



Lifestyle  
**Splurge: why not?**

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Stoked by celebrities and fashion blogs, young working adults spend a month's pay or more on luxury bags

Bank executive Priscilla Wong has spent more than \$20,000 on four luxury handbags in the past two years.

The most expensive of the lot?

A Chanel python-skin flap bag in gold that she saw retailing for \$11,000 in Singapore, but for which she paid \$8,000 - a friend who was travelling in Europe bought it for her last month.

"It doesn't pain me to buy these bags. I don't save up to buy my bags either. I buy them because they are within my means. When something catches my eye and I know I've got the extra, I'll go for it," says Ms Wong, 25, who has been working for two years and earns close to a five-figure sum each month.

Her father is retired and her mother is a customer service officer. She has two siblings.

She is among a growing group of young working adults here who believe the bag maketh the man.

Copywriter Avian Nishikawara, 24, says: "I want people to see and know that I'm a person who knows what luxury truly means."

He works for Reebonz, a home-grown online retailer whose wares include pre-owned luxury goods.

Mr Nishikawara earns a "mid-range four-figure" salary and has spent more than \$11,000 on five bags so far this year.

The first was a women's bag - a black Celine Luggage (\$4,000) - followed by a Balenciaga Seashore tote (\$2,000), a Jill Sander brown bag (\$1,800), a Want Les Essentials luggage (\$2,200) and a Louis Vuitton folio (\$1,100).

He is among the 10 young men and women SundayLife! spoke to who do not bat an eyelid splurging a month's pay or more on a branded bag. Aged 22 to 25, they have been working for between one and three years and draw a four-figure salary.

Luxury bag retailers here also report seeing more customers from this demographic in the last five years.

Ms Valerie Tan, 34, who owns multi-label luxury bag store NiMe Shop that stocks brands such as Prada and Yves Saint Laurent, says those aged 20 to 25 formed about 20 per cent of her clientele when she set up shop about five years ago. They now make up about 40 per cent of her customers.

In this media-saturated age, the addiction to luxe arm candy is often stoked by fashion blogs and celebrities.

Corporate communications officer Samantha Chng, 25, recalls buying her first luxury handbag in 2011, about six months after she started working.

It was a \$2,200 Chloe Aureore tote that she had been eyeing for some time.

She recalls: "I did my research and I saw blogs showing celebrities such as Jessica Alba and Alexa Chung carrying it."

Since then, she has bought another five coveted bags totalling about \$9,000 in the past three years, or about one bag every six months.

"I'm quite fortunate to be able to afford them," says Ms Chng, who earns a mid-four-figure salary.

She estimates that about 10 per cent of her annual income goes to these luxe totes.

"I used to carry quirky, non-branded bags and they did not last," she says. "But these do. I know I am paying for quality and good design."

A growing number of fashion-conscious young men share her sentiments.

Says Mr Nishikawara: "I'm not paying for status. I'm paying for well-made bags with designs I like."

But many of these young adults say they are careful to spend within their means.

Mr Scott Lim, 22, says he saves up to buy his bags and sometimes spends half his paycheque on them.

He has spent \$3,800 in total on four luxury bags in the past two years - a modest sum compared to some of the others interviewed for this story - and says he puts much thought into each of his purchases.

"I do my research and I save money. I think about it again when my pay comes and then I decide whether to get it or not," says the logistics assistant.

His favourite purchase so far is a backpack by German label Modern Creation Munchen (MCM), for which he paid \$1,000.

He says: "It's bright orange, so my friends can see me from a distance. I like to stand out." His widowed mother is a housewife and he has three older sisters.

Some say their peers and parents have shaped their taste for posh purses.

Mr Nishikawara recalls accompanying his parents to luxury bag boutiques from the time he was five. His Japanese father is an architect and his mother a teacher. He is an only child.

He says: "I was exposed to luxury bags from a young age and because my parents carried the same bags through the decades, I knew these were products of a high quality."

Ms Chng recalls that her father, a general manager, reminded her to spend wisely when she bought her first luxury bag. Her mother is a business support executive and she has two brothers.

But she adds: "Actually, he was the one who got me interested in them."

He bought her a limited-edition Chanel Chain Around bag as a graduation present, which cost about \$5,000.

"After that, I told myself I would want to buy these pretty things with my own money when I started working," she says.

For Ms Wong, friends exert a heavier influence.

She says: "My friends are a big part of my life and their love for luxury bags rubs off on me."

These young customers are known to be savvy shoppers.

Mrs Sherrey Bahuguna, 41, owner of designer bag retailer BagBistro.com, says: "They approach the shop after doing their research and are very well-informed. They usually want to compare the available colours for the specific model that they are eyeing."

While the bulk of sales comes from her online shop, she also runs a physical store in Changi Business Park. Her shop, which stocks bags priced from about \$1,000 to \$6,500 from brands such as Celine and Givenchy, also draws teenagers.

"These teens know their brands too and they usually save up through part-time jobs to buy their bag of choice," she says.

"They don't see it as irresponsible behaviour. To these young people, it's like a little milestone in their lives to buy these bags."

Indeed, retail experts say luxury bags serve as status symbols for young working adults.

Dr **Lynda Wee**, an adjunct associate professor specialising in retail management at Nanyang Technological University, says: "Carrying luxury brands signals one's prestige, status and accomplishment in life. It hints at one's earning power and promotes confidence in the user."

She adds that compared to the prices of houses and cars, bags, watches and fashion are forms of "affordable luxury" for this age group.

Dr Seshan Ramaswami, associate professor of marketing education at the Singapore Management University, says that many of these young adults are living with their parents and thus have more disposable income.

"A large majority of them also do not have the concerns of saving up for a home or a family," he adds.

Retail experts point out that luxury bags have moved from being mere fashion accessories to lifestyle statements.

Says Dr Wee: "It helps them explain to the world who they are, their identity, aspirational values and lifestyle."

Ms Wong, with her \$20,000 worth of bags, agrees. "I am fun, bold and daring, and my bags reflect those aspects of my personality. They are an extension of who I am," she says.

Dr Ramaswami believes that as these young adults grow older and contemplate marriage, buying a home and starting a family, "some of these expensive habits will be tempered".

The realities of life have already caught up with some of these young bag aficionados.

Ms Chng says she has not bought any new bags this year as she is trying to save up for big-ticket items such as a car or a property.

She adds: "Sometimes when I lie in bed at night, I look at my bags and do a mental calculation of how much I have spent on them and I think how ridiculous it is."

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\$11,100 over three years

SAMANTHA CHNG, 25

Corporate communications officer

Her luxury bags:

1. Chloe Aurore – \$2,200
2. Chloe Marcie – \$2,200
3. Givenchy Pandora – \$1,700
4. Givenchy Nightingale – \$2,300
5. Prada Tessuto tote – \$1,700
6. Proenza Schouler clutch – \$1,000
7. Chanel CC tote – \$3,000 (pictured, Christmas gift from her parents)

\$3,800 over two years

SCOTT LIM, 22

Logistics assistant

His luxury bags:

1. MCM backpack (pictured, in orange) – \$1,000
2. Gucci messenger (pictured, middle) – \$1,000
3. Prada messenger (pictured, in black) – \$1,200
4. Gucci tote – \$600

Samantha Chng. -- PHOTO: DESMOND WEE  
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