

PERSPECTIVES ON QUALITATIVE LUXURY BRAND ASPECTS

Francisco J. Conejo, University of Colorado - Denver, U.S.
francisco.conejo@ucdenver.edu

Lawrence F. Cunningham, University of Colorado - Denver, U.S.
lawrence.cunningham@ucdenver.edu

ABSTRACT

As the luxury sector continues to gain importance, the features that make brands luxurious remain unclear. To complement and extend quantitative findings in this regard, the present paper reviews a series of qualitative studies addressing luxury's intrinsic aspects. Cross-referenced results indicate that this stream of research is converging on a handful of primary luxury aspects. However, these are complemented by a number of secondary and tertiary luxury aspects. The latter's inconsistent and occasionally-confusing nature indicates that further qualitative work is needed before luxury aspects are thoroughly understood. This offers significant research opportunities to fine-tune and extend knowledge in the area.

KEYWORDS: Luxury, marketing, brand, qualitative, interpretive, research.

INTRODUCTION

The luxury sector has experienced spectacular growth over the past 30 years (BCG, 2016). Not only has it successfully weathered economic downturns (Chen & Lamberti, 2015), but of the world's top 100 global brands, 16 now belong to the luxury category (Interbrand, 2017). Luxury's ascendance derives from the consumer trend of *trading-up* across categories (Silverstein et al., 2008). It also follows the substantial increase in consumers able to afford upscale products: With the emergence of masstige price-points, luxury consumption is no longer limited to developed economies nor wealthy elites. It is now driven by middle classes, especially in emerging markets, luxury consumption a significant global phenomenon (Kapferer, 2015).

Despite luxury's rise, the intrinsic features that make brands luxurious are still not clear. Identifying these characteristics remains key to understanding the luxury sector (Chen & Lamberti, 2015; Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016). From an academic perspective, knowing luxury's various aspects would allow researchers to better assess the antecedents and consequences of luxury consumption. This would help empirical efforts, and in turn, theoretical development. From a practitioner perspective, understanding luxury's aspects would allow to more effectively create and maintain luxury brands: It would aid segmentation and targeting; enhance product development, differentiation, and positioning; and improve distribution, pricing, and promotion. All the above becomes increasingly important as global luxury markets grow more diverse, complex and competitive (Wiedmann et al., 2009).

Assuming brand multidimensionality, see, e.g., Keller (2003), a series of factorial studies have over the past two decades addressed luxury's inherent nature. These efforts are valuable in that they empirically uncover the various attributes that might characterize luxury brands. Being quantitative and consumer-based, they also offer a fairly objective and realistic picture.

However, these taxonomies are largely driven by the same theoretical frameworks, most notably Vigneron and Johnson (1999). The dimensions uncovered by these studies thus tend to converge on just a handful of broad luxury aspects such as *Quality*, *Conspicuousness* or *Hedonism* (Conejo & Cunningham, 2017). This results suboptimal. Luxury is an extraordinarily rich and complex notion (Heine & Phan, 2011; Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). To truly understand luxury, methods that attain deep insights on its different aspects, that explain how these different aspects interrelate, and that contextualize these aspects, are required. This, in contrast to the superficial observations characteristic of quantitative/factorial approaches (Beverland, 2004; Fionda & Moore, 2009).

The present paper thus reviews a series of qualitative studies addressing luxury aspects. This is valuable, as the oft-neglected stream of qualitative research can provide a richer picture of luxury's features, complementing, even extending, quantitative findings. It is acknowledged that qualitative research is hardly representative, more focused on understanding specific contexts in-depth (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). Though by cross-referencing the various qualitative studies, and identifying core and ancillary luxury aspects, this paper provides marketers, both academics and practitioners, with a deeper and more holistic understanding of the aspects driving luxury consumption. Taken as a whole, the findings herein are bound to transcend their original contexts and likely apply to other situations.

This paper begins by briefly reviewing the features said to characterize luxury brands. Based thereupon, and without getting into methodological discussions, the qualitative studies that address luxury's different aspects are presented. This is followed by a discussion of overall results. Some managerial implications are then offered, as well as some avenues for future research. The authors hope that this paper contributes towards a better understanding of the luxury construct, that it stimulates the ongoing debate on luxury's features, and that it helps guide future research in the area.

FEATURES CHARACTERIZING LUXURY

Marketers generally agree that luxury transcends the ordinary. It instead refers to what is special (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). Though how, exactly, brands become special takes on different forms. Nueno and Quelch (1998), in their thorough characterization, distinguish luxury brands from their mundane counterparts through a series of features: *Top quality* via superior construction, materials and design; *unmatched performance* through time and situations; *strong heritage* associated to a country/region-of-origin; *craftsmanship traditions* linked to the original founders; *consistent and recognizable styling*, perhaps also flagship products; *uniqueness*, stemming being hand-crafted, not mass-produced; *rarity*, derived from limited production/distribution; *high prices*, product of all the above; *exclusivity*, given limited accessibility; *social recognition/prestige* to users; and *strong sensual/emotional appeal* to users. While the above featured seem unique, they remain related. Not only do they operate in unison but reinforce each other. Consumers intuitively apply these aspects when evaluating luxury brands. Though depending on the particular situation or individual, certain aspects become more salient than others (Wiedmann et al., 2009).

QUALITATIVE LUXURY EXPLORATIONS

The literature was reviewed to identify studies that addressed luxury brand aspects. After omitting a series of quantitative efforts, seven qualitative studies were found, which form the basis for the present analysis. These studies approach luxuriousness from both consumer and firm perspectives.

Studies also address the intrinsic characteristics of luxury brands, as well as the benefits sought from the latter. Taken together, studies provide a fairly comprehensive picture of luxury's different facets.

Other qualitative luxury inquiries were found. However, they were omitted from the present analysis on different grounds: Some studies were overly-specific, focusing on certain luxury brand aspects, not aspects generally. E.g., Beverland (2006) uses case studies and interviews to identify factors associated with luxury brand authenticity. Other excluded studies were too general, addressing a barrage of luxury consumption factors while discussing brand aspects only in passing. E.g., Wu et al. (2015) use interviews to understand the luxury fashion consumption of young Taiwanese. Finally, some studies were omitted for not offering detailed methodologies, nor discussions on uncovered luxury brand aspects. These studies would include a majority of quantitative efforts: While most have a qualitative component, it is mentioned only in passing, strictly as a means to generate initial items.

Following the summaries of the seven qualitative studies herein analyzed, chronologically ordered. Each briefly outlines its study's methodology and findings. Given space limitations, readers are referred to the original studies for comprehensive discussions of the luxury aspects uncovered. General, cross-referenced findings are subsequently addressed in the Discussion section.

Dubois et al. (2001) conduct in-depth interviews with 16 diverse French luxury consumers. Interviews are semi-structured and last about 1.5 hours. Recorded and transcribed data is analyzed individually, then in-group, summarized into themes. Eight broad luxury facets emerge, all related: 1) *Excellent Quality* refers to products' exceptional nature, be it through design, components, construction, performance, or durability. 2) *Very High Price* refers to the cost associated with luxury purchases, be it monetary, though also psychic and energetic. 3) *Scarcity* refers to products' limited availability given their exceptional quality, high price, and limited distribution. 4) *Uniqueness* refers to luxury products being different from mass-produced ones, sometimes incorporating variability and customization. 5) *Poly-sensuality* refers to how luxury consumption is a hedonic experience, pleasing senses such as sight, touch, sound, smell or taste. 6) *Ancestral Heritage* refers to how luxury products are anchored in the past, associated with history, places, people or traditions. 7) *Personal History* refers to how luxury products are part of their owners' identity. Passed down through generations, products become part of the family history. 8) *Superfluosity* refers to how luxury products are excessive, both in quantity and quality, sometimes even completely unnecessary.

Beverland (2004) develops case studies to uncover the features luxury wines use to create and maintain their positioning. Multiple data sources provide a comprehensive picture of these aspects. Thirty-five interviews are conducted with the marketing managers/owners of 24 international luxury wine producers in five countries — Interviews last about three hours. To gain a deeper understanding interviews are complemented with production facility tours, 11 focus groups with Australian luxury wine consumers, eight interviews with international wine distributors/retailers, and secondary data from sales materials, articles, books, and the media. Data is first analyzed within-case, then across-case to identify common themes. Four broad luxury brand features emerge: 1) *Product Integrity* refers to fanatical attention to product quality, achieved through selectivity in raw materials, superior production standards, and constant attention to detail; 2)

History refers to how brands are linked to a legendary founder, product, or tradition, as well as to special places, people and events. 3) *De-marketing* refers to how crass commercial techniques are downplayed, brands instead emphasizing substantive aspects like quality, history, experience, or endorsements. 4) *Value-Driven Emergence* refers to firms being largely conservative, though also seizing market opportunities if these align with brand values.

De Barnier et al. (2006) study luxury perceptions in France, Russia and the UK. In each ten active and five peripheral luxury consumers are interviewed. The 45 interviews are semi-structured, lasting about 1.5 hours. Interviews are recorded, transcribed, and content analyzed to uncover major themes. Ten related luxury facets emerge, five common, five country-specific: 1) *Aesthetics* refers to product design and style, which contribute towards overall beauty, also reconciling fashion and tradition. 2) *Premium Quality* refers to superior materials and craftsmanship, geared towards product longevity. 3) *Product History* refers to category expertise, reputation, or heritage, enhancing overall desirability. 4) *Self-Pleasure* refers to how luxury makes consumers feel good, in terms of senses, intellect, and spirit. 5) *Expensiveness* refers to extraordinarily high prices, justified by the above features. 6) *Aspiration* (FR) refers to sophistication, refinement, and class, enhancing users' social image. 7) *Conspicuousness* (FR) refers to luxuries standing out via superior design or quality, further helping users distinguish themselves. 8) *Functionality* (UK, RU) refers to how luxuries must be useful, be it through durability, reliability or flexibility in use. 9) *Atmospherics* (UK) refer to purchase experiences, created by point of sale location, decor, assortment and service. 10) *Uniqueness* (RU) refers to limited product availability, be it through production, distribution, or cost, which further distinguishes owners.

Fionda and Moore (2009) develop case studies on 12 diverse UK luxury fashion retailers. Semi-structured, 1.5-hour-long interviews with top executives are conducted. Recorded and transcribed data is complemented by internal documents and media reports. Data is first content analyzed within-case, then cross-referenced to generalize findings. Nine broad themes emerge, understood as the main facets of luxury fashion brands: 1) *Clear Brand Identity* refers to unique and easily-understood brand meanings, which by being appealing entice consumers. 2) *Coherent Communications* refers to consistently delivering brand meanings across channels, from advertising through shows. 3) *Product Integrity* refers to innovative designs, and well-crafted, high-quality, and functional products. 4) *Brand Signature* refers to a recognizable style across categories, epitomized via iconic products, also extending into packaging and store atmosphere. 5) *Prestige Price* refers to high prices reflecting the quality and premium positioning, also suggesting exclusivity. 6) *Exclusivity* refers to limited product ranges and manufacturing runs, special product editions, and controlled distribution. 7) *Heritage* refers to having a history or link to some personality or original creator. 8) *Experience* refers to superior purchase environments, enhanced by personalized service, livery, and ideally flagship stores. 9) *Culture* refers to internal organizational values, commitment, and partner alignment.

Heine and Phan (2011) study 31 diverse German millionaires. As heavy luxury consumers, the latter have expert understanding and experience with luxury. This sample is also relevant as luxury trends often originate and trickle down from the upper-most classes. The researchers apply multiple techniques. Hour-and-a-half interviews are complemented by repertory grid, preference-difference, critical incident, and projective exercises. Data is recorded, transcribed, and content-analyzed. Results indicate that high-end consumers perceive luxury products as having six major

characteristics: 1) *High Price* refers to the monetary cost of luxury objects, important for individuals' self-esteem but also for social signaling. 2) *Superior Quality* encompasses, among others, product design, materials, expertise, artistry, features, operation, usability, durability, and service. 3) *Aesthetics* refers to compliance with sophisticated upper-class tastes and values, to the exclusion of the crass and gaudy. 4) *Rarity* refers to luxury products not being common, ideally unique, done through limited and customized manufacture or distribution. 5) *Extraordinariness* refers to how impressive/special products might be, the key towards generating conversation value and further social recognition. 6) *Symbolism* refers to the various meanings luxury products encompass, which like aesthetics, is determined by group values and tastes.

Chen and Lamberti (2015) study upper-class Chinese luxury consumers. Focus groups are conducted in four major cities with highly-developed luxury markets. Sessions comprise six participants (24 total), are semi-structured and take about 1.5 hours. Data is recorded, transcribed, and content analyzed, first within the group, then across groups to uncover general themes. Eleven related sources of luxury value are identified: 1) *Usability* refers to product usage, aesthetics, innovation, and durability. 2) *Quality* refers to product design, materials, and craftsmanship, ideally a recognizable style. 3) *Uniqueness* comprises rarity (absolute and relative scarcity), as well as exclusivity (limited accessibility). 4) *Financial* refers to the price, actual and perceived, that products are worth. 5) *Self-Identity* refers to products reflecting users' style, also enhancing self-confidence. 6) *Hedonic* refers to luxury consumption's pleasurable aspects, be it sensory, intellectual or emotional. 7) *Materialistic* refers to the inclination of possessing things per se, sometimes even collecting. 8) *Self-actualization* refers to luxury as an achievement vehicle, satisfying aspirations. 9) *Conspicuousness* refers to the visibility of luxury products, helping owners show-off. 10) *Prestige* refers to the social status luxury products endow users with, be it by belonging to or differentiating from a group. 11) *Brand* refers to various manufacturer aspects such as history, reputation, heritage, recognition, and identity.

Seo and Buchanan (2018) study New Zealand luxury fashion consumers. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with 24 diverse participants, each with years of luxury experience. Interviews last about three hours and take place in Auckland, the country's main luxury market. Incorporating elements of Zaltman's Metaphor Elicitation Technique enhances interviews. These are recorded, transcribed, and content analyzed, first individually then across participants to uncover common themes. Five related luxury consumption aspects emerge: 1) *Investment* refers to how luxury products provide superior value-in-use given their quality and durability, also perceived as assets, retaining/increasing in value. 2) *Escape* refers to how luxury products allow consumers to temporarily transcend their mundane lives, both physically and mentally. 3) *Lifestyle* refers to consumers perpetuating their luxury usage to the point of leading a rather hedonic life. 4) *Status* refers to how luxury products distinguish owners, providing them with social prestige and entry into select groups. 5) *Transformation* refers to how luxury products allow users to inwardly build and maintain unique identities.

Table 1, below, provides an overview of the luxury brand's different features, as uncovered by the studies herein analyzed. Luxury aspects are grouped according to their general meaning. For a brief explanation of each reader are referred back to study synopses. Aspects are cross-referenced and categorized into three tiers: Primary aspects appear in over half the studies, mentioned at least four times. Secondary aspects are mentioned two or three times, while tertiary aspects just once.

Table 1: Qualitative Luxury Aspects

N	Dubois et al. (2001) (8 aspects)	Beverland (2004) (4 aspects)	De Barnier et al. (2006) (10 aspects)	Fionda & Moore (2009) (9 aspects)	Heine & Phan (2011) (6 aspects)	Chen & Lambertini (2015) (11 aspects)	Seo & Buchanan (2018) (5 aspects)
6	<i>Excellent Quality</i>	<i>Product Integrity</i>	<i>Premium Quality</i>	<i>Product Integrity</i>	<i>Superior Quality</i>	<i>Quality</i>	
6	<i>High Price</i>		<i>Expensive</i>	<i>Prestige Price</i>	<i>High Price</i>	<i>Financial</i>	<i>Investment</i>
5	<i>Ancestral Heritage</i>	<i>History</i>	<i>Product History</i>	<i>Heritage</i>		<i>Brand</i>	
4	<i>Scarce</i>		<i>Uniqueness</i>	<i>Exclusivity</i>		<i>Uniqueness</i>	
4	<i>Poly-sensual</i>		<i>Self-Pleasure</i>			<i>Hedonic</i>	<i>Lifestyle</i>
3			<i>Aspiration</i>			<i>Prestige</i>	<i>Status</i>
3	<i>Personal History</i>					<i>Self-Identity</i>	<i>Transformation</i>
2	<i>Unique</i>				<i>Rarity</i>		
2			<i>Atmospherics</i>	<i>Experience</i>			
2			<i>Conspicuous</i>			<i>Conspicuous</i>	
2			<i>Functionality</i>			<i>Usability</i>	
2			<i>Aesthetics</i>		<i>Aesthetics</i>		
1	<i>Superfluous</i>						
1		<i>Value-Driven Emergence</i>					
1		<i>De-marketing</i>					
1				<i>Firm Culture</i>			
1				<i>Brand Signature</i>			
1				<i>Clear Brand Identity</i>			
1				<i>Coherent Marcom</i>			
1					<i>Symbolism</i>		
1					<i>Extraordinariness</i>		
1						<i>Materialistic</i>	
1						<i>Self-actualization</i>	
1							<i>Escape</i>

DISCUSSION

As Table 1 highlights, the various studies identify both recurring and divergent luxury features. In regards to the number of aspects attained, no pattern is observable. Studies range from four features (Beverland (2004)) to eleven (Chen & Lamberti (2015)), averaging about eight. These figures are admittedly irrelevant within a qualitative context. They nevertheless constitute a useful starting point towards understanding this stream of research.

Beyond the numerical disparity, similarities and differences emerge in regards to the nature of aspects identified. As to commonalities, most studies reveal variants of the *Quality*, *Price*, *Heritage*, *Scarcity* and *Hedonic* aspects. These facets are considered primary, present in over half the studies reviewed. These aspects are also largely consistent with the various luxury characterizations, frameworks and taxonomies found across the literature. This convergence is encouraging. It indicates that marketing overall agrees as to luxury's core aspects.

Despite the above convergence, the *fuzzy* nature of primary aspects, like that of secondary and tertiary ones, must be acknowledged. Facets are in the last instance interpreted by researchers. This makes them somewhat subjective. Aspects across studies, even if called the same, rarely refer to the same construct. At best facets refer to similar phenomena. Further qualitative work is thus needed to identify more precise and conceptually-consistent luxury aspects.

Another issue to consider is how actionable these broad primary aspects are. Luxury is a rich construct. While broad aspects are certainly convenient, they also burry luxury's finer aspects, of which there are many. This conceptual ambiguity affects research and practice. E.g., there is no doubt that luxury brands offer exceptionally high quality. But what, exactly, does *Quality* refer to, performance, construction, materials, design? If all the above, the case could be made that this aspect is not conceptually unique, leading to confusion and suboptimal decisions.

Broad aspects, like the ones on which qualitative research is converging, are sufficient for a general understanding of luxury. However, they are not suitable for behavioral prediction as they lack domain specificity. Their general nature makes it challenging to obtain and compare empirical findings. This, in turn, limits theory and practice to rather basic levels (Saucier & Ostendorf, 1999). Future qualitative research should thus strive to understand luxury in a more conceptually-precise manner. Efforts should aim to identify more-specific and actionable luxury aspects, instead of the general and rather ambiguous ones currently the norm. To this end, we commend those qualitative studies which do offer more-precise luxury aspects. E.g., Dubois et al. (2001) differentiate between *Scarcity* and *Uniqueness*, while De Barnier et al. (2006) offer specific *Functionality* and *Aesthetics* aspects. These efforts represent a good start though more-specific qualitative luxury research remains needed.

As to the nature of aspects identified, perhaps most significant is their diversity. Twenty-five different ones cover a broad range of areas. Though it is the secondary and tertiary aspects, which precisely for being less common, extend marketing's understanding of brand luxuriousness. Noteworthy is, e.g., Heine and Phan's (2011) *Extraordinariness* aspect. It refers to how impressive a product might be, beyond scarcity and uniqueness. This is key towards generating conversation

value and thereby social recognition. Also noteworthy is Seo & Buchanan's (2018) *Escape* aspect. It refers to how luxury products allow consumers to temporarily transcend their mundane lives, both physically and mentally, generating a provisional sense of well-being.

However, some secondary and tertiary aspects remain conceptually unclear. Their fundamental nature, and difference vis a vis other aspects, even within the same study, is occasionally confusing. E.g., Chen and Lamberti's (2015) *Brand* aspect mixes elements associated with branding and heritage. Alternatively, De Barnier et al.'s (2006) *Self-Pleasure* and *Aesthetics* aspects seem to overlap. The former refers to how luxury makes consumers feel good in terms of senses, intellect, and spirit — the latter to how product design and style contribute towards overall beauty, also a pleasure aspect.

The above lack of clarity extends to some primary aspects. E.g., Wiedmann et al.'s (2007) luxury value framework (comprising functional, financial, individual and social dimensions) was used by Chen and Lamberti (2015) to organize their qualitative findings. This resulted in their *Quality*, *Usability*, and *Uniqueness* elements being grouped under a broader *Functional* aspect. *Quality* and *Usability* are arguably functional aspects. However, *Uniqueness* is conceptually different. It is not part of the functional domain, instead of a separate aspect in its own right. Theoretical frameworks are no doubt useful. They inform and help guide empirical efforts though excessive reliance on theoretical frameworks can be counterproductive. Qualitative research is often exploratory. Subordinating it to extant frameworks might constrain the richness of its findings, and in turn, decrease its potential for theoretical development.

Cases like the above indicate that luxury aspects, despite their thematic classification, are not conceptually unique. Marketing requires a clear and precise understanding of luxury's aspects (Wiedmann et al., 2009). This means that as currently interpreted, some luxury aspects might not be suitable for luxury research, the boundaries between them still not well-delimited. This reinforces the need for further qualitative work to clarify aspects of precise nature, redundant ones needing to be culled or merged.

Finally, noteworthy is how some luxury aspects are underrepresented, even absent. As to the former, one might mention the *Symbolism* aspect. Identified only by Heine and Phan (2011), it refers to the various social meanings luxury products encompass. This is a major shortcoming considering that consumption is highly symbolic (Belk, 1988), especially in high involvement categories like luxury. As to missing aspects, one might mention *Sustainability*. With socio-environmental responsibility increasingly demanded by consumers, sustainable luxury is receiving growing attention from industry and academia (Han et al., 2017). However, this aspect is oddly absent. Despite the plethora of luxury aspects identified, the above cases show how further qualitative research is still needed to attain a comprehensive picture of luxury's different facets.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Understanding luxury aspects are important for managers. It allows them to more effectively create and maintain luxury brands, the key towards enhancing firm performance. Traditional segmentation applies geographic, demographic, psychographic and behavioral criteria (Kotler & Armstrong, 2014). Though consumers differ widely as to luxury expectations. By complementing

traditional segmentation criteria with the luxury aspects identified, more precise targeting become possible.

As to positioning and differentiation, luxury brands should not strive to maximize all aspects. While all are important, aspects should instead be used to different degrees and for different purposes, ideally resulting in unique attribute combinations. Primary aspects like *Quality*, *Price*, or *Pleasure* are quintessential luxury features. Managers might use these aspects to create an overall upscale image. This would position brands within the luxury category, above their regular counterparts. Managers might then emphasize certain secondary and tertiary luxury aspects for a more-specific positioning and differentiation, rare aspects like *Escape* or *Extraordinariness* setting brands apart from their luxury competitors.

The luxury aspects that firms decide to emphasize is highly individualized. These not only depend on target markets and competitors but also unique internal and environmental circumstances that co-determine the configuration of luxury aspects (Beverland, 2004; Fionda & Moore, 2009). Older, more established firms might thus emphasize *Quality* or *Heritage* aspects. Newer firms, lacking a reputation, might instead emphasize *Experiential* or *Hedonic* aspects.

As to the marketing mix, emphasized aspects can help guide product, place, price, and promotion efforts. By having the latter highlight luxury aspects that reflect brands' positioning and differentiation, firms further stimulate interest among target markets. And as luxury markets evolve, additional luxury aspects can be used to comply with socio-cultural shifts. This, without eroding the overall positioning nor differentiation. That said, consumer perceptions of luxury aspects are just as important as the actual aspects. By adequately managing consumer perceptions, also through the marketing mix, luxury brands may slightly compensate for weaknesses, e.g., between perceived and actual *Rarity* (Phau & Prendergast, 2000).

Managers must also realize brands' systemic nature, see Conejo and Wooliscroft (2015a). Luxury brands, in particular, have highly-integrated components. The aspects of characterizing luxury brands are not autonomous. They instead overlap, being closely related. Selected aspects should be reinforced simultaneously and continuously as otherwise, the positioning suffers. In addition to luxury aspects, managers must consider the impact that the firm itself, the marketing environment, and co-creating consumers have. This reveals the rather complex nature of the luxury brand system. Managers must thus ensure that the different luxury aspects and participants are integrated into a coherent whole and that a consistent branding is maintained over time (Beverland, 2004; Fionda & Moore, 2009; Seo & Buchanan, 2018).

Lastly, managers must be aware that even if their brands do comply with all strategic and tactical luxury aspects, they might still not necessarily succeed within the category. An important, albeit difficult-to-obtain catalyzer, is a certain *magic* that pulls all elements together into a winning combination (Wetlaufer, 2001).

FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper showed how qualitative studies are mixed with regards to the aspects that make brands luxurious. On the one hand, results converge on a handful of primary luxury aspects. This is positive. The agreement suggests that marketing is moving in unison, closer to understanding the

nature of luxury brands. On the other hand, primary aspects are supplemented by some discrepant and occasionally unclear secondary and tertiary luxury aspects. The latter, combined with the general nature of primary aspects, indicates that further qualitative research is needed before a comprehensive picture of the aspects that make brands luxurious is attained.

Future research should thus concentrate on making primary luxury aspects more specific. This conceptual precision would not only improve marketers' understanding of what makes brands luxurious. More importantly, it would enhance academic and practitioner efforts. Future research might also look into clarifying secondary and tertiary luxury aspects. Despite being less prevalent, they are nonetheless important. Not only do they complement/enhance primary aspects, but they introduce neglected aspects, shedding light on luxury's subtle nuances. With secondary and tertiary aspects being ambiguous and divergent, their conceptual nature requires clarification. This might be accomplished by separating conceptually-divergent components, and by merging conceptually-similar ones.

Future research might also look into how different luxury aspects are related. Even though aspects seem independent, they interact with each other influencing overall luxury perceptions. These interrelationships might not only be horizontal, between conceptually-distinct aspects such as *Quality* and *Price*. Present results suggest that these relationships might also be vertical, between conceptually-consistent aspects such as *Quality* and *Materials*. In this case, it is likely that luxury aspects are hierarchical, organized in progressive sub-categories. As luxury marketing matures, more sophisticated frameworks are called for, beyond the mere enumeration of aspects.

Luxury research often uses diverse samples to attain more representative results. Though this ends up tainting results, luxury's nuances often buried/canceled out through aggregation. Science not only pursues single, universal truths. It also strives to understand variability (Gladwell, 2004). One might thus argue that there is no single, universal type of luxury. It is instead variously understood, luxury's nature moderated by some personal and situational factors (Kemp, 1998; Roper et al., 2013; Seo & Buchanan, 2018). Luxury is thus not a clear notion. Its understandings are instead diverse, complex, ambivalent, and sometimes even contradictory (Dubois et al., 2001). With the above in mind, a standardized palette of luxury aspects might be inadequate to describe the increasingly-diverse global luxury consumer. Future qualitative efforts might, therefore, look into identifying the luxury aspects relevant to specific consumer segments. The latter might be precisely defined along variables such as culture, nationality, and region; age, education and income; luxury consumption frequency and level; and individual values, personality, and lifestyle, among others. The above would yield more accurate, relevant and actionable sets of luxury aspects, as opposed to the oft-generic ones reported.

Finally, future research needs to address methodological issues. The most appropriate (and inappropriate) qualitative methods for the study of luxury brand aspects remains to be established. Furthermore, the optimal combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques also needs to be addressed. Positive marketing research attempts to approximate reality. No single research technique is alone able to accomplish this, methodological triangulation essential to further understand the different aspects of luxury brand consumption.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Global luxury markets are increasingly complex and competitive. It is thus essential that the various aspects which make brands luxurious be properly understood. This paper has shown that in regards to the latter qualitative results are mixed. While there is a certain degree of convergence, there are also important issues that remain to be clarified. We are nevertheless optimistic. Not only is the qualitative approach particularly suited to uncover the nuances of luxury consumption, complementing, even extending, quantitative findings. But with qualitative luxury research already going down the correct path, it offers significant research opportunities to fine-tune and extend knowledge in the area.

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Author Biographies

Dr. Francisco J. Conejo is Senior Marketing Instructor at the University of Colorado - Denver. His research intersects branding, psychology, and entrepreneurship, having been published in outlets such as the *Journal of Macromarketing*, *Journal of Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, *Journal of Sport and Tourism*, *Journal of International Marketing Strategy*, and the *International Journal of Business and Management*, among others. Before entering academia, Dr. Conejo worked extensively in industry, marketing consumer goods and services across a variety of categories. He is an experienced ethnic marketer, having serviced the HCM & AACM. He is also an experienced international marketer, having taken American brands all around the world.

Dr. Lawrence F. Cunningham is Professor of Marketing at the Business School at the University of Colorado Denver. He has also served as The Accenture Term Professorship of Marketing at CU Denver, a Distinguished Research Professor and Fellow at the EDHEC School of Business in Lille/Nice France, the Joseph and Martha Davis Term Professor of Marketing at the University of Colorado Denver, the Fulbright Distinguished Professor at the University of Linz in International Business in the 2006-2007 Fulbright Program. Professor Cunningham has published in numerous journals including the *Journal of Services Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, *The Services Industries Journal*, *Advances in Services Marketing and Management*,

The Transportation Journal. His main areas of research are services, international services marketing and international marketing. He serves as the Managing Editor for the Journal of International Marketing Strategy

