

PERCEPTIONS OF ACCESSIBLE, INTERMEDIATE, AND INACCESSIBLE LUXURY ACROSS SELECT HANDBAG BRANDS

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ABSTRACT

Because of rapid changes in the luxury market, this study sought to discover if perceptions of luxury have changed. Emerging research suggests that the luxury market is fragmenting into levels based upon perceptions of luxury dimensions. This study employed a modified version of the Brand Luxury Index to proxy luxury level perceptions across a select group of luxury handbags. A sample of 369 luxury handbag owners revealed that consumers seem to recognize three levels of luxury for handbags: accessible, intermediate, and inaccessible. These perceptions may help to explain the rise in popularity of masstige brands among female luxury consumers.

Keywords: Luxury, consumer perceptions, accessible luxury, intermediate luxury, inaccessible luxury, handbags.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional high-end luxury handbag brands are facing new challenges because the luxury market has changed. New, younger luxury consumers, consumers from the emerging markets of Brazil, Russia, India, and China have forever altered the luxury market landscape. Traditional luxury handbag brands are also discovering that newer, luxury consumers are different from the “traditional” luxury consumer. Tynan, McKechnie, and Chhuon (2010) state that the new luxury customer is more value driven and that traditional heritage (luxury) brands cannot rely solely on their reputation or status to remain relevant. Riot, Chamaret, and Rigaud (2013) refers to this dynamic as the de-commoditization of luxury. Because of these changes, established luxury brands have deemed it necessary to adopt marketing strategies and practices that allow them to more effectively capture the new luxury customer.

As established luxury handbag brands reach out to these new luxury consumers, they now face stiff competition from masstige brands. Masstige branding is a pricing strategy that combines reasonable price premiums with a high perceived prestige; it is designed to attract young and middle-class consumers (Truong, McColl, & Kitchen, 2009). One may surmise that masstige brands have introduced the concept of “affordable” or assessable options to the luxury product consumer. Traditional luxury manufacturers have struggled to stem market share loss from these new “affordable” luxury products.

Further, luxury brands have become widely available and more accessible to diverse consumer markets, thus causing a shift in how consumers define luxury (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Wiedmann, Hennigs, & Siebels, 2007). This shift may mean that consumers are beginning to perceive luxury brands and the consumption of their products as no longer exclusive to the “landed gentry” or only to members of the upper echelon of society but also accessible and available for the masses. Several studies described this phenomena as “the democratization of luxury” or luxury for the masses (Dubois and Laurent, 1995; Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Twitchell, 2002).

New luxury consumers and masstige brand competition have put pressure on established luxury brands to rethink product placement and possibly, generate price points that not only cater to the traditional inaccessible but also cater more to the intermediate and attainable needs of the luxury market. These new “realities” for luxury brands may have influenced consumer perceptions. DeBarnier, Falcy, and Valette-Florence (2012), describe this phenomenon as a “continuum of luxury.” If this continuum is at play in the luxury arena, this could mean that luxury products along the continuum could be perceived as substitutes by luxury consumers.

Few studies have examined consumers’ perceptions of luxury. Vickers and Renand (2003) and DeBarnier *et al.* (2012) examined the three dimensions of accessible, intermediate, and inaccessible luxury. However, their study examined this continuum across non-competing product categories. They used perfume, watches, jewelry, and cars as stimuli in their study. No studies were identified that investigated consumer perceptions of different levels of luxury within one product category. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine if consumers perceive different levels of luxury for accessible, intermediate, and inaccessible products. A modified version of Vigneron and Johnson’s (2004) Brand Luxury Index (BLI) scale will be used to measure luxury perceptions for a range of five, well-known luxury handbag brands.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Luxury Brands

According to Nueno and Quelch (1998), a luxury brand is a premium priced brand purchased by consumers for their psychological values (hedonic and symbolic), and not primarily for their functional or economic value. Vigneron and Johnson (2004) state that luxury products satisfy both psychological and functional needs of consumers and are associated with the perceived product characteristics of quality, aesthetics, scarcity, and elitism. The authors of this study have adopted the widely cited definition provided by Nueno and Quelch (1998).

Many studies have measured consumers’ perception of luxury (Kapferer, 1998; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999; Dubois, Laurent, & Czellar, 2001). Some studies have shown that differences in perception exist between luxury and non-luxury goods (Dubois and Laurent, 1995; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Another avenue of research has examined differing levels of luxury, which will be discussed next.

Levels of Luxury

In the literature, the concept of levels of luxury has emerged. These studies suggest that a stratification on luxury brands could be determined by examining the amount (level) of perceived luxury indicated within a given dimension of luxury. For example, Vigneron and Johnson (2004) determined five dimensions of perceived luxury. If one were to compare luxury brands based upon

the level of perceived luxury across the five dimensions, one could categorize the luxury brand according to its perceived level of luxury.

Alleres (1990) examined luxury goods within the context of socio-economic class and found a hierarchy existed that consisted of three levels, based on the degree of consumer accessibility. Alleres' three levels included inaccessible luxury, related to an elite social class; intermediate luxury, related to the professional social class; and accessible luxury, related to the middle class. Inaccessible luxury products were described as extremely high priced and products which would offer the owner "exceptional" social prestige. Accessible products, on the other hand, were those that were easily attainable by consumers who are trying to achieve a higher social status through their purchase behavior.

Vickers and Renand (2003) conducted an exploratory study that examined three conceptual levels of luxury products. They proposed a consumer needs model for luxury goods based on the dimensions of Functionalism, Experientialism, and Symbolic Interactionism using the luxury product categories of China and cars. They suggest that consumers do identify luxury products by these three dimensions, at least for the product categories in their study.

In a 2012 study, DeBarnier *et al.* investigated whether consumers perceive different levels of luxury for five different product categories. The five categories included perfume, pens, watches, cars, and jewelry. Different luxury brands within the categories were classified as accessible, intermediate, or inaccessible luxury and consumer perceptions of these brands were measured. This study concluded that a continuum of luxury did exist that ranged from accessible to inaccessible luxury, but noted that further research regarding consumer perceptions of luxury is needed. They also conjectured whether luxury consumption was the same for all product sectors.

Dimensions of Luxury

The components or attributes that describe or define luxury perceptions are much debated within the literature. Multiple models and explanations have been offered to explain this elusive construct. Most explanations employ value driven components derived from hedonic or utilitarian consumer needs. Raluca, Dorel, Florin, and Drule (2011) present a comprehensive analysis on luxury perceptions models and luxury dimensions addressed within the literature. Their study identified nine luxury dimensions that have been used to denote luxury dimensions: quality, price, rarity/uniqueness, self-identity, hedonism, materialism, ostentation, prestige status, and history/heritage. They further include a detailed review of three of the most cited luxury perception models (Dubois *et al.*, 2001; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004, and Wiedmann *et al.*, 2007). Raluca *et al.*'s (2011) conceptualization of luxury dimensions, heavily influenced by Wiedmann *et al.* (2007), include four domains: financial value, functional value, individual value, and social value.

Others have expanded the conceptualization of dimensions of luxury by describing them as a brand personality (Sung, Choi, Ahn, & Song, 2015). They suggest that all luxury brands possess six personality traits: excitement, sincerity, sophistication, professionalism, attractiveness, and materialism. Many of these personality traits are similar to the luxury dimensions identified by Raluca *et al.* (2011).

Brand Luxury Index Scale

In 2004, Vigneron and Johnson developed and tested the 20-item Brand Luxury Index (BLI) scale, a tool that could be used to provide quantifiable data on consumer brand luxury perceptions. The BLI scale could be used as an instrument that would address concerns about luxury brands mentioned in several studies (Cailleux, Mignot, & Kapferer, 2009; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2007; Keller, 2009). The five dimensions of the Vigneron and Johnson (2004) BLI scale are described below.

a) *Perceived conspicuousness.* The public consumption of luxury brands can be important to individuals looking for social prestige and status (Bearden and Etzel, 1982). For many consumers, a higher price denotes higher quality; therefore, a more expensive good can be viewed as a luxury good. Vigneron and Johnson (1999) noted that the use of a “prestige-pricing strategy” is appropriate when appealing to status-seeking consumers.

b) *Perceived uniqueness.* Luxury brands have often been viewed as products that are not accessible by the mainstream consumer due to their higher price. They are considered to be unique because not everyone can afford them. They are considered to be exclusive since they may be available only at select retail outlets.

c) *Perceived extended-self.* Consumers may use luxury products to construct their own identity. Belk (1988) noted that many consumers regard their possessions as being part of their identity. Consumers may also use expensive and exclusive luxury products to distinguish themselves from others. Vigneron and Johnson (2004) stated that consumers’ need to separate themselves from a non-affluent lifestyle affected their luxury-seeking behavior.

d) *Perceived hedonism.* According to Bearden and Etzel (1982), hedonism refers to sensory gratification and sensory pleasure derived from the consumption of a luxury brand. Hedonism captures the emotional and pleasurable benefits of a product, rather than its functional properties.

e) *Perceived quality/perfection.* As previously mentioned, consumers often associate a higher price with higher quality, and therefore often assume that a luxury, higher-priced brand has superior characteristics over a non-luxury brand. These characteristics may include craftsmanship, design, and durability.

Vigneron and Johnson (2004) stated the BLI could be used to gauge consumer perceptions of luxury and to also develop effective product promotional and positioning strategies. Such a tool could also prove useful in the comparison and contrasts of competing brands. Robinson and Doss (2011) used a modified version of the BLI scale to examine young female consumers’ luxury perceptions of a luxury brand and counterfeits of that brand. Results show that all rated perceptions of the luxury brand were significantly higher than those for the counterfeits of that brand. Results also showed that consumers may perceive a “lack of luxury” for a luxury brand, especially when the brand is widely available. The authors noted that additional study with different luxury brands was warranted.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the BLI’s five conceptualized dimensions of luxury: perceived conspicuousness, perceived uniqueness, perceived extended-self, perceived hedonism, and perceived quality/perfection. These dimensions have been supported in the literature (Vigneron, 2006; DeBarnier *et al.*, 2012) and are adequate measures for studying consumer luxury perceptions. Further, Vigneron (2006) stated that the BLI scale was an excellent instrument for the comparison

of competitive advantages. Doss and Robinson (2013) developed a modified version of the BLI scale that updated several of the items on the 20-item instrument to provide more recognizable terminology and more defined polar opposite comparisons than the original scale.

To test whether luxury handbag consumers do perceive different levels of luxury for accessible, intermediate, and inaccessible luxury products, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: There will be significant luxury perception differences in the ratings of Hermès, Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Gucci, and Coach handbag brands based on the perceptions of:

- H1a perceived conspicuousness
- H1b perceived uniqueness
- H1c perceived extended-self
- H1d perceived hedonism
- H1e perceived quality/perfection

H2: There will be significant luxury perception differences between owners and non-owners in the ratings of Hermès, Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Gucci, and Coach handbag brands based on the perceptions of:

- H2a perceived conspicuousness
- H2b perceived uniqueness
- H2c perceived extended-self
- H2d perceived hedonism
- H2e perceived quality/perfection

Since no definitive listing was discovered that named or ranked luxury handbags according to the same criteria, the researchers chose handbag brands based upon numerous reviews in the trade press that reported consumer perceptions of luxury handbag brands. The luxury brands chosen for the study include Hermès, Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Gucci, and Coach. These brands represent a spectrum of price points within the luxury handbag market. To reduce response fatigue due to the length of the instrument, only five luxury brands were chosen for this study. According to the BrandZ Top 100 Global Report (2017), Louis Vuitton, Hermes, Gucci, and Chanel were the top four luxury brands by earnings and revenue potential during 2014-2015. Coach was listed as the tenth-ranked luxury brand. The researchers chose the Hermès and Chanel brands to represent inaccessible luxury, the Louis Vuitton brand to represent the bridge between inaccessible and intermediate luxury, the Gucci brand to represent the bridge between intermediate and accessible

luxury, and the Coach brand to represent accessible luxury. Further, the Coach brand was chosen to represent a clearly masstige luxury brand offering, as described by Truong *et al.* (2009).

The population for this study included US female consumers sampled from a national database. For inclusion in the study respondents had to: be ages 18 or over, owned at least one of the luxury handbags used in the study, and have brand awareness of all of the luxury handbags used in this study. Since the researchers wanted to tap into the perceptions of actual owners of the handbags used in the study, QUALTRICS a professional marketing research firm was employed for sample selection and data collection. A snowballing technique was used to generate a total of 369 participants. Data was analyzed using repeated measures ANOVAs, and if significant differences were found, matched-pair t-tests.

Using Doss and Robinson's (2013) modified BLI scale, subjects completed a separate version of the scale for each of the five luxury brands. To lessen the effects of response bias, all items on the modified BLI scale and each brand were randomly assigned during the completion of the instrument. Responses were recorded using an online protocol. Respondents' perception ratings were summed to determine an overall composite score for each of the five dimensions for each luxury brand. Additionally, actual luxury brand owner mean ratings for each luxury brand were compared to the overall composite ratings for that brand to assess congruency in luxury perceptions between owners and non-owners of that brand.

FINDINGS

Sample characteristics for the participants showed the following: 4.6% were between the ages of 18-21; 33.9% were between the ages of 22-35; 39% were between the ages of 36-55, and 22.5% were aged 56 or over. The majority of the sample reported owning several of the luxury handbag brands listed on the instrument. Specifically, 256 participants owned Coach, 189 owned Gucci, 183 owned Chanel, 178 owned Louis Vuitton, 163 owned Hermès, and 186 owned other luxury brands not examined in the study. Cronbach's alphas were examined to ascertain the internal reliability of the modified BLI scale used in the study. For each of the five brands, alphas were above 0.930 which supports excellent internal reliability.

General Linear Model (GLM) repeated measures ANOVAs and matched pair t-tests were used to test Hypotheses H1a-H1e. All five hypotheses were supported. Significant differences were found for all five luxury brands in the ratings of consumers' perceptions of H1a, Perceived conspicuousness: $F(1,368) = 13132.537, p < 0.001$; H1b Perceived Uniqueness: $F(1,368) = 7146.437, p < 0.001$; H1c Perceived Extended-Self: $F(1,368) = 6798.189, p < 0.001$; H1d Perceived Hedonism: $F(1,368) = 6975.951, p < 0.001$; and H1e Perceived Quality/Perfection: $F(1,368) = 9131.282, p < 0.001$. Please see Table 1 for these results.

Table 1: Results for One Way ANOVAS for H1

Dimension	Test Statistic	P value
H1a: Perceived Conspicuousness	F (1,368) = 13132.537	p < 0.001
H1b: Perceived Uniqueness	F (1,368) = 7146.437	p < 0.001
H1c: Perceived Extended Self	F (1,368) = 6798.189	p < 0.001
H1d: Perceived Hedonism	F (1,368) = 6975.951	p < 0.001
H1e: Perceived Quality/Perfection	F (1,368) = 9131.282	p < 0.001

In general, matched-pair t-tests suggest that a continuum of luxury (high to low) is at play among the five brands examined in this study. No single luxury brand was perceived as more luxurious than the other across all five dimensions. Four of the five luxury brands were perceived to offer distinct competitive advantages on specific dimensions in regards to consumer luxury perceptions. These findings support those of DeBarnier *et al.* (2012) that suggested a luxury perception continuum exists among inaccessible, intermediate, and accessible luxury brands. Please see Table 2 for descriptive statistics.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for H1

	Chanel	369	5.3360	1.08263
	Louis Vuitton	369	5.4851	1.05654
	Gucci	369	5.3123	1.08136
	Coach	369	4.7175	1.18340
H1b: Perceived Uniqueness	Hermès	369	5.2500	1.26607
	Chanel	369	5.1186	1.32659
	Louis Vuitton	369	5.0732	1.41915
	Gucci	369	4.9187	1.32768
	Coach	369	4.3631	1.48860
H1c: Perceived Extended-Self	Hermès	369	5.1944	1.33894
	Chanel	369	5.3313	1.32921
	Louis Vuitton	369	5.3625	1.43089
	Gucci	369	5.2588	1.38144
	Coach	369	5.0915	1.39253
H1d: Perceived Hedonism	Hermès	369	5.2511	1.34332
	Chanel	369	5.4155	1.37333
	Louis Vuitton	369	5.3451	1.45779
	Gucci	369	5.2683	1.39118
	Coach	369	5.1075	1.39082
H1e: Perceived Quality/Perfection	Hermès	369	5.3859	1.21029
	Chanel	369	5.3718	1.20030
	Louis Vuitton	369	5.3453	1.29209
	Gucci	369	5.2461	1.23356
	Coach	369	4.9198	1.21426

Results indicate that every luxury brand was perceived as being more luxurious than the Coach brand on all dimensions. However, there was one caveat. There was no significant luxury perception difference between the Hermès and Coach brands on Perceived Extended-Self.

Overall, the Louis Vuitton brand was perceived as being significantly more conspicuous than all other brands. The Hermès brand was perceived as being significantly different than the Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Gucci, and Coach brands on the Perceived Uniqueness dimension. Both the Louis Vuitton and Chanel brands were perceived as being significantly different from the Hermès, Gucci and Coach brands on the Perceived Extended-Self dimension. The Chanel brand was perceived as being significantly different from Hermès, Gucci, and Coach on Perceived Hedonism, but not significantly different from Louis Vuitton. The Hermès, Louis Vuitton, and Chanel brands were perceived as being significantly different from the Gucci and Coach brands on Perceived Quality/Perfection. These results may help to explain how certain luxury consumers form perceptions based upon trade-offs of dimensions (Vigneron, 2004) that may lead to the ultimate purchase of a specific luxury brand. Please see Figure 1 for detail.

One-way ANOVAS were used to test Hypotheses H2a-H2e. Significant differences were found ($p \leq 0.05$) between owner and non-owner perceptions of H2a, Perceived Conspicuousness. Both owners of the Louis Vuitton and Coach brands displayed significantly different perceived conspicuousness perceptions for that brand than non-owners. There was no difference in perceptions between owners and non-owners for the other three luxury brands in regards to conspicuousness. Owner's perception ratings for conspicuousness across each luxury brand was lower than non-owners. Hence, owners of each luxury brand perceived its luxury brand as being less conspicuous than the other luxury brands examined in the study. These findings also suggest that the Hermès, Gucci, and Chanel brands have established and convey a universally understood and agreed upon symbolic representation of conspicuousness among owners and non-owners of the luxury brands examined in this study.

For H2b, Perceived Uniqueness, significant perception differences were observed ($p \leq 0.05$) between owners and non-owners of four of the five luxury brands. There was no significant perception difference between owners and non-owners of the Coach brand. Overall, luxury brand owners of a specific brand perceived the brand to be significantly more unique than non-owners of that specific luxury brand.

For H2c Perceived Extended-Self, H2d Perceived Hedonism, and H2e Perceived Quality/Perfection, significant perception differences were observed ($p \leq 0.05$) between owners and non-owners of a specific luxury brand. Owners of a specific luxury brand displayed significantly higher perceived mean ratings than non-owners of that specific luxury brand. Additionally, the perceptions of owners of the Coach brand provide evidence of the existence of an accessible /masstige level of luxury for consumers. Overall, the perceptions of owners of the Coach brand showed a high level of luxury for this reasonably priced brand. Please see Table 3 for descriptive statistics.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine if consumers perceive different levels of luxury in luxury handbag brands. This study used Robinson and Doss's (2013) modified version of the original BLI scale to assess luxury perceptions for five luxury handbag brands. The strength of luxury perceptions were gauged using the dimensions of Perceived Conspicuousness, Perceived Uniqueness, Perceived Extended-Self, Perceived Hedonism, and Perceived Quality/Perfection. Findings suggest that consumers do perceive different levels of luxury from the five luxury brands examined in the study. Every luxury handbag examined in the study seems to have consumer perceptions that differentiate the brands from each other. Hence, the modified BLI scale used in this study was a successful tool since the luxury brands in this study filtered into three levels of luxury.

Three of the luxury brands, Hermès, Louis Vuitton, and Chanel, were often perceived as more distinctive than the Gucci and Coach brands. The Gucci brand was additionally perceived as being distinctive from the Coach brand. If the average price for a luxury handbag is entered into this equation of luxury perceptions, one is presented with a stratification of luxury perceptions that support the notion of inaccessible, intermediate, and accessible luxury brands in the handbag market that was purported by DeBarnier *et al.* (2012). However, the luxury brands placement into the three levels as proposed by the study's authors' is not so evident in the inaccessible category. They proposed that the Hermès and Chanel brands would be distinguished from the other luxury brands. Neither the Hermès nor Chanel brands offer handbags at retail price points that would be considered accessible. In fact, the Hermès Birkin handbag, the brand's most popular handbag, is extremely hard to get due to limited supply and an exceedingly long reserve waiting list, and has a retail price that ranges from \$15,000-\$200,000. Although the three luxury brands with the highest luxury perceptions, Hermès, Chanel, and Louis Vuitton, offer handbags that have an average retail over \$3000, the Louis Vuitton brand's average retail price is considerably lower than Hermès or Chanel. Gucci's average retail price for a handbag is approximately \$1500; while the Coach brand's average retail for a handbag is approximately \$400.

Brand	Hypotheses	Ownership	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Hermés	H2a: Perceived Conspicuousness	Owners	163	5.2500	1.11769
		Non-owners	206	5.3726	1.12666
	H2b: Perceived Uniqueness	Owners	163	5.5276	1.14531
		Non-owners	206	5.0303	1.31571
	H2c: Perceived Extended Self	Owners	163	5.5322	1.22825
		Non-owners	206	4.9272	1.36513
	H2d: Perceived Hedonism	Owners	163	5.5358	1.24966
		Non-owners	206	5.0259	1.37472
	H2e: Perceived Quality/Perfection	Owners	163	5.6613	1.13819
		Non-owners	206	5.1680	1.22381
Chanel	H2a: Perceived Conspicuousness	Owners	183	5.2896	1.10884
		Non-owners	186	5.3817	1.05721
	H2b: Perceived Uniqueness	Owners	183	5.4112	1.20694
		Non-owners	186	4.8306	1.37824
	H2c: Perceived Extended Self	Owners	183	5.6393	1.20341
		Non-owners	186	5.0282	1.37971
	H2d: Perceived Hedonism	Owners	183	5.7268	1.27075
		Non-owners	186	5.1093	1.40462
	H2e: Perceived Quality/Perfection	Owners	183	5.6262	1.15909
		Non-owners	186	5.1215	1.19044
Louis Vuitton	H2a: Perceived Conspicuousness	Owners	178	5.3778	1.09578
		Non-owners	191	5.5851	1.01127
	H2b: Perceived Uniqueness	Owners	178	5.3020	1.33501
		Non-owners	191	4.8599	1.46484
	H2c: Perceived Extended Self	Owners	178	5.6419	1.29368

		Non-owners	191	5.1021	1.50505
	H2d: Perceived Hedonism	Owners	178	5.5824	1.38271
		Non-owners	191	5.1239	1.49436
	H2e: Perceived Quality/Perfection	Owners	178	5.5393	1.23303
		Non-owners	191	5.1644	1.32251
Gucci	H2a: Perceived Conspicuousness	Owners	189	5.2698	1.12009
		Non-owners	180	5.3569	1.04040
	H2b: Perceived Uniqueness	Owners	189	5.1587	1.24625
		Non-owners	180	4.6667	1.36675
	H2c: Perceived Extended Self	Owners	189	5.5344	1.25801
		Non-owners	180	4.9694	1.44804
	H2d: Perceived Hedonism	Owners	189	5.5432	1.28826
		Non-owners	180	4.9796	1.42952
	H2e: Perceived Quality/Perfection	Owners	189	5.4582	1.17537
		Non-owners	180	5.0233	1.25698
Coach	H2a: Perceived Conspicuousness	Owners	256	4.5596	1.15687
		Non-owners	113	5.0752	1.16969
	H2b: Perceived Uniqueness	Owners	256	4.3711	1.46294
		Non-owners	113	4.3451	1.55168
	H2c: Perceived Extended Self	Owners	256	5.2480	1.32269
		Non-owners	113	4.7367	1.48498
	H2d: Perceived Hedonism	Owners	256	5.2513	1.32143
		Non-owners	113	4.7817	1.49189
	H2e: Perceived Quality/Perfection	Owners	256	5.0063	1.17194
		Non-owners	113	4.7239	1.28905

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for H2

One may also conclude from these luxury perceptions that the Coach brand does fit into the masstige brand category that describes a product that is reasonably priced but enjoys high perceived prestige (Truong *et al.*, 2009). Participants in this study did not perceive a difference in luxury between the prestigious Hermès brand and the Coach brand on the dimension of perceived extended-self. Of note of interest, one of Louis Vuitton's top-selling handbags, the Speedy, retails between \$600 - \$1000, which clearly makes the Speedy a masstige priced product from the venerable brand. Yet, this masstige offering did not seem to negatively impact consumers' luxury perceptions of that brand.

However, there is a significant difference in luxury perceptions in play for owners and non-owners of specific luxury hand bag brands. Owners of all five luxury brands significantly disagreed with non-owners on perceptions of Perceived Extended-Self, Perceived Hedonism, and Perceived Quality/Perfection (see table 3). There seems to be a "halo effect" for owners of specific luxury brands that may enhance the perceptions of luxury from the ownership of that luxury brand. This "halo effect" observed from owners of the luxury brands produced perceptions ratings that made the Hermès, Louis Vuitton, Chanel, and Gucci brands virtually indistinguishable across perceptions of Perceived Conspicuousness, Perceived Extended-Self, Perceived Hedonism, and Perceived Quality/Perfection. These findings suggests that owners of a specific luxury brand perceive that brand to be just as luxurious or prestigious as any other luxury brand.

Owners of the Coach brand did differ with non-owners on the dimensions of Perceived Conspicuousness and Perceived Uniqueness; however, owners' luxury perceptions were lower on all the dimensions than owners of the four other luxury brands. This may suggests that the Coach brand, or masstige brands in general, may be perceived as an "entry-level" option in the luxury handbag market and that both owners and non-owners universally agree on the Coach brand's overall luxury status in this market.

This study reveals three realities for luxury brand managers. First you must sample the entire market in order to assess "global" perceptions of the brand. Paying too much attention to the owners, or customers, may result in inflated assessments of product. Though it is imperative to always satisfy one's target market, if one wishes to grow market share or extend product offerings into new spaces, one must gain a global view or assessment of product offerings. These results reveal that although the target market is enamored with their products, the overall market, or non-owners, are not as enamored. Marketing appeals and a balanced marketing mix that informs all current and potential customers must be employed to grow market share, optimize consumer perceptions and hopefully, the luxury brand's viability in the market.

Second, masstige brands will continue to erode market share in the luxury handbag market due to their perception as affordable luxury offerings and the perceived value they seem to offer in this sector. Louis Vuitton has been successful with offering a masstige handbag that has not negatively impacted its overall luxury perception. Hermès, Chanel, and Gucci have not been able to or have not tried to address this issue. Luxury brands should examine their product offerings and ascertain how their product mix may best address value perceptions of consumers at the accessible, intermediate, and inaccessible luxury levels.

Third, when all of the reported consumer perceptions for the five luxury brands are simultaneously mapped (see Figure 1), one can see how closely aligned luxury perception ratings are for each

brand that suggests any of these brands, under the right purchasing scenario, may serve as a substitute for another luxury brand. Given this and the sample's reported ownership of multiple luxury handbag brands in this sector, relying on brand loyalty, reputation, and heritage, may not be enough to maintain or capture market share. Brand managers need to determine how, why and in what context is their luxury product used by the luxury consumer.

Finally, a disturbing finding of this research, not discussed in the text, was that many of the respondents reported owning both authentic and counterfeit luxury brands. One would not expect this from a sample of luxury handbag owners.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several limitations to the present study. Since only five luxury handbag brands were examined, the results cannot be generalized to all luxury handbag brands. Also, results only apply to the luxury handbags in this study, and may not be generalized to other product categories. The use of a marketing research firm to collect data presents a limitation. Participants for this study were limited to those that were recruited by the research firm; therefore, results cannot be generalized to the entire population. Finally, report findings were generated from self-reported questionnaire data that may not reflect actual perceptions.

Future research on luxury handbags could include examining if perceptions differ due to age differences. Also, due to the vast amount of luxury handbag offerings in the marketplace, other luxury brands need to be examined. Research needs to be completed to see if context plays a role in luxury product consumption. Additionally, studies that examine consumer perceptions for other luxury product categories in the inaccessible, intermediate, and accessible perception realm should be queried to ascertain a greater understanding of the luxury continuum.

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