A Study of Consumer Perceptions on Brand Imagery in Luxury Brands

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INTRODUCTION
Demand for luxury fashion brands has increased dramatically (Frank 1999), especially among younger consumers who have become an attractive segment for the luxury fashion industry (Curtis 2000). Even established brands have introduced “starter level brands” in order to shape younger consumer’s brand loyalty and prepare them to adopt traditional lines at later stages in their lives (Curtis 2000). This new opportunity brings the necessity for brand and marketing managers in the fashion industry to understand younger consumers’ changing imagery of fashion and of luxury. This exercise can help to solidify brand equity in an industry where brands and their “print ads are so redundant that if you pulled the Givenchy name out of its ads and added a Dior label would you be any the wiser?” (Killgren 1998, p.23).

One way to differentiate a brand from its competitors is to establish a relationship with their customers that are experiential (Schmitt 1997). An experience is “a private - and sometimes intimate – event that may involve the entire living being: the senses, the feelings, then intellect and the body” (Schmitt 1998, p.11). At the heart of this relationship, especially for highly symbolic products like fashion, is an experience rich in mental imagery (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Schmitt 1997). However, understanding which characteristics in mental imagery leads the consumer to a more experiential relationship remains unclear. Thus far, brand personality research attempts to investigate or tap into consumers’ imagery has failed to make the distinction between static and embodied imagery. The former referring to imagery in the form of a picture-like, un-moving, freeze frame quality while the later referring to “people’s subjective felt experiences of their bodies in action” (Gibbs and Berg 2002, p.1). For fashion clothing which bears such a close tie to one’s self-concept in general and body image in particular, it may be useful to examine embodied mental imagery, which may lead to consumer to experiential relationship with the brand. In this paper, we explore young consumers’ notion of luxury fashion and the static and embodied quality of their various mental images of fashion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand Image
Keller defined brand image as “a set of perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in the consumer’s memory.” (Keller 1993, p.3). Among these associations includes brand personality and user imagery (Aaker, 1996). Brand personality is defined as “a set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker 1997, p. 347) and essentially helps humanize the brand (Batra, Lehman and Singh, 1993). User imagery conveys the answer to the question “Who is the user of the brand?” (Keller, 1993, p.4) and hence is a significant tool to establish in the minds of the target consumers the desired traits that will humanise the brand and create its unique personality.

The power of user imagery resides in its ability to establish a relationship with consumers’ self-concept, a collection of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about oneself (Rosenberg 1979) and the product’s brand image. This relationship is a subjective experience felt by the consumers, that refers to self-congruity or “the degree of match or mismatch between the product image and the self-concept for a given consumer” (Sirgy 1982,
p.292), can influence consumers’ responses to a brand and its marketing communications. User imagery is but one type of mental imagery. Thus we now turn to examine features of mental imagery and their impact on brand responses.

**Mental Imagery**

MacInnis and Price defined mental imagery as “a process by which sensory information is represented in working memory” (1987, p.473). Thus far, user imagery and brand personality research have fail to make the distinction between descriptors that convey user characteristics in a static and embodied manner. Static user imagery is more like a snapshot of a typical user with a stable, un-moving, picture-like, freeze frame quality. In anthropology, this static view of the self has been linked to the western world’s separation of body and mind and has overlooked the validity of the human body as a tool of communication and its role in the formation of one’s self-concept (Farnell 1999). As a result, the importance of the body and body movement has been all but ignored in brand imagery research.

By opposition to static imagery, embodied imagery involves a mental representation of “people’s subjective felt experiences of their bodies in action” (Gibbs and Berg, 2002, p.1). With direct experience and contact with a stimulus, individuals acquire skills and learn expressive bodily conducts, which are referred to as “embodied modes” or “dynamically embodied actions” (Farnell 1999). Thus, embodied user imagery captures the felt bodily experience associated with a brand experience. To date, consumer research has yet to examine the impact of embodied representations and ways to evoke them.

One key and very meaningful characteristic of mental imagery is its vividness, or “the clarity with which an individual experiences imagery.” (Bone and Ellen, 1992 p. 97). Imagery vividness can influence attitudinal judgment and behavioral intentions by generating more elaborate cognitive processing (Kisselius and Sternthal 1984; Mcgill and Anand 1989; MacInnis and Price 1987). Moreover, the vividness associated with imagining oneself interacting with the product has been shown to produce stronger behavioral intentions (Anderson, 1983; Bone and Ellen, 1992). This suggests that embodied imagery may be more vivid and yield more favorable brand evaluations and behavioral intentions.

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

To increase the reliability for our exploratory finding, we conducted two exploratory surveys. The first objective of the both study was to investigate, descriptively, the perceptions of luxury fashion among young consumers. The second study was also designed with a second objective in mind, to estimate the power of various words to convey embodied and vivid user imagery.

**STUDY 1**

**Methods.** Seventy-six undergraduate students from a Canadian university participated voluntarily in the study (28 males and 48 females, average age 22.4 for male and 21.5 for females years). Participants were asked to indicate (1) the article of clothing they had purchased that was considered luxurious, (2) the purpose, (3) the motivation underlying their purchase, (4) the feelings experienced from wearing the article, and (5) the context in which the clothing article was worn. Luxury fashion was described as garments or accessories made and designed by a well-known designer or company and for which one usually pays a premium.
Results and Discussion. Article most purchased or intended to be purchased were: trousers (23.7%), tops (20.8) and coats/jacket (9%), formal suits (13.2%) and outwear such as coats an jackets (9.2) for the garment category, and footwear (13.2%) for the accessory category. Participants indicated that the most common purpose for purchasing the products was going out such as special occasion (37.0%) and for feelings associated with wearing the product (26.1%). Others bought the product for general need (10.9%) and for school (8.7%). Feelings most often mentioned by participants who purchase luxury fashion were: confident (16), confortable (13), sexy (14), trendy or stylish (14) and, feelings relating to how they look such as pretty, good or attractive (16), uniqueness (6), classy (6), and successful (4).

STUDY 2

Method. Seventy-eight undergraduate students from a Canadian university participated voluntarily in the study (27 males and 51 females, average age 21.3 years). To explore the meaning of luxury fashion among younger consumers, participants were asked (1) to name brands they would consider part of the luxury fashion category and then to describe the recent purchase of luxury garment or accessory, (2) indicate the type of purchase (e.g., “pants”), (3) the brand name, (4) the price and (5) to choose the dominant reason for purchase from a set of options (e.g., making me feel good, gift giving, to go out, for work, etc.). Subsequently, participants were asked to rate the quality (static or embodied) and vividness of the imagery generated by a series of descriptors. These descriptors included the 30 of Aaker’s (1997) brand personality scale personality traits along with 28 others deemed appropriate for our purpose. Embodied-static quality of the imagery evoked by the descriptors was assessed using a 5-point semantic differential scale with “very static” to “very moving” as end points. Imagery vividness was assessed using a 5-point Liker scale anchored by “very low vividness” and “very high vividness” inspired by Bone and Ellen (1992).

Results & Discussion. Brand names spontaneously associated with luxury were tallied by order of mention and by overall. By immediate top of mind association (i.e., first mentioned), Gucci was by far the most popular with 13 mentions followed by Ralph Lauren, Diesel, and Giorgio Armani. Overall, across all mentions, the top seven brands most frequently mentioned were: Diesel (13.8%), Donna Karan (7.7%), Parasuco (6.2%), Louis Vuitton (4.6%), Marc Jacobs (3.1%), Gucci (3.1) and Giorgio Armani (3.1%). These findings indicate a clear overlap between the brands that most readily come to mind when thinking of luxury fashion and those they purchase (or intend to purchase).

Article most purchased or intended to be purchased were: trousers (19%), tops (19%) and coats/jacket (9%) for the garment category, and jewelry (10%) and eyewear (10%) for the accessory category. As reported by our sample (see table 1.), price range for garments such as pants had a lower price spread (90$-300$) then suits that had a greater price spread (200$ to 900$). For accessories, some price spreads were even greater. Some participants allocated or were willing to allocate for leather accessories such as (i.e. purses, wallets bags and suitcases) as little as 50$ to as much as 750$. Similarly, for jewelry some allocated or were willing to allocate as little as 3$ to much as 1600$. These findings suggest that younger consumers have their disposal the income and the willingness to allocate significant amount money to acquire specific luxury items.
Table 1
Mean Cost of Luxury Fashion Products Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Garments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pants</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>90$</td>
<td>300$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tops (t-shirt, tank, blouse, sweater)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>40$</td>
<td>500$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coat/Jacket</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70$</td>
<td>500$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suit</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>200$</td>
<td>900$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skirt</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30$</td>
<td>600$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>120$</td>
<td>150$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessories</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewelry</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3$</td>
<td>1600$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eyewear</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>100$</td>
<td>400$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Footwear</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>115$</td>
<td>300$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purses, Wallets, Bags, Suitcase</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50$</td>
<td>750$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>200$</td>
<td>750$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most common usage of fashion luxury items suggested was that of “making participants feel good” (41.3%), for other reasons (e.g. gift giving) (16%), to go out (13.3%), for school (13.3%), for work (9.3%) and for sports (6.7%). As might be expected, these findings suggest that affective motives tend to be more readily associated with the purchase of luxury fashion.

Participants who purchase luxury fashion reported similar feeling to those in study 1. Participants mentioned feeling confident (8), confortable (8), trendy or stylish (4) and, feelings relating to how they look such as pretty, good or attractive (38), uniqueness (3), classy (5).

Descriptors such as sexual, active, sporty, playful were associated with embodied imagery whereas descriptors such as wholesome, old fashioned, Zen, serene and unusual were associated with static imagery. Descriptors such as glamorous, sexual, attractive, elegant, and sporty evoked higher imagery vividness than the serene, rhythmic and wholesome products. Sex differences were found for some of the descriptors mostly for imagery vividness. Males found that descriptors such as imaginative, independent, rugged and hardworking evoked significantly more vivid imagery than did female participants. Females, on the other hand, found that descriptors such as glamorous, warm and comfortable evoked more vivid imagery vividness than did males.

Figure 1 below contains a plot of all descriptors using each one’s static/embodied and vividness values. The location of each descriptors on this map communicates its potential to generate vivid (or less so) embodied (or static) imagery. Amongst those descriptors that include a higher embodied quality of imagery as well as higher level of vividness included such descriptors as glamorous, sexual, attractive, elegant, sporty, athletic, whereas those that had lower imagery vividness included rythmic, upbeat, spirited, expressive, playful. The lack of vividness for certain descriptors may be the result of participants inability to truly envision the descriptors in their because of time constraints.
General Discussion
The findings in the present exploratory studies reveal that certain perceptions are prevalent when young consumers think of luxury fashion. Particularly, consumers readily think of certain brands and products when thinking of luxury fashion and they are more likely to choose those that come to mind when its time for a purchase. Also, younger consumers of luxury fashion further confirm that they have a their disposal the income as well as the willingness to acquire luxury fashion mainly because of the feelings involved as a result of acquiring it and to a lesser extent for the purpose it serves in their daily routine.

Second, our second study indicates that although certain descriptors provide a strong embodied quality, they do not necessarily evoke strong imagery vividness. It may be that certain descriptors are cognitively more taxing than others (Kisselius and Stenhall, 1984) or are more difficult to evoke in the consumer mind (Bone and Ellen, 1992). Therefore, when time is of constraint, brand and marketing managers may need to opt for descriptors that have both embodied imagery quality and imagery vividness. Conversely, when consumer has more time to think about the imagery information that is projected to them, they can choose descriptors that have a stronger embodied imagery quality. Future research should now focus on establishing a causal relationship between the embodied-static dichotomy and the impact it has one consumer responses.

REFERENCES

