Luxury & Myself – How Luxury Experiences Contribute to Consumer Selves

Bauer, Martina, von Wallpach, Sylvia, and Hemetsberger, Andrea

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Abstract

Hitherto literature in the area of luxury and luxury brands predominantly applies a management-oriented view of luxury. This project departs from traditional views on luxury by focusing on consumers' experiences with what they perceive as luxury. More specifically, the objective is to enhance understanding regarding how luxury experiences contribute to consumers' selves. The empirical study is exploratory in nature and relies on consumer diaries regarding consumer luxury experiences. This project contributes to existing literature by outlining four different forms of how luxury relates to consumers' selves.

Keywords: Luxury experience, consumer self
Track: Consumer Behavior

1. Introduction

Luxury brands are a dominant phenomenon in today's marketplace and constitute "one of the purest examples of branding" (Keller, 2009, p. 290). Traditional branding literature assumes that a manager's task is defining luxury and mainly focuses on how to build a luxury image, ideally resulting in organizational value and wealth (e.g., Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Keller, 2009). Consumer behavior literature inextricably connects luxury to demonstrative and conspicuous consumption, assuming that luxury derives meaning from the social context (Brückner, 2008). By doing that, existing literature predominantly considers consumers' social identity, while neglecting individual identity needs associated with luxury consumption. Growing individualization in today's postmodern society suggests that consumers use luxury in many different ways supporting their identities. Previous literature has demonstrated the supportive function of products/brands regarding consumers' selves (Belk, 1988). Only recently, research applies a consumer-centered view on luxury, pointing out the subjectivity of luxury perception (e.g. Tynan, McKechnie, & Chhuon, 2009). First empirical evidence shows that luxury perceptions of consumers are not restricted to luxury products and services, and that luxury experiences are much more private than previously assumed in the context of traditional luxury goods (Bauer et al., 2011). The present study picks up the thread and focuses not only on products or brands, but allows for all personally meaningful objects or moments consumers might perceive as luxury. We propose that luxury is not used in enclaved luxurious spaces or contexts only, but rather integrated in consumers' everyday lived experiences. This implies that any product or brand has the potential to become a luxurious good depending on whether consumers perceive it as such or not. This article aims to enhance our understanding of luxury's contribution to consumers' selves in that it applies a constructivist approach that emphasizes luxury's experiential and contextual aspects. With an exploratory study using consumer diaries, we investigate consumers' luxury experiences and shed light on the processes by which luxury supports consumers' selves.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Traditional and new perspectives on luxury*

Although commonly used in habitual language, the concept of luxury appears to be blurred in marketing literature, which is reflected in a plethora of concept definitions (Vickers & Renand, 2003). Traditionally, a premium image, higher price, outstanding quality, uniqueness/scarcity, unnecessity, and aesthetics characterize luxury goods and brands (e.g. Keller, 2009). The majority of studies in luxury brand research suggest that management can determine the success of luxury brands. Studies based on this assumption cover issues relating to the concept definition and measurement of luxury (e.g. Christodoulides, Michaelidou, & Li, 2009), brand extensions (Stegemann, 2006), or guidelines for managing luxury as means for social distinction (e.g. Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010). In contrast, recent studies show a comparatively stronger consumer behavior orientation (e.g. Vickers & Renand, 2003). Postmodernity has radically altered contemporary definitions of luxury, adding pastiche and democratized forms of luxury for the masses (Atwal & Williams, 2009; Tsai, 2005; Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2006). Research on individual customer orientation in luxury consumption focuses on the measurement of luxury perception (e.g., Christodoulides et al., 2009), the value of luxury brands for individuals (e.g. Tsai, 2005), or individual consumption practices (e.g., Atwal & Williams, 2009; Gistri, Romani, Pace, Gabrielli, & Grappi, 2009). However, only few studies stress the importance of consumer experiences in the context of luxury brands. Bauer et al. (2011) find that from a consumer-experiential perspective luxury can be characterized as transient, which is reflected in its situation-specific, escapist nature,

and its integration in consumers' everyday lived experiences. Furthermore, they reveal that luxury has a strong private component and supports consumers' selves. Although some authors have acknowledged the importance of taking on an experience-oriented view on luxury consumption, consumers' experiences and their contribution the consumers' selves remain under-researched in the context of luxury. The present study applies an 'everyday', life-contextual view on luxury to gain insights into luxury experience's contribution to consumers' selves.

2.2. Luxury and self

The self is defined as consisting of several identities, that is, "sets of meanings people hold for themselves that define "what it means" to be who they are as persons, as role occupants, and as group members" (Burke, 2004, p. 5). Consumer behavior literature has shown that consumers use products and brands in order to signal identity (e.g. Belk, 1988; Berger & Heath, 2007; S. Kleine, Kleine III, & Allen, 1995; Sirgy, 1982; Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009). Based on Veblen's (1902) seminal study, traditional luxury literature has a strong focus on consumers' social affiliation and social comparison, stressing consumers' social identity needs (Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel, 1982). Although some studies outline the importance of luxury for the individual self (Bauer et al., 2011), no study exists that describes luxury's contribution to the process of individual identity construction. The present study challenges this dominant view by introducing the idea that luxury consumption is of special, personal meaning and importance to a person, rather than just being used as a status symbol. Personal luxuries can help individuals to build and maintain their selves (Bauer, von Wallpach, & Hemetsberger, 2011). Consuming personal luxury can make individuals feel different and generate transformative experiences (e.g. Hemetsberger, Hoppe, Matzler, Mühlbacher, & Pichler, 2010; Hoppe, Hemetsberger, Pichler, & Matzler, 2009). Sirgy (1982) suggests that each person has an "actual self" –a realistic view of how a person perceives herself—and an "ideal self", relating to how a person would like to be. The uncomfortable gaps between the real and the ideal selves respectively can be closed through consumption. Products/brands communicate symbolic meaning. Hence, their consumption potentially enriches a consumer's self-concept via the transfer of certain product/brand meanings to the self. A more postmodern view has been introduced by Belk (1988), Ahuvia (2005), or Bahl and Milne (2010), who have drawn attention to the extended, fragmented and changeable consumer self. Whereas Belk introduces the deep meaning of possessions as part of individual's identity construction, Ahuvia supports a multiple selves view, where consumers regularly switch among different facets of their identities. In contrast to Ahuvia (2005), who provides solutions of how to form *one* coherent self-narrative, Bahl & Milne (2010) look at the constant dialogue of different selves to avoid or solve possible conflicts amongst them. Other authors introduced the notion of consumer self-transformation to depict the many changes that consumers undergo when consuming valued consumption objects (Hoppe et al., 2009). To sum up, the consumption of products/brands can help individuals to master their identity projects by transferring symbolic meanings to consumers' selves (R. Kleine & Kleine, 2000). Following the assumption that consumers define what they perceive as luxury, luxury might contribute in many ways to consumers' identity projects. This process might be experienced consciously or unconsciously and consist of a broad array of self-transformative experiences eventually involving products and brands.

3. Empirical Study

3.1. Sample and Methods

This study applies an interpretative, exploratory approach since the goal is to gain a detailed understanding of luxury's contribution to consumers' selves. We approach the phenomenon under study from a constructivist perspective, aiming at investigating consumers' subjective experiences with, and meanings of luxury and its relationship to consumers' selves.

To achieve maximum variation of views on luxury and the respective effect on the self, informants were from a variety of age groups, job/educational background, and different gender (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). We applied purposeful sampling, selecting German speaking informants according to their relevance for this research. The number of informants amounts to 17 (7 male, 10 female; age range: 24-84; mean = 41; education: university degree: 8; high school degree: 4; no high school degree: 5; marital status: married: 7; in a relationship: 8; single: 2). Data were collected via consumer diaries. Qualitative diary research is a method that enables the researcher to deeply understand processes, relationships and consumers in *their* world (Patterson, 2005). Diaries are written documents containing informants' regular records of events, observations, and thoughts as well as feelings, experiences and consequences (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003, p. 580). Accordingly, diaries "provide a way of accessing data in a relatively natural form […]" (Alaszewski 2006, p. 43), and thus provide intimate and personal insights in an unobtrusive way. In the present research context, diaries represent personal descriptions of everyday situations involving luxury consumption or purchase and related conversations. Diaries provide in-depth insights into consumers' subjective perceptions of luxury and its contribution to consumers' selves. The authors' theorizing is inductive in that it involves iteratively deriving theory from the data material. In order to reduce researcher bias in the analysis, we applied an inductive categorization process (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Spiggle, 1994) that involved (a) independently reading the stories consumers forwarded; (b) inductively deriving major themes and issues arising throughout the stories; (c) assigning codes to each theme; and (d) a meeting to compare and discuss independent codes and to come up with a combined catalogue of major themes, based on cross-case analysis (Kreiner, et al., 2006).

3.2. Findings: Incorporating luxury into one's self

The purchase and consumption of luxuries is largely motivated by consumers' individual identity needs (Vickers & Renand, 2003). Consumers seem to use four alternative ways of incorporating luxury into their selves: (1) luxury represents a state of being; (2) luxury equals the possibility to change between selves; (3) luxury mirrors the unattainability of a specific self; and (4) luxury represents the harmony of selves.

3.3.1 State of being
A state of freedom. Respondents characterize luxury as freeing themselves from the requirements that role standards impose on them:
"… at least, there is a cup of tea for me. Tea is then a daily small island that I'm on. It is so small that it lacks space for anybody else. Only I'm sitting on it, together with my tea." (Sarah, 35, housewife)
Defining role standards. Consumers also describe the state of being in a specific role as luxury but only when they are able to define role standards themselves. Luxury represents the freedom to choose the intensity of being in a specific role, as well as the freedom to individual interpretation and subsequent change of commonly accepted role standards.
"My hobby had become an obligation. But today, I felt exempt. Posture, volume etc. were not perfect but that didn't bother me. I made music!" (Tom, 63, civil servant)
3.3.2 Oscillating between selves
Luxury also represents a means to 'oscillate' between different selves. We commonly experience this urge to oscillate among selves, if we experience more than just one role as valuable form of living. This change occurs, for instance, when luxury enables consumers to

re-enter the world of a previous self as for instance in childhood. Changing their selves, and thereby the temporal context, might lead to feelings of nostalgia and relates consumers' present selves to their past.

"It feels as if I was back in Scotland. The flavor, the taste, the feeling...sheer luxury!" (Peter, 30, Assistant Professor)

3.3.3 Unattainability of a self

Personal unattainability. Selves that are rarely attainable or not attainable at all make these selves rare luxuries as they evoke desire. Being unable to attain a specific self might be due to a shortage personal, temporal, or financial resources. The requirements of specific roles might lead to role conflicts that make consumers perceive the unattainable self as luxury.

"Today, I rather experienced the opposite of luxury. I need sports for compensation....But it is impossible. Today I tried a minimal version – Fitness DVD. However, my daughter leeched on to my leg and climbed me (crying), which was annoying and frustrating." (Sarah, 35, housewife)

Unattainability for others. Relating to consumers' social identity needs, respondents also characterize experiences as luxury that are not available for others. Consumers are aware of privileges that they hold due to the local, temporal or social context they are living in. Hence, the privileged self is perceived as luxury.

"I switched off the alarm clock and had a good night's rest. On weekdays, one has to call that luxury, but actually it's the advantage of an academic job. Anyway, I will always appreciate a stress-free morning"! (Peter, 30, Assistant Professor)

3.3.4 Harmony of selves

Finally, consumers report to experience luxury when their selves are in harmony. Respondents argue that this state can be reached if they are able to organize their time according to their personal preference and attach as much effort to different selves as they feel like, or when they feel perfect harmony of being.

"... to be able to organize my time and do things down to my whim!" (Tom, 63, civil servant)
"Doing nothing with all my senses" (Anna, 84, housewife).

Summarizing the insights revealed in this study, Figure 1 outlines the four ways of how luxury experience relates to consumer selves.
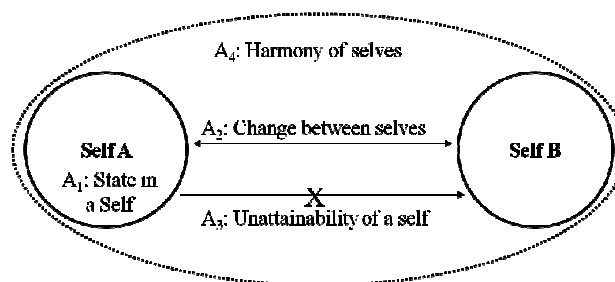

Figure 1: Forms of luxury-self relationships

5. Discussion

This article contributes to research by investigating lived luxury experiences and by introducing a conceptual framework outlining different forms of how luxury relates to consumers' selves. We find that perceptions and experiences of luxury are much more intimately related to different selves than traditionally assumed. Our study reveals consumers' need for building and supporting individual identities and luxury's role as a symbolic resource that strongly contributes to individual identity construction (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Luxury, from a consumer perspective, is not defined through boldly exhibited products and brands but rather constitutes exceptionally valuable, hidden supporters of everyday living. In many cases, self-defined luxuries are portrayed as self-gifts (Mick & DeMoss, 1990), because they exert a transformative power: what is perceived as luxury supports short-term or long-term changes in states of being. Our study shows that luxury perception is much more than just a perceived extension of consumers' selves (Belk, 1988) but rather an opportunity to live out different states of being. Our findings partly corroborate Ahuvia's (2005) findings that consumers are looking for a synthesis of conflicting selves, or harmonious state of being, respectively. However, oscillation as a way to switch between worlds and selves extends Ahuvia's (2005) findings. Our findings also clearly extend Bahl and Milne's (2010) meta-self theory in that they show that consumers not only avoid or manage conflicting roles, or accord with a dominating meta-self but also indulge themselves in luxurious states of perfect harmony. Furthermore, conflicting states of being could also be perceived as luxurious, when they reflect desire and unattainable states of self, as long as there is hope. As luxury is so strongly related to consumers' relational states among their possible selves, its definition also changes. Consumers ascribe luxury, for instance, to products, brands, activities, or special moments. Consumers purposefully transfer perceived luxury to new situations and everyday contexts, making them luxurious, while still accrediting them different qualities than traditional luxury brands/products. That is, while traditionally consumers ascribe uniqueness or exclusivity, quality, or premium price to luxury (e.g., Atwal & Williams, 2009), we found that perceived luxury is not necessarily associated with these qualities. To speak to the different forms of consumer-luxury relationships, luxury offers should be highly flexible and enable consumers to oscillate among roles, or support experiences of being and harmony of selves. This flexibility might be a necessary condition for retaining consumers as their perception of luxury provides unprecedented, more frequent experience opportunities in different contexts than traditional forms of luxury. Luxury allows consumers to experience something extraordinary in their ordinary lives, to escape from unwanted roles, to try out many different selves, and to experience perfect harmony.

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