Contributing clarity by examining brand luxury in the fashion market

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A B S T R A C T

Research relevant to the creation and development of luxury brands is a growing area in the literature. Offering insight, previous research also contributes evidence of a lack of clarity regarding a definition, operationalization, and measurement of brand luxury. This study focuses specifically on this issue within the pre-eminent luxury fashion brands category. Carefully examining brand luxury and the dimensions and relationships underlying the luxury fashion brand, this study develops a conceptual model. Testing across three specific fashion categories the Brand Luxury Model makes important contributions, by clarifying the confusion evident in earlier brand luxury research, supplying evidence about the importance of brand leadership, and helping brand managers and academics by creating a useful framework to depict the luxury fashion brand.

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1. Introduction

Researchers are attracted to the luxury brands market for a number of reasons including the complexity, diverseness, size, status, and the rapidness and constant evolvement of the luxury brands market (Atwal & Williams, 2009; Chadha & Husband, 2006; Christodoulides, Michaelidou, & Li, 2009; Fionda & Moore, 2009). Luxury brands outpace that of other consumer categories and are responsible for the development of a $220 billion global industry (Keller, 2009). Brand luxury, often used synonymously with prestige, holds considerable intangible worth, has an enduring positive brand image and is at the forefront of design, quality, status and fashion (Juggessur & Cohen, 2009; Phau & Prendergast, 2000a). Despite the significant insights the luxury sector provides to contemporary business, brand luxury is under-represented in the academic literature (Berthon, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2009; Fionda & Moore, 2009). The definition, operationalization, and measurement of brand luxury are highly subjective and remain inconclusive in the literature (Godey, Lagier, & Pederzoli, 2009; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).

An increasing number of luxury categories of which luxury fashion brands (couture, ready to wear and accessories) account for the largest proportion of luxury goods sales, as well as the strongest product growth (Fionda & Moore, 2009) suggest this category’s prominence for research. Luxury brands have marketing costs and complexities that exceed those of other fashion categories (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2008; Jackson & Shaw, 2004; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Moore & Birtwistle, 2004), because of the speed of change and short life of fashion merchandise, the result of more competitors, easier entry into the industry, and the considerable scale and breadth of fashion items under a single brand entity (Juggessur & Cohen, 2009; Moore & Birtwistle, 2004; Okonkwo, 2007; Tynan, McKechnie, & Chhuon, 2010; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). Despite the complexities and costs, in the fashion industry, luxury brands are the most profitable and fastest growing brand segment. However, luxury brands are also the most poorly understood and under investigated (Berthon et al., 2009 p 45).

While the literature relevant to branding of consumer goods is growing substantially, researchers do not pay enough attention to the application of consumer brands in the fashion luxury goods sector. Recent studies focus on delineating the form and function of consumer brands, yet very few empirical studies seek to identify and understand the processes that support the creation, and maintenance of the luxury fashion brand (Fionda & Moore, 2009). While some research addresses the dimensions of luxury branding, how those dimensions connect, and to what extent is unclear (Fionda & Moore, 2009).

This lack of clarity is possibly because very few studies actually focus on defining, operationalizing and measuring brand luxury. To address this gap, this study seeks to contribute clarity by examining brand luxury in the fashion market. To accomplish this, the paper first discusses the relevant brand luxury literature, before addressing some of the dimensions and relationships regarding fashion brand luxury, and then developing hypotheses. The study discusses the results next, providing new information on fashion brand luxury, placing parameters around brand luxury, separating brand luxury from a...
number of specific concepts, and contributing empirical evidence for
the beginning of a fashion brand luxury nomological network.

2. Brand luxury

Brand luxury management generates interest in both academic
and business circles, because the brand is integral: the reason why
consumers associate themselves with a luxury company (Okonkwo,
2007). Much of the previous research attempts to uncover tenets of
luxury brands (Atwal & Williams, 2009; Berthon et al., 2009; Fionda
& Moore, 2009; Keller, 2009; Nueno & Quelch, 1998; Truong, McColl,
& Kitchen, 2009; Tyan et al., 2010; Wetlaufer, 2004). Some research
seeks to identify motivations for purchasing luxury goods (Husic
& Cicic, 2009; Kim, Kim, & Sohn, 2009; Park, Rabolt, & Sook, 2008;
Prendergast & Wong, 2003) or fashion (Sung & Jeon, 2009). Other re-
searchers tend to focus on luxury brand development (Christodoulides
et al., 2009; Moore & Birtwistle, 2004; Nobbs, Birtwistle, & Florito, 2008;
Silverstein, Fiske, & Butman, 2005; Truong, Simmons, McColl, & Kitchen,
2008; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004), purchase (Park et al., 2008), parental
influence (Prendergast & Wong, 2003), protection (Clarke & Owens,
2000; Elmore, 2000; Juggessur & Cohen, 2009; McDonald & Roberts,
1990; Phau & Min, 2009), the Internet (Nyeck, 2004; Okonkwo, 2009;
Sung & Jeon, 2009) and brand extensions (Chen & Liu, 2004; Dias &

Paradoxically previous studies improve knowledge and increase
brand luxury confusion. This is because of the variability in approaches,
definitions and correspondingly different names, types and numbers of
dimensions in brand luxury typologies. One of the areas of agreement in
the brand luxury literature is the lack of agreement regarding what is
a luxury brand (Atwal & Williams, 2009; Berthon et al., 2009;
Christodoulides et al., 2009; Fionda & Moore, 2009).

The brand luxury literature (see Table 1 for a summary of a number of
these studies) takes different approaches. For example, Atwal and
Williams (2009) paper views luxury as experiential and varied in levels
of customer participation and connection. Tyan et al. (2010) argue that
luxury is at one end of a continuum with ordinary, so where ordinary
ends and luxury starts is a matter of degree that a consumer judges.
Alternatively, Nueno and Quelch (1998) utilize an economics per-
spective to define luxury brands, whereas Vickers and Renand (2003)
propose a more psychological model, finding the primary
value of luxury versus non-luxury is psychological. The lack of congruity
is not a result of an evolving definition of brand luxury. Table 1 shows
the terms of the actual dimensional measures and the number of
dimensions researchers use are disparate. This disparity is unresolved
and continues in very recent literature. Keller (2009), for example,
argues that luxury brands have ten characteristics. Alternatively,
Atwal and Williams (2009) argue luxury has three dimensions, Fionda
and Moore (2009) believe that brand luxury has nine components and
Kapferer and Bastien (2009) argue that brand luxury has two facets.
These two facets are indulging in one’s pleasures (luxury for one’s self) and
a demonstration of success (luxury for others). The lack of congruity is
an indication that the underlying structure and relationships making
up a fashion luxury brand remain unclear. Further evidence of this
uncertainty occurs in Christodoulides et al. (2009) study. They could
not support the underlying structure of Vigneron and Johnson’s
(1999) Brand Luxury Index (BLI) scale, finding a number of cross
loadings and no evidence of discriminant validity. The results of
Christodoulides et al. (2009) study add to the evidence regarding
the conceptual confusion of brand luxury.

As is evident from Table 1 and the literature cited, approaches to
brand luxury and dimensions of brand luxury vary. Many of these
studies have no empirical support for their claims, and arguments of
what brand luxury might be or contain remain confusing. The need
for clarity is pressing. To develop clarity requires researchers to ex-

2.1. Brand luxury framework development

Even though the evidence regarding brand luxury is inconclusive,
some areas of agreement exist. Areas of agreement in the literature
include the notion that brand luxury is an assessment associated
with intangible elements of the brand. Intangible elements include
a history of success, or the brand’s corporate identity, culture and spirit,
or the brand’s reputation, or how visionary, trendy and up-to-date
the brand is and/or the brand’s careful management (Alleres, 2003;
Atwal & Williams, 2009; Beverland, 2004; Dubois & Paternault,
1995; Fionda & Moore, 2009; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Keller,
2009; Nueno & Quelch, 1998; Wetlaufer, 2004). These are all elements
associated with the brand as a leader, a remarkably resilient brand
(Beverland, 2004) and one which demonstrates success (Kapferer
& Bastien, 2009). While these elements are associated with luxury
brands, the elements are not specific to luxury brands. Beverland
(2004) points out these attributes are part of any successful brand and
the above attributes are therefore more likely to be contributing factors
to assessments of luxury rather than being a specific element of brand
luxury. In all probability, an individual consumer may perceive a
brand to be successful and the extent to which an individual perceives
a brand to be successful or as a leader is likely to affect the degree,
to which the individual perceives the brand as luxurious. As such, the
hypothesis is:

H1. Brand leadership directly affects brand luxury.

Another area of agreement among brand authors associates brand
luxury with originality, creative excellence, uniqueness, creative
imagination, innovative design and creative quality, which links
with the symbols, logos and package design (Alleres, 2003; Dubois
& Paternault, 1995; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Keller, 2009; Vigneron
& Johnson, 1999, 2004; Wetlaufer, 2004). Innovation is associated
with originality (scarcity), uniqueness, creativity, and slight imper-
fecions in handmade goods (Dubois et al., 2001; Nueno & Quelch, 1998).
Some authors (for example, Dubois & Paternault, 1995; Vigneron
& Johnson, 1999) in their discussions link brand luxury with innovative
elements. Innovation (and perceptions of innovation and elements of
innovation) is conceptually quite different to brand luxury. The extent
to which a consumer perceives a brand to be innovative is likely to affect
the degree to which a consumer perceives a brand as luxurious. Also
likely is that brand innovation contributes to and affects perceptions of
brand leadership. The more innovative, creative and unique a
brand, the more likely an individual consumer perceives the brand as
leading the way, a market leader or possibly as luxurious. Accordingly,
the following hypotheses are:

H2. Brand innovation directly affects brand leadership.

H3. Brand innovation directly affects brand luxury.

The branding literature suggests brands that are leaders are likely
to be more valuable than those that follow. In Hoeffler and Keller’s
(2003) article on strong brands, they argue that strong brands are
more likely to be market leaders and are more likely to be more valu-
able in the customer’s minds-eye. Therefore, the hypothesis is:

H4. Brand leadership directly affects brand value.

Another likely influencer of brand value is brand luxury. Richins
(2004) argues the value of a brand stems partly from the perception
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