how Perceived Brand Authenticity, Perceived Brand Inclusivity, and Sensory Fit influence Purchase Intention toward genderless luxury perfumes among Class A Indonesian consumers. The quantitative phase tests hypothesized causal relationships using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as the behavioral foundation, integrated with Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) and Baudrillard's Sign-Value Theory to capture symbolic and identity-based determinants. Quantitative data were collected using online questionnaire (n = 150) was conducted among Class A consumers in Jakarta, Surabaya, and Bandung. Constructs were measured using 7-point Likert scales adapted from prior validated studies (Chaudhuri et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2023).

Following the quantitative stage, the qualitative phase enriches the interpretation of findings by exploring the cultural meanings and social-signaling practices behind genderless perfume adoption through in-depth interviews. A deductive approach was selected, beginning with theoretical propositions derived from SCT, Sign-Value, and TPB, which were empirically validated through statistical and interpretive analyses (Creswell & Creswell, 2024). The quantitative phase identifies the magnitude and significance of relationships among constructs, whereas the qualitative phase uncovers how Class A consumers interpret perfume as a symbolic representation of individuality and social status.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Quantitative Result
The regression model indicated significant relationships between brand inclusivity, sensory fit, and purchase intention:

Table 1

Predictor	B	P-value	Significance
Authenticity	0.046	0.482	Not Significant
Inclusivity	0.379	0.000	Significant
Sensory Fit	0.401	0.000	Significant

This indicates that perceptions of brand inclusivity and sensory experience significantly increase purchase intention for genderless perfume, while brand authenticity is not strong enough to directly influence purchase intention.

Comparative analysis was used to examine differences in perception levels between respondent groups. In this study, comparisons were made based on demographics (age, gender, and perfume expenditure) to determine whether there were differences in perceptions of the research variables.

The results are female respondents (77%) tended to have higher Purchase Intention scores than male respondents (21%), indicating that women are more receptive to brand messages of inclusivity. The 18–22 age group (35%) showed the highest interest in genderless perfumes, reflecting the trend of open consumption among young people. Monthly perfume spending above IDR 1,000,000 is associated with higher perceptions of Authenticity and Sensory Fit, reinforcing Class A consumers' classification as early adopters in the genderless perfume category. This analysis shows that acceptance of genderless perfumes varies across groups, but is generally high among young and high-income segments, consistent with Self-Categorization and Sign-Value theories.

The model achieved an adjusted R^2 = .768, showing strong explanatory power. This value indicates that the variables Perceived Brand Authenticity (X1), Perceived Brand Inclusivity (X2), and Sensory Fit (X3) predict 76.8% of changes in Purchase Intention (Y), while the remaining 23.2% is influenced by other variables not examined.

Qualitative Result

In-depth interviews with five informants: Cerelia Chrisyanti (Perfume Advocate, Gen Z Content Creator); Lucky Heng (Founder of Alien Objects); Gabriella Adeline (Collector & Visual Strategist); Callista Calim (Retail Buyer, PILLAR Plaza Indonesia); Juris Bramantyo (Community Voice & #LokalWangi Advocate), enriched the quantitative insights. Across participants, three consistent themes emerged:

1. Authenticity

   Authenticity was defined not by material provenance but by narrative coherence and sincerity. Respondents emphasized that genuine storytelling and emotional alignment were more important than claims of originality or ingredients. This explains why authenticity factor is not quantitatively significant, because it plays a symbolic, not a functional role, supports Baudrillard's view of authenticity as a performative illusion that sustains symbolic meaning.

2. Inclusivity

   All participants associated inclusivity with emotional representation and self-expression. Genderless branding was perceived as empowering and liberating, allowing individuals to express unique identities beyond traditional gender codes. Within the *Self-Categorization Theory (SCT)* framework, inclusivity fosters social belonging to a cosmopolitan and open-minded class identity, aligning with *subjective norms* in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB).

3. Sensory Fit

   Sensory fit was identified as the most tangible and personal factor influencing purchase intention. Consumers selected perfumes that matched mood, weather, or personal aesthetic - demonstrating *perceived behavioral control* in TPB terms. The sensory experience became a medium of self-regulation and self-recognition, reinforcing symbolic individuality.

CONCLUSION

Quantitative results demonstrated that perceived brand authenticity showed a positive but non-significant effect on purchase intention (p = 0.482). Perceived brand inclusivity exerted a significant positive influence (β = 0.379, p < 0.001). Sensory fit emerged as the most influential factor (β = 0.401, p < 0.001). Collectively, the three variables explained 76.8 percent of the variance in purchase intention (Adjusted R^2 = 0.768).

Qualitative findings deepened these statistical outcomes. Interviews revealed that authenticity is often interpreted symbolically rather than materially—a reflection of Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, where consumers value the illusion of sincerity embedded in narrative and aesthetic coherence. In contrast, inclusivity and sensory fit represent lived experiences that allow consumers to align self-perception with brand meaning. Through the lens of SCT, respondents described fragrance choice as a process of self-definition and differentiation, while TPB explained how positive attitudes, inclusive social norms, and sensory control collectively drive intention.

This research demonstrates that the appeal of genderless luxury fragrances among Indonesian Class A consumers lies not in ideological gender neutrality, but in the aesthetic, emotional, and symbolic fit between self and scent. Authenticity is no longer a proof of origin, it is a performance of meaning. Inclusivity serves as the new social code of modern luxury, while sensory fit completes the experience of self-coherence. Through the synergy of SCT, Baudrillard, and TPB, this study affirms that in today's post-modern marketplace, to purchase is to signify and in the world of fragrance, identity itself becomes the most desired scent.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Academic Institutions should support interdisciplinary studies combining marketing, psychology, cultural studies, and design to understand how genderless values reshape consumer behavior in creative economies.

2. Policy makers and professional associations (such as Indonesian Perfumery and Cosmetics Boards) should promote guidelines that prevent gender stereotyping and encourage equitable representation in fragrance and beauty campaigns.

3. Public and private agencies could facilitate programs helping Indonesian perfume entrepreneurs to build authentic storytelling, enhance sensory innovation, and align inclusivity with cultural heritage, ensuring competitiveness in the global genderless market.

4. Brands should communicate authenticity not merely through heritage claims but through consistency of narrative, tone, and emotion.

5. Marketers should position genderless fragrances as tools of identity expression rather than ideological statements. Campaigns emphasizing mood, personality, and artistic individuality are more effective among Class A consumers, who seek emotional depth and exclusivity.

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