Doing More With Less: Toward A Parsimonious Approach to Examining Brand Luxury

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Abstract

Research relevant to the creation and development of luxury brands is a growing area in the literature. Previous studies have, however, used both many different dimensions of luxury as well as different approaches to luxury, resulting in a lack of clarity with respect to what defines a luxury brand. This paper focuses specifically on this key issue. A meta-analytical approach is utilised to carefully examine the dimensions and relationships underlying the luxury brand. The findings make important contributions to both clarifying the confusion shown in previous luxury brand research and to potentially reducing the vast number of luxury dimensions and approaches previously used—providing a useful framework for further research in this area.

Keywords: Brand luxury, luxury dimensions, meta-analysis, conceptual framework

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Dimensions of Brand Luxury: The Need for Doing More With Less

Research relevant to the creation and development of luxury brands is a growing area in the literature. Unfortunately, even a cursory examination of previous studies shows a bewildering disarray of definitions, concepts and approaches to defining brand luxury. Theory building and a scientific approach to research require a solid core of knowledge based on parsimonious, rigorous definitions and concepts, as well as replication and extension of previous approaches to scientific inquiry (Zaltman et al, 1982). The brand luxury literature would seem particularly deficient on these basic criteria of scientific analysis, and consequently, it is not surprising that there is a significant lack of clarity with what defines a luxury brand.

What is Brand Luxury?

The fact is that we really have no definitive answer to the question above. While previous studies have improved our knowledge of brand luxury, they also provide evidence of a lack of clarity with respect to how luxury brands are defined, operationalised and measured. Atwal and Williams (2009), Christodoulides et al (2009), Fionda and Moore (2009) and others note, for example, that there is little agreement in the academic literature on what constitutes a luxury brand (c.f. Jackson and Shaw, 2004; Phau and Pedergast 2000; Vigneron and Johnson 1999). Confusion about what constitutes a luxury brand can be seen from the various definitions, such as luxury is in the mind of the consumer and in a position of superiority with respect to its client (Kapferer and Bastien 2009 p 314), or that luxury can be viewed as experiential, varied in levels of customer participation and connection (Atwal and Williams 2009) or that luxury is at one end of a continuum with ordinary, so where ordinary ends and luxury starts is a matter of degree as judged by consumers.

The lack of congruity isn't a result of an evolving definition of luxury. As evident in the literature, the terms of the *actual dimensional measures*, and *the number of dimensions* used are disparate and continue even in very recent literature. **Further,** looking at the recent literature the actual number of dimensions suggested to underlie brand luxury range from two (Kapferer and Bastien 2009) to ten (Keller 2009), with some arguing three (Berthon et al 2009) or four (Atwal and Williams) or nine (Fionda and Moore 2009). This lack of agreement about what is luxury, and how many dimensions underlie luxury is hampering both its operationalisation and measurement, making it difficult for a nomological network to be established so that research on brand luxury can move forward and inform both the academic and industry communities.

Method and Approach

This paper aims to address this issue, through a careful examination of the numerous definitions and issues raised in previous research-- with the aim to both simplify and to add clarity to the luxury brand literature through doing more with less. A meta-analytical approach is utilised to unpack and examine the dimensions and relationships underlying the luxury brand, and to build toward a more parsimonious nomological network.

Taking a step back: What do we know?

We *do* know that there is little empirical work in the luxury brand literature, and even in the rare empirical example (e.g.Vigneron and Johnson, 1999; 2005) the evidence has not been supported by later research (Christodoulides, Michaelidou, and Li., 2009)**.** In a widely cited (and since reprised) paper Stephen Brown examined the art versus science debate with respect to marketing practice (Brown, 2001). The authors of this paper suggest that the luxury brand literature to date does not reflect a scientific approach, and hence is inconclusive.

*Cross-Study Agreement***:**

Whilst there is inconclusive evidence about what makes up the DNA of brand luxury, there seems to be some agreement (though generally not empirically derived) that brand luxury is an assessment associated with *intangible* elements of the brand, such as a history of success, its corporate identity, culture and spirit, its reputation, how visionary, trendy and up-to-date the brand is perceived and its careful management (Alleres 2003; Atwal and Williams 2009; Beverland 2004; Dubois and Patnault 1995; Fionda and Moore 2009; Kapferer and Bastien 2009; Keller 2009; Nueno and Quelch 1998; Wetlaufer 2004) – elements associated with the brand as a leader,--a brand that is remarkably resilient (Beverland 2004) and a demonstration of success (Kapferer and Bastien 2009). There also seems to be agreement amongst many of the brand luxury authors that associated with brand luxury is originality, creative excellence, uniqueness, creative imagination, innovative design, creative quality associated with the symbols, logos and package design (Alleres 2003; Dubois and Paternault 1995; Keller 2009; Vigernon and Johnson 1999; Wetlaufer 2004).

Advancing our knowledge of the luxury brand more scientifically, however, requires a step back, and a careful unpacking of both the known and unknown, in order that we then build on a solid background. The importance of the luxury brand both from a conceptual marketing and an economic standpoint, would seem to demand this.

Defining luxury: What is it?

Past literature has taken both different approaches, and has utilised different dimensions to delineate the dimensionality of the luxury brand. In attempting to arrive at a more parsimonious approach, our meta-examination of the literature reveals issues that must be clarified and empirically tested if our knowledge is to proceed scientifically and parsimoniously. These issues may be characterised as confusion between (1) new versus old luxury, (2) luxury for oneself, versus luxury for others (3) product/brand/service considerations, and (4) confounding antecedents and consequences of luxury.

New versus Old

The literature has addressed issues involving the differing and evolving perceptions of constitutes "luxury", though definitions and concepts in these studies are often not carefully delineated. In particular, much of the confusion in the luxury brand literature is concerned with "new" versus "old" luxury. Kapferer and Bastien (2009, pg. 313) discuss that "originally luxury was the viable result –deliberately conspicuous and ostentatious-- of hereditary social stratification." These authors go on to note that today, however, this social stratification is done in a demographic manner—with hierarchical codes required to delineate the strata. The literature has also addressed considerable attention to various concepts associated with the so-called "new luxury": trading up (Silverstein and Fiske, 2003; Silverstein, Fiske, and Butman (2005), mass luxury (Danziger, 2005; Okongwo, 2007; Thomas, 2007), masstige brands (Truong, McCall and Kitchen. 2009), and so on. As discussed by Kapferer and Bastien (2009.pg. 314) however, these conceptualizations are quite

different from the traditional requirements of "luxury". Trading up, for example, is very different from luxury, for it does not the latter's sociological dimension. Its function is not so much social stratification as personal indulgence (Kapferer and Bastien , 2009.pg. 314).

In looking at the literature, it appears that the new luxury versus old luxury categorization is again very reflective of confusion of terms and concepts which are not carefully defined, operationalised and especially, which have not received much empirical testing. It also seems clear the confusion in the literature is related to the issue of luxury concepts and terminology as this can be applied to brands, products, or services, and the functional, symbolic or experiential aspects of these.

Product/Brand/Service: functional/symbolic/experiential

A better understanding of luxury also means that we must unpack, and specifically delineate what aspects of luxury are associated with the product or service itself, and/or the brand. Again, focussing the analysis around "new" versus "old" luxury is useful. More recent literature has suggested that the product is less prominent (cf. Atwall and Williams, 2009; Cailleux, Mignot, and Kapferer 2009)--reflecting a "new luxury" viewpoint, whereas discussions of more traditional or old luxury have highlighted the prominence of the product itself (e.g. Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2008)Traditional or old luxury goods reflect a handcrafted, artisan-made product quality that features prominently in consumers' perceptions of luxury. The discussion in the literature about counterfeit "fakes" reflects that today's technology makes possible products that are not handcrafted but are not immediately distinguishable from the handcrafted originals. (e.g. Gistri et.al, 2009;Juggessur and Cohen, 2009; Phau, I., & Min, T. ,2009) aimed at the luxury customer for whom luxury is a logo (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009). Recent literature has also explored the services aspect, with Atwal and Williams (2009) and others advancing the proposition that with luxury services , in particular, the experience --whether *Entertainment, Education, Escapist or Aesthetic*--is everything. Our examination shows that much of the definitional confusion in the literature that exists around the notion of luxury concerns functionality, symbolic, and experiential issues. These issues are directly related to "old" versus "new luxury discussion above as well.   Much of the confusion in the literature could potentially be ameliorated by a more careful delineation of context and how the product itself is being perceived and used.

Luxury for Others versus Luxury for Oneself

Luxury for others versus luxury for oneself seems a point of confusion that requires further research and clarification. As noted by Kapferer and Bastien (2009) luxury can be thought of as a badge-- as a measure of social stratification. Undoubtedly symbols are important to the consumer market—witness the proliferation of ostentatious logos on leather bags and accessories today), but as noted by Kapferer and Bastien (2009, pg. 315), "no luxury brand can hope to survive if it relies purely on clients who are only interested in reputed signs and recognition, the symbol rather than the substance; these people, those who are only interested in symbols—will drift from one symbol to another, from one logo to another. A more careful profiling of users in these categories appears warranted.

Antecedents/Consequences

Our examination of the luxury brand literature indicates that a *major* source of confusion in our knowledge of the luxury brand has to do with the confounding of the definition of luxury with its antecedents and its consequences. How we recognise brand luxury may well be an antecedent as it would seem from the branding literature that there are a number of elements shared with *all* brands, regardless of whether they are perceived as luxurious or otherwise. Elements such as unique (Vigneron and Johnson 2004) or a distinct identity with a global reputation (Okonkwo 2007), the design of the brand, its name, logo, packaging and other tangible elements that uniquely identify the brand (Alleres 2003; Fionda and Moore 2009; Keller 2009; Prendergast and Wong 2003), personal creativity, expressiveness, style (Alleres 2003; Beverland 2006; Dumoulin 2007; Okonkwo 2007; Silverstein and Fiske 2003; Wetlaufer 2004), innovativeness (Okonkwo 2007) and quality (Beverland 2006; Dubois et al 2005; Dubois and Paternault 1995; Fionda and Moore 2009; Keller 2009; Okonkwo 2007; Prendergast and Wong 2003; Silverstein and Fiske 2003; Vigneron and Johnson (2004) are all examples of this. Gutsatz (1996) refers to these aforementioned brand elements as being the first level of representation – the material – where consumers perceive the brand, and that the second level is influenced by society, social values, culture and social norms and how society constructs is meaning and perceives the brand in a social environment.

Much of the literature into brand luxury has focused more on its consequences, suggesting that luxury brands help the consumer to extend their self-image, update, maintain or enhance their self-esteem (Vigneron and Johnson 1999; 2004) as through the consumption of luxury the luxury consumer may ostentatiously display wealth (Dubois and Duquesne 1993) or be associated with a desired group (Vickers and Renand 2003), and the consumption of luxury is likely to provide functional, symbolic and experiential value (Berthon, et al 2009; Godey et al 2009; Tynan et al 2009; Vickers and Renand 2003), or perceived conspicuous value, unique value, social value or hedonic value (Kim et al 2009), sensory pleasure or hedonism in the consumption process (Atwal and Williams 2009; Godey et al 2009; Tynan et al 2009; Vickers and Renand 2003; Vigneron and Johnson 2004). The take away message here is that previous studies have confused these antecedents and consequences of luxury—with further research required to address the lack of clarity in terms of the definitional elements of luxury.

Conclusion and Directions for Further Research

Resolving the confusion in the luxury brand literature and moving toward a more parsimonious and scientific approach is a clear requirement for the marketing profession if we are to better understand the luxury brand. The findings from our analysis make important contributions to clarifying the confusion shown in previous luxury brand research, and help create a useful framework for further research in this area. It would appear from our meta-examination that based on commonalities of usage and approach, there *is* scope to reduce the vast number of dimensions of brand luxury that have appeared in past literature. Further, parsimony of explanation and theory building would seem to both require this.

Our findings suggest that it would be beneficial for future research to address the following elements to reduce the current definitional confusion in the literature in terms of what defines the luxury brand:

1. Firstly, further research should address the previous lack of definitional clarity, and the concomitant confusion in the literature when terms are not well defined and operationalised, and are inter-changeably used. We suggest a fruitful area for further

luxury brand research involves a more scientific approach to understanding luxury which features better operationalisation, measurement and empirical testing of definitional terms in order for these terms to be better delineated, and brand luxury better understood.

2. Secondly, researchers engaged in further research on the luxury brand should be cognizant of what we have shown as the lack of definitional clarity caused by previous researchers' use of both antecedents and consequences of luxury in defining luxury. Future research needs to work toward better delineation of the definition of luxury as separately distinct from its antecedents and consequences.

3. Thirdly, future research might utilise our work to address the reduced and targeted set of luxury brand dimensions and issues shown in each cell of Table 1. Our examination of the literature indicates that in particular, an unpacking and teasing out of the similarities and differences associated with the functional, symbolic and experiential elements of the brand, product and service elements in terms of the how the luxury item is being used, would be useful to address existing knowledge gaps.

Table 1
Brand

	Product	Service
Luxury	Old New	New
Luxury	For Others For Self	For Self

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