

Rise of the manbags and the \$2,500 shoes

Men are splurging on themselves as the cufflinks cartel carves out a new niche in the luxury goods market

By [Joyce Hooi](#)

As the wealthy become increasingly monogram-shy for whatever reason, artisan-type enterprises have begun to populate Singapore's landscape - PHOTO : BLOOMBERG

IN the sombreness that has followed a recession and in the suspicion that another might soon follow, the cufflinks cartel is still spending its white-collar largesse, but much more quietly this year.

As mainstream luxury brands report a slowdown in 2012 growth rates, a separate tier of niche and bespoke luxury items is burgeoning for men who can still afford their monograms - but pitched sotto voce rather than at shouting volume.

Ben Benjamin, of FJ Benjamin, has been seeing more men reach for discreet creature comforts under the Celine, Goyard and Givenchy labels in the local retailer's portfolio.

"2009 made everybody feel a little bit uncomfortable about being so conspicuous in their spending. (Since then), there's been a group of customers who are looking for luxury that's a little more understated," he said. "Because of that, you've got these brands that are not the institutional luxury types (like) the Louis Vuittons and Chanel of the world. When that happens, brands like Celine and Givenchy tend to do better."

At Givenchy, male patronage accounts for about 30 per cent of till takings. At Celine, it is 5-10 per cent. Considering how Celine carries all women's merchandise, this is somewhat remarkable.

"The men buy the bigger (Celine) bags and use them as document bags, gym bags. Some of them who are very fashion-forward, I think they use it as their - I think "handbag" is the appropriate word," Mr Benjamin said.

Manbag? "A manbag! That's a good one," he exclaimed.

While the idea of a manbag is not new, its debut at the higher end of luxury fashion has been relatively recent, as part of the larger trend of men splurging on themselves.

The latest Bain & Company study found that men now account for 41 per cent of the global luxury goods market, up from 35 per cent in 1995, and in a market almost three times larger. "Luxury for men used to involve classic business attire, watches and a small selection of leather goods for business occasions," Bain's global luxury expert, Claudia D'Arpizio, told The Business Times. "Now, we see men also purchasing fragrances and skincare items, and shifting their tastes in apparel from business purpose to fashion content."

This trend is being borne out in Singapore where retailers such as Tangs have started placing men's grooming brands like Lab Series, Biotherm Homme and Aramis within reach, on the same floor as the men's apparel and accessories.

Even so, the global picture for luxury goods demand can be viewed with approval or apprehension, depending on how one's glass is filled.

The luxury goods market is estimated to have grown 10 per cent to 212 billion euros (\$336 billion) for 2012, down from an 11 per cent increase the year before. At constant exchange rates, the slowdown is more apparent - only a 5 per cent growth this year compared with 13 per cent in 2011.

Even China, a branded goods market fond of simultaneously wearing plaid Burberry pants, hat and scarf, has slowed significantly. Projected growth this year stands at 8 per cent in local currency terms, down from 30 per cent in 2011, as the mainland's breakneck growth slowed to a canter. Considering how one in every four luxury goods buyer is Chinese, this is worrisome.

The Bain survey, however, includes only data from brands that have the trappings of a luxury house - global recognition, premium pricing and a presence in the glossies presiding over high fashion.

It does not take into account where else the rich go if they have a little less to spend or simply do not want to be seen spending it.

As the wealthy become increasingly monogram-shy for whatever reason, artisan-type enterprises have begun to populate Singapore's landscape.

Shoe outfit Ed Et Al, for example, started only a year ago, but it has taken orders for more than 100 custom-made and bespoke shoes. While its custom-made shoes start from \$800, a bespoke shoe virgin will pay \$2,500 minimum for his first pair - \$1,000 of which is for the shoe-last.

"There is no real ceiling. We start at \$2,500 (and) have had commissions where the (price of) the pair of shoes probably added up to five figures," said Edwin Neo, the brand's shoemaker.

His clientele can roughly be divided into two groups - the already-well-heeled who want shoes that can be in regular contact with the pavement, and the upscalers who cannot yet afford the big-league shoes. Mr Neo's ready-to-wear range eases men into the idea of luxury footwear with a \$300 entry price. For the sake of comparison, Prada men's shoes which come ready-to-wear range from \$800 to \$1,500.

Mr Neo considers being wedged between dime-a-dozen loafers and high-end Italian labels a good place to be, as the wealthy become more vigilant about money but men in

general want to spend more. "Before I started this, there was no mid-range. It was the \$100 (shoes) and the next step up was \$600-\$700," he said.

The same is true for Dylan & Son, which tailors men's clothing replete with super-fine Italian wool and smoked mother-of-pearl buttons ("When you pay a 4-figure sum for a suit, it is a crime to be given plastic buttons," the tailor's latest blog entry says).

Shirts and trousers start from \$149-\$250, while a two-piece pure wool suit goes anywhere upward from \$1,200. A Dolce & Gabbana ready-to-wear suit is a notch more expensive, starting at US\$1,500 (S\$1,830).

Since 2010, Dylan & Son has seen a 50 per cent increase in sales, albeit from a relatively low base. Already, the store has a pool of 20-30 regular customers who come by every other month to pick up "a few shirts here and there", according to its founder and director, Dylan Chong.

"Most of my customers are not brand-conscious ones. You will seldom hear them talking about Louis Vuitton bags or Dolce & Gabbana shoes," he said.

At other independent outfits, the bargain-hunting of the still-wealthy, coupled with the attrition of the aspiring has made for some strange outcomes.

Frederic Sai, founder of the eponymously named men's fashion label, has seen demand drop this year for his more accessible shirts which are priced at \$120-\$150. At the same time, demand for his limited edition line, where shirts start at \$250, has increased. "Price is not really an issue. (The clients) just don't want to wear what everyone else is wearing," Mr Sai said.

This does not mean that mainstream luxury is going to pot. "It is important to point out that the (luxury goods market) growth rate is slower but still positive. In fact, there are not many industries where a 10 per cent growth rate would be considered bad news," Bain's Ms D'Arpizio said.

She has a point, even if one considers the 5 per cent growth rate at constant exchange rates.

Over the past year, the World Luxury Goods Index comprising 20 firms outstripped the performance of the iShares Dow Jones US for consumer goods, 18 per cent to 11 per cent. In Asia, demand for food, beverages and tobacco is expected to grow at about 3 per cent this year, at most.

In such uncertain times, appetite for bread might wane, but life continues for people who can afford cake.

<http://www.businessstimes.com.sg/premium/top-stories/rise-manbags-and-2500-shoes-20121208>