

## ON LUXURY BRAND DIMENSIONALITY

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### ABSTRACT

Luxury brands have become increasingly complex. Taxonomies that comprehensively cover the various luxury brand aspects are required to properly understand their consumption. This study reviews extant luxury taxonomies to help guide future scaling efforts. Results indicate that while studies converge on a handful of central luxury dimensions, the latter are complemented by a plethora of divergent ancillary factors. The inconsistency of dimensions, coupled with dimensions' generic and confusing nature, suggests that further work is still needed before luxury brands are properly understood. This situation creates significant opportunities for researchers to develop a new generation of improved luxury scales.

**KEYWORDS:** Marketing, brand, luxury, taxonomy, scale, measure, dimension.

### INTRODUCTION

Luxury brands have become a global phenomenon. They provide consumers around the world with pleasure and prestige, while at the same time producers and sellers with striking profits. Luxury brands are thriving across product categories (Müller-Stewens and Berghaus, 2014). The global luxury market is now worth around \$1.6 trillion with no signs of slowing down (B.C.G., 2016). This global appetite for luxury has spurred academic interest in the area (Kapferer and Valette-Florence, 2016). A substantial body of literature has emerged over the past three decades, luxury branding now a research area in its own right (Okonkwo, 2009).

However, theory within luxury branding remains fragmented. Even fundamental notions still lack conceptual unity (Ciornea *et al.*, 2012; Müller-Stewens and Berghaus, 2014). One such issue involves luxury brand dimensionality. That is, the different ways in which consumers perceive brands to be luxurious. Despite having been variously addressed, there is still lack of consensus as to what, exactly, makes brands luxurious (Berthon *et al.*, 2009; Christodoulides *et al.*, 2009). Uncovering the structure of these value perceptions is critical towards understanding luxury consumption. It warrants urgent resolution as a great deal of academic and industry efforts stand to rest on luxury's value taxonomy (Conejo and Cunningham, 2016; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2009).

An instrument able to accurately measure luxury brand dimensions would allow academics to better assess the various antecedents and consequences of luxury consumption. It would greatly aid empirical efforts, and therefore, theoretical development. Such an instrument would also allow practitioners to better serve customers. It would contribute towards superior segmentation and targeting; improve product development, differentiation, and positioning; and enhance pricing, distribution and promotion. All the above would aid strategic planning, and help firms develop/sustain competitive advantage (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2009).

Understanding luxury brand dimensions becomes particularly important as luxury markets grow ever more complex and competitive.

The present paper offers an overview of the different luxury taxonomies. This is important. Before luxury research continues, the virtues and limitations of extant instruments must be understood. Furthermore, before new luxury brand measures are developed, the overall state of this area must also be acknowledged. This paper begins by reviewing luxury's conceptual nature. Factor analytical efforts addressing luxury brand dimensions are then revisited. Based thereupon, the current state of luxury brand scaling is discussed, some future directions also provided. Without going into psychometric issues, beyond the scope of this paper, the goal is to raise awareness in regards to the general state of luxury brand scaling. It also strives to stimulate discussion among luxury researchers, both academics and practitioners, as to how luxury brand scaling might best move forward. It is also hoped that this article stimulates further research in the area, contributing towards a better understanding of luxury brands, and luxury marketing more generally.

### **CONCEPTUAL LUXURY NATURE**

The nature of luxury, broadly understood, has been long recognized as unclear (Kapferer, 1998). There is general agreement that luxury transcends the necessary and ordinary. It instead refers to what is special and desirable (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012). However, the way in which the latter is accomplished takes on multiple forms. It is also highly dependent on the particular individual and situation (Kemp, 1998). Luxury is acknowledged as more than a set of attributes (Berthon *et al.*, 2009). But in the absence of a single, specific definition of luxury (Heine and Phan, 2011), research has instead focused on the different aspects that contribute towards perceptions of luxury.

Frequently-cited is the comprehensive characterization of Nueno and Quelch (1998). The authors conceive luxury brands as comprising a series of features: Superior quality in terms of design, materials and construction; consistently-high performance across situations; a pedigree of craftsmanship often traceable to a founder; a strong heritage, linked to country/region-of-origin associations; a certain uniqueness stemming being crafted, not mass-produced; a recognizable and consistent style, even a flagship product; limited production/distribution to ensure rarity; very high prices to ensure exclusivity; strong emotional and sensual appeal; and strong social recognition/prestige to users.

Characterizations like the one above are useful. They help explain luxury's rich and diverse nature, offering a better understanding of what luxury brands might be like. More importantly, they help explain why consumers might be drawn towards luxury brands. However, and despite being based on expert opinion, these characterizations are nevertheless based on conjecture. Anecdotal and subjective, they are not always substantiated by theory and research. Furthermore, these characterizations are hardly more than a list of features. They lack conceptual unity/structure, which hinders the systematic understanding of luxury. To address these limitations, several researchers reconcile the literature and put forward theoretical luxury frameworks

Vigneron and Johnson (1999) propose that luxury consumption satisfies five basic motives: *Perfectionism*, the desire for highest-quality products; *Hedonism*, the pursuit of physical and emotional pleasure; *Bandwagon*, the pursuit of belonging through positive self-images; *Snob*, the

differentiation from others; and *Veblenian*, the conspicuous garnering of social prestige. Wiedmann *et al.* (2007) posit that luxury consists of four value dimensions: *Financial*, involving the monetary; *Functional*, referring to the utilitarian; *Individual*, comprising the inner-directed; and *Social*, referring to the outer-directed. Each of these broad dimensions is said to be made up of more specific aspects. Tynan *et al.* (2010) suggest that luxury offers six types of value: *Utilitarian*, encompassing features and function; *Outer-directed*, consisting of symbolic expressions to others; *Inner-directed*, comprising symbolic expressions to the self; *Experiential/hedonic*, referring to sensory and emotional pleasure; *Relational*, involving the bond with the brand and other brand users; and *Cost*, encompassing the sacrifices needed to attain the other benefits.

Frameworks like those above are also useful. Transcending characterizations, they integrate the literature offering a theoretically-grounded understanding of luxury's nature. Frameworks also more deeply explain why consumers are drawn towards luxury. And by providing solid theoretical foundations on which to build, frameworks aid subsequent empirical research. However, and despite these important advantages, frameworks lack empirical substantiation and thus remain speculative. Furthermore, these frameworks neglect consumers' point of view. This is a major limitation given how consumer-centric marketing is.

To resolve the above issues, and based on brands' multidimensional nature, see e.g. Conejo and Wooliscroft (2015a, 2015b); Keller (2003), researchers have empirically approached the inherent nature of luxury brands. Via factor analysis, the preeminent technique used to decompose broad constructs into their more specific elements, various luxury brand dimensions have been identified. While statistically-independent, the dimensions uncovered remain conceptually-related, operating in unison as a semantic network. Consumers intuitively apply these dimensions while evaluating luxury brands. However, depending on the particular situation or individual, certain dimensions become more salient than others (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2009).

Following an overview of extant factorial efforts. By transcending subjective characterizations and theoretical frameworks, these offer a more representative picture of luxury brand perceptions. These, in turn, help better understand the luxury construct and its consumption. Hence factorial efforts being the focus of the present study.

## **FACTORIAL LUXURY EXPLORATIONS**

This review comprises eight factorial studies, selected for addressing luxury brand dimensionality in a broad, general sense. Other luxury scaling efforts exist. They were however omitted from the present analysis on two grounds: On the one hand, they refer to specific luxury aspects. E.g., Lagier and Godey (2007) address the aesthetics of luxury products, while Sreejesh *et al.* (2016) the aspirational aspects of luxury products. On the other hand, omitted studies either compare/combine original measures, e.g. De Barnier *et al.* (2012), or attempt to reproduce/test/improve original measures, e.g. Vigneron and Johnson (2003), Christodoulides *et al.* (2009), Stegemann *et al.* (2011), Strehlau and Freire (2013), Doss and Robinson (2013), or Kim and Johnson (2015).

Dubois and Laurent (1994) study consumer perceptions through a mixed qualitative/quantitative approach. In-depth interviews with 16 differing consumers first explore the meanings associated with luxury. Based on the themes uncovered 34 attitudinal items are then developed, pretested and administered via survey to a quota sample of 440 French consumers. Given the nature of luxury consumption, the sample is slightly skewed towards females and high income categories. Principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation is applied. Ten factors are extracted though only four retained, explaining 38% total variance. Factor 1 refers to lack of interest in luxury given limited experience and familiarity. Factor 2, to positive luxury perceptions fostered by hedonic motives. Factor 3, to negative luxury perceptions caused by the annoying behaviors of others. Factor 4, to luxury's mythic-symbolic nature. Discarded factors interestingly refer to specific luxury aspects such as pricing and scarcity, anticipating more-current taxonomies.

Vickers and Renand (2003) also use a qualitative/quantitative approach. Fifty luxury/non-luxury tableware/car owners are first interviewed to identify luxury associations. Based on the themes uncovered, a 24-item questionnaire is developed. Four questionnaire versions (luxury/non-luxury, tableware/cars) are then administered to a sample of 400 respondents, 100 per stimuli. Quota samples approximate the UK's age and gender structure. Data undergo PCA with varimax rotation. All samples consistently produce three-factor solutions. Cumulative variance for luxury products average 92%, and 42% for non-luxury products. Factor 1, *Functionalism*, refers to solving actual needs or preventing potential problems. Factor 2, *Experientialism*, to sensory pleasure or cognitive stimulation. Factor 3, *Symbolic Interactionism*, to self-enhancement and group position. Both luxury and non-luxury products can be described along these dimensions. However, while non-luxury products emphasize *Functionality*, luxury products skew towards the *Experiential* and the *Symbolic*.

Vigneron and Johnson (2004) also use a qualitative/quantitative approach. Thirty initial items are generated from the literature, interviews, focus groups and a preliminary evaluation. Items are then evaluated by various Australian student samples rating different brands. Data are subjected to PCA with varimax rotation. Preliminary total variance is 69.5%. Multiple rounds of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) eventually converge on a 20-item/five-factor structure. Factor 1, *Uniqueness*, refers to the rarity of luxury brands, inaccessible to the average person. Factor 2, *Extended-Self*, to the identity-building function of luxury brands, used to create individual and social representations. Factor 3, *Conspicuousness*, to the public consumption of luxury brands, used to enhance group status. Factor 4, *Quality*, to the superior characteristics of luxury brands, be it materials, craftsmanship and performance. Factor 5, *Hedonism*, to the indulgent aspects of luxury brands, their consumption providing sensory and emotional pleasure.

Wiedmann *et al.* (2009) develop forty eight initial items from extant measures, interviews and a pretest. 750 German consumers then use items to rate various brands. Data are subjected to PCA with varimax rotation. Modelling converges on a 10-factor solution addressing functional, individual and social luxury aspects, total variance not reported. Factor 1, *Usability*, refers to luxury's functional aspects. Factor 2, *Uniqueness*, to luxury's rareness and exclusivity. Factor 3, *Quality*, to luxury products' superior nature. Factor 4, *Self-Identity*, to the symbolic meaning that luxury products provide individuals. Factor 5, *Materialism*, to consumers' use of luxury for

signaling purposes. Factor 6, *Self-Gifting*, to luxury's inner-directed reward/celebratory nature. Factor 7, *Extravagance*, to luxury going beyond the normal. Factor 8, *Self-Pleasure*, to luxury's inner-directed hedonic nature. Factor 9, *Life Enrichment*, to how luxury enhances everyday life. Factor 10, *Social Prestige*, to how luxury is used to impress others.

Choo *et al.* (2012) develop a survey taking items from the literature. 306 Korean women, members of an online panel, then evaluate one of forty-five well-known fashion brands. Data are subjected to CFA. Eight first-order luxury value aspects are identified, total variance not reported: Factor 1, *Excellence*, refers to brand sophistication, craftsmanship, and durability. Factor 2, *Functional*, to products' usefulness. Factor 3, *Aesthetic*, to design, appearance and uniqueness. Factor 4, *Pleasure*, to sensory appeal and desirability. Factor 5, *Experiential*, to how brands transport users to other worlds. Factor 6, *Self-Expressive*, to how brands project individual meanings, personality, and values. Factor 7, *Social*, to brands as symbols of success and status. Factor 8, *Economic*, to the price, investment, and overall worth of luxury brands. A second-order CFA identifies four overarching luxury aspects: The *Excellence* and *Functional* dimensions comprise a more general *Utilitarian* value; *Aesthetic*, *Pleasure* and *Experiential* a broader *Hedonic* value; and *Self-expressive* and *Social* a broader *Symbolic* value. The *Economic* dimension remains independent.

Teimourpour *et al.* (2013) compile initial items from the literature and 23 marketing expert interviews. Validation by 15 marketing experts and pre-test reduce items to 63. These are applied to a diverse sample of 1,097 Iranian consumers. Unlike other efforts, this one does not have respondents evaluate brands but the luxury notion. Data are subjected to exploratory PCA with varimax rotation. A 53-item/eight-factor luxury taxonomy emerges explaining 60% variance. Factor 1, *Conspicuousness*, refers to the public consumption of luxury. Factor 2, *Hedonic*, to the sensual and emotional pleasure luxury provides. Factor 3, *Materialistic*, to individual's inclination towards physical possessions. Factor 4, *Prestige*, to consumption geared towards attaining status. Factor 5, *Quality*, to superior product construction and performance. Factor 6, *Self-Identify*, to how luxuries help project users' identity. Factor 7, *Uniqueness*, to the difference and exclusivity that luxury confers. Factor 8, *Usability*, to how luxury satisfies actual consumer needs.

Walley *et al.* (2013) also use a qualitative/quantitative approach. Six in-depth consumer interviews are first conducted. Identified themes are the basis for items used in a subsequent quantitative phase. After pre-testing, 131 UK consumers are surveyed via street intercepts. The sample is quota-based, representative of UK consumers. Data are subjected to PCA with varimax rotation. The structure converges on a five-factor solution explaining 66% total variance. Factor 1, *Affect*, refers to the emotional aspects of consuming luxury products. Factor 2, *Characteristics*, to the features of luxury products. Factor 3, *Status*, to the social prestige derived from using luxury products. Factor 4, *Gifting*, to the propensity of buying luxury products when intended for others. Factor 5, *Involvement*, to how luxury purchases are more planned and complex.

Kapferer and Valette-Florence (2016) first interview a small sample of luxury consumers and brand managers, salient themes the basis for 42 initial items. Surveys via an online panel have 1,286 French consumers rate one of 12 well-known luxury brands. The sample is skewed towards more affluent consumers. Data undergoes PCA with promax rotation. A 34-item/eight-dimensional solution explaining 78% variance is obtained. CFA ratifies this structure. Factor 1,

*Product Superiority*, refers to how luxury brands are in different ways better. Factor 2, *Selective Distribution*, to the limited quantity/high quality of luxury outlets. Factor 3, *Class and Status*, to how luxury brands endow owners with social prestige. Factor 4, *Actual yet Unique*, to how luxury remains current and exciting through time. Factor 5, *Not for Everybody*, to luxury's clientele being limited and exclusive. Factor 6, *Glamorous*, to luxury's close association with celebrities. Factor 7, *Elitism*, to luxury's high prices and unaffordability. Factor 8, *Fashionable*, to how luxury taps into what is trending, becoming a must-have. The eight above dimensions form part of a broader luxury value hierarchy.

Table 1, below, summarizes the eight taxonomical efforts reviewed. Studies, chronologically ordered, are across the top row. Their respective luxury dimensions are thereunder. Dimensions are thematically grouped, based on their respective studies' explanations, as well as items loading thereunder. Dimensions are ordered by prevalence.



## DISCUSSION

Table 1, above, shows how the different studies structure the luxury construct. Overall, taxonomies only marginally resemble one another. As to number of dimensions, taxonomies range from three dimensions (Vickers and Renand (2003)) to ten (Wiedmann *et al.* (2009)), most being towards the upper limit. Also, early efforts tend to have fewer dimensions (Dubois and Laurent (1994), Vickers and Renand (2003), and Vigneron and Johnson (2004)); while recent efforts more dimensions (Wiedmann *et al.* (2009), Choo *et al.* (2012), Teimourpour *et al.* (2013), and Kapferer and Valette-Florence (2016)). This is encouraging. It suggests that knowledge of luxury's aspects is improving, becoming more precise. The numerical differences notwithstanding, commonalities and differences as to the conceptual nature of dimensions are also found.

As to commonalities, most of the eight studies produce some sort of *Conspicuousness*, *Hedonism*, *Extended-Self*, *Quality*, *Functional*, and *Uniqueness* dimension. Save for the oddly-present *Functional* dimension, arguably more characteristic of non-luxury products Vickers and Renand (2003), the above dimensions empirically support the characterizations and theoretical frameworks mentioned earlier. This convergence is also encouraging. It suggests that luxury marketing is generally in agreement as to some of luxury's basic dimensions.

However, and despite the general agreement, the *fuzzy* nature of extant luxury dimensions must also be noted. On the one hand, dimensions are constituted by different items, these also having different load intensities. On the other hand, dimensions are ultimately interpreted and named by authors. This makes them somewhat subjective, despite the quantitative factorial approach. Dimensions across efforts, even if equally-named, thus hardly refer to the same latent constructs. At best dimensions refer to generally-similar constructs. Further taxonomical work is thus required to identify more conceptually-consistent and precise factors. In this regard, studies at the item level, even factorial meta-analyses, would be called for.

While the above convergence indicates that luxury marketing is indeed on the right track, one must also question how practical these basic dimensions really are. Luxury is a rich and diverse construct. Its complete nature is unlikely captured by a handful of general dimensions. While simple and convenient, broad dimensions result ambiguous, the finer luxury aspects lost. To illustrate, there is no doubt that luxury comprises extraordinarily high-quality products. However, what exactly does a dimension labeled *Quality* refer to, design, materials, construction, or performance? If all the above, one might argue that such a factor, even if statistically independent, is not really conceptually unidimensional, a most alarming scaling issue (Bond and Fox, 2015).

Broad dimensions suffice for general purposes. Though omnibus dimensions, like the ones on which luxury research is converging, are unsuitable for behavioral prediction as they are not domain-specific. This makes it difficult to produce and compare findings, or develop theory, at all but the most basic levels (Bandura, 1997; Conejo *et al.*, 2015; Saucier and Ostendorf, 1999). Research should thus strive for a more nuanced and conceptually unidimensional understanding of luxury. Taxonomical efforts should, therefore, pursue more concrete and actionable dimensions, rather than the broad, abstract ones currently the norm. In this regard, we applaud the recent taxonomical efforts which do provide more-specific dimensions, e.g., Wiedmann *et al.* (2009),



Choo *et al.* (2012), or Kapferer and Valette-Florence (2016). We also commend the scaling efforts which refine specific luxury aspects, e.g., Lagier and Godey (2007) aesthetic style; or Sreejesh *et al.* (2016) aspirational value. Though again, the above underscores the need for further taxonomical work in luxury marketing.

In regards to dimensional differences, most striking is the quantity and diversity of factors uncovered. The 23 different dimensions, on average three new ones per study, cover a wide range of luxury aspects (see the different studies for factors' respective meanings). Not only do dimensions support some of the other aspects mentioned by the earlier characterizations and frameworks. They also contribute new luxury facets as perceived by consumers. This is also encouraging as it extends knowledge in the area.

However, several of these dimensions are conceptually unclear. Their nature, as well as the difference concerning other dimensions, even ones within the same study, remains confusing. To illustrate, one could argue that Teimourpour *et al.*'s (2013) *Prestige* and *Conspicuousness* dimensions overlap. The first refers to consumption geared towards attaining status, while the second refers to the public consumption of luxury, also geared towards gaining status. The same might be said of Kapferer and Valette-Florence's (2016) *Elitism* and *Not for Everybody* dimensions. Further, Wiedmann *et al.*'s (2009) *Life-Enriching* dimension is not only ambiguous for not specifying in which way life is enriched. It is also a tautology, arguably all aspects of luxury brands being in different ways life-enriching

The above indicates that luxury dimensions, despite being statistically independent, are not necessarily unidimensional from a conceptual perspective. This suggests that the different luxury taxonomies might after all not be that suitable for luxury research, the boundaries between luxury's different aspects still not defined. This again suggests that further taxonomical work is needed to clarify the nature of dimensions, redundant dimensions needing to be merged/culled.

Despite the number and variety of dimensions offered, worth noting is how some important luxury aspects are still missing from the different taxonomies. One such absence would be a *Heritage* dimension linked to country/region-of-origin associations. Consumer culture has come to place a great deal of importance on the notion of *authenticity* (Brooks, 2004; Gilmore and Pine, 2007). The latter is of particular value in luxury purchases, upscale consumers demanding products of true provenance for the premiums paid (Beverland, 2006; Beverland, 2005). With this in mind, a luxury dimension referring to different heritage aspects is both necessary and useful.

Another, more striking absence, is a *Price* dimension. Price is one of the most important cues while shopping (Lichtenstein *et al.*, 1993). High prices are also *the* quintessential feature of luxury products/brands (Kapferer, 2015). Choo *et al.* (2012) do offer an *Economic* dimension. However, it broadly refers to the various financial aspects of luxury purchases, comprising e.g. investment value. Other taxonomies also include price-related items within other factors, e.g. Vigneron and Johnson (2004) an *Extremely Expensive* item under their *Conspicuousness* dimension. While luxury dimensions are indeed conceptually-related, one could argue that price is so important within luxury marketing that it should command its own factor. Furthermore, the pursuit of an independent *Price* dimension would likely improve other dimensions, helping clarify the

conceptual confusion discussed earlier. All the above underscores the need for further taxonomical research.

## **CONCLUSION**

Empirical results eventually converge. Together they provide a reasonable picture of what is true (Hunt, 1990). As this paper has shown, results from the eight taxonomical efforts reviewed are mixed in regards to the dimensionality of luxury brands. On the one hand, studies have started to converge on a handful of central luxury dimensions. This is encouraging. The agreement indicates that luxury marketing as a whole is moving in the right direction, ever closer to understanding the true nature luxury brands. On the other hand, these central factors are complemented by a plethora of divergent and sometimes confusing ancillary luxury dimensions. This, coupled with the generic nature of central factors, and the absence of key dimensions, indicates that much work remains to be done before an accurate picture of luxury brands is achieved.

As to future research, efforts might focus on making central dimensions less generic. Increasing their conceptual specificity would not only result in more theoretically-rigorous measures. It would also provide more actionable scales to be used by industry. Another area to look into pertains ancillary dimensions. The latter stand to enrich central dimensions providing a more nuanced description of luxury brands. Given ancillary dimensions' divergent and ambiguous nature, their factor content needs to be clarified. Also, being so abundant, their number needs to be streamlined into those most relevant. This might be done by either merging conceptually-similar dimensions while culling others altogether. Finally, future research might address important, albeit still absent luxury brand aspects. While *Heritage* and *Price* dimensions are preliminary candidates, other additions are bound to improve marketing's understanding of luxury brands.

Luxury consumption is no longer focused on developed economies. It has become a global phenomenon, now driven by emerging markets across Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia (B.C.G., 2016; Kapferer, 2015). Luxury markets are more diverse, complex, and competitive than ever before. It therefore becomes critically important to properly understand the nuances of luxury consumption. However, this requires robust measures, ones that comprehensively cover luxury's different aspects (Wiedmann *et al.* 2009). This reality, coupled with incomplete/inconclusive extant instruments, might be seen as a setback for luxury marketing. However, we are instead optimistic. It represents a significant opportunity for researchers to develop a new generation of improved luxury scales.

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