

# **Exploring the relationship between luxury brand personality, store personality and consumer characteristics**

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## **Abstract**

This paper aims to gain a deeper understanding of luxury brand positioning in relation to brand personality, store personality and target consumer personality traits. In so doing, we hope to get a fuller explanation of brand perceptions within the market environment in which luxury transactions occur. Using a variety of secondary sources we undertook a content analysis of narratives from web pages of the Italian brand Tod's as well as from consumer blogs relating to four Tod's flagship stores. Our theoretical contribution enhances explanations of luxury consumption in terms of three value sources namely, (i) time (ii) social responsibility and (iii) knowledge. Managerially, we determine that consumer interaction with sales persons is critical to consumer experience of the brand based upon their understanding and expectation of the luxury it represents.

**keywords:** *Brands;luxury, store personality; brand personality; consumer segmentation; content analysis; congruence distance*

## **Introduction and Objectives**

Luxury brands flourish or fail in an increasingly complicated and competitive environment. While in the past socio-demographic characteristics helped to position the offering this has become more difficult in contemporary global markets. There also appears to be a polarization within the market on the part of highly informed expert consumers who do not follow traditional norms of purchasing behaviour and purchase elite luxury and high street goods at the same time. Such inconsistent behaviour compels us to examine the luxury brand consumer in depth. Consumer perceptions of luxury comprise financial, functional, individual and social value components (Hennings et al., 2012), as well as changing cultural interpretations (Mo and Roux 2009) and symbolic and human characteristics (Aaker 1997). Looking at the brand and the consumer is not enough and a third aspect needs to be considered relating to the retail environment (D'Astous and Lévesque 2003).

This is important as the growth of many leading luxury groups has slowed during the recent economic crisis and managers need to make informed decisions regarding (a) who the target customer is and (b) that the retail environment reflects favourable brand associations in the consumers mind; all this while maintaining competitive advantage in the marketplace. The research question guiding this research is “can consumer personality traits, brand personality and store personality be configured to present a holistic view of the aura of a luxury brand?”

## **Literature Review**

### *Defining Luxury*

Luxury products have traditionally been associated with, exclusivity, quality and status (Atwal and Williams 2009), while being conceptualised according to functional, experiential and interaction dimensions (Liu et al., 2012; Wiedmann et al., 2009). They are manifested by premium prices, craftsmanship, heritage, rarity, aesthetics, speciality and symbolism (Heine 2009). Luxury consumption is generally associated with a desire to impress, to make statements about oneself and to create identity or develop a sense of belonging (Atwal and Williams 2009). It has been argued in literature that such psychological benefits differentiate luxury from non luxury products (Nia and Zaichkowsky 2000) and consequently luxury products place more emphasis on image rather than objective physical attributes (Liu et al., 2012; Roper et al., 2013). There is an implicit acceptance of the link with notions of conspicuous consumption and luxury goods providing a high cultural status (Bourdieu 1984). Wiedmann et al., (2007) developed a model with 4 over-arching dimensions to explain luxury consumption through consumer perceptions of the financial, functional, individual and social values encompassed by luxury products. Here the financial dimension reflects the monetary value of the product. The functional dimension refers to core product benefits and basic utilities such as quality, uniqueness, usability, reliability and durability. The individual dimension reflects a consumer's personal orientation towards luxury consumption and notions of materialism, hedonism and self-identity. Finally, the social dimension refers to the recognition consumers acquire within their own social groups from products and services such as prestige and conspicuousness.

### *Luxury Brands and Consumers*

Brand image and brand identity comprise all associations that are intended by the company (Aaker 1997). This is how the company wants the brand to be perceived to its target groups and positioned in terms of its competitors. Brand identity is made up of rational (attributes and benefits) and abstract emotional components (symbols, mental images and personality) (Heine 2009).

Such symbols have become more important for brand differentiation and Heine (2009 p.25) points to the trend for consumers to buy products due to a “*congruity between their perceived personality and the symbolic personality of the product.*” Brand personality can be inferred in a number of ways, for example advertising style, symbols, logos, and retail environment (D’Astous and Lévesque, 2003).

In consumer research, consumer personalities may be defined through product use. Products can be described as having a certain image made up of the physical characteristics of the object and a number of other factors such as advertising and price. These images are reinforced by other associations, such as stereotypes of the typical user (Sirgy 1982; Mulyanegara and Tsarenko 2009; Liu et al., 2012). Visibility in use is essential for a product to have a personality association so that the difference between individuals can be inferred through the use of a product. That is the use of the products communicates symbolic meaning to the individual and to others and enhances the self-concept. This will include attitudes, perceptions and feelings that the individual wishes to be associated with and the consumer will be motivated to purchase products that are congruent with their self-image. This enables consumers to create closer attachments to the brand and results in the consumer becoming more loyal, both in behavioural and emotional terms (Arora and Stoner 2009; Lee 2009).

Empirical evidence suggests that consumers enjoy the challenge of purchasing a brand that matches well with their own values and the personality of the consumer impacts on the final selection of a brand reflecting his self-concept. In her study, Aaker (1997), based on a large scale survey, developed a theoretical framework of brand personality dimensions using terms such as sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness. Heine (2009) using Reparatory Grid Technique, interviewed 31 heavy luxury user millionaires and developed 5 luxury brand personality dimensions; modernity, eccentricity, opulence, elitism and strength. Modernity describes the temporal perspective of a brand; eccentricity reflects how far the brand is from accepted social norms; opulence is described as the level of conspicuousness of the symbols of wealth and elitism, describes the level of status and exclusivity displayed by the brand; finally, strength, describes the level of toughness and masculinity suggested by the brand.

### *Store Personality*

Distribution in the context of luxury brands is synonymous with exclusivity (Lagier et al., 2009). Manufactures have taken control of distribution, developing their own stores and networks and choosing independent distributors very carefully. One of the outcomes of this strategic redirection is the setting up of flagship and mono brand stores. These emphasise the experiential aspect of the consumption of luxury goods by interaction between the brand, consumer and the store. The retail store’s image comprises functional qualities and psychological attributes. Some brands take great care to make their stores a place where the offer becomes aesthetic and reinforces the brand’s power. This is the environment where the personality of the brand is staged to underpin both tangible and intangible attributes that further influence consumer perception (D’Astous and Lévesque 2003). In order to

differentiate between brands perceived with similar positioning, the symbolic qualities of the luxury brands become highly relevant and a key motivation of luxury brand purchasing behaviour (Heine 2009; Liu et al., 2010).

According to D'Astous and Lévesque, (2003) store personality comprises five attributes, sophistication, solidity, genuineness, enthusiasm and unpleasantness. This concept of store personality is helpful to marketers determining marketing action and is very useful for marketing strategists who can use this information to position the brand.

The flagship store is a means of communicating brand objectives but little is known empirically about the aesthetic dimensions of the luxury flagship, its function in relation to the brand and the experience it provides consumers (Manlow and Nobbs 2013). Nevertheless, it seems that the aesthetics of the flagship store have become increasingly important and often viewed as a 3<sup>rd</sup> space; the design of the flagship store manifests the brands identity.

Luxury shopping allows a consumer to fulfil a dual need for a status and a desire to indulge in pleasurable experiences. Luxury flagship stores designed to take account of all the senses, create an emotional response in the consumer. Consumers, bewitched by the surroundings, come to accept legitimacy of the brand. The flagship store is a management device that serves to establish an experience and context for the wider activities of the brand (Doyle et al., 2008). It is a source of added value, emphasising the brand's pedigree and providing an authentic context for the brand to be understood in its entirety.

### **Conceptual Underpinning**

From the above perspectives we have considered the reasons why people buy luxury products and the relationship between brand personality, luxury consumer personality traits and the store personality. This understanding is of strategic marketing importance and helps an organisation to correctly appreciate the target consumer market and match the brand offer to that market. In order to do so effectively, brand owners need to understand the target audience to ensure that the brand narratives and other marketing communications fit with that target market and the value criteria these consumers try to adopt.

Our analysis draws upon Aaker's (1997) brand personality, luxury consumer personality traits from Hennings et al., (2009) and the store personality dimensions from D'Astous and Levesque, (2003), store image (Porter and Claycomb 1997) and the four luxury values, financial, functional, individual and social from Weidman et al., (2007; 2009). The difference in the degrees of alignment represents what we have termed "congruence distance" between each personality dimension. Misalignment may indicate that the corporate view of the luxury brand is out of sync with consumer perceptions and may impact upon strategic marketing efforts.

### **Method**

To explore the degrees of congruence between these disparate personality dimensions we undertook a content analysis of narratives from web pages of the Italian brand Tod's as well as from consumer blogs relating to four Tod's's flagship stores; using a variety of secondary

sources. We chose the Tod's brand for the following reasons. First, we felt it was important to focus on a named brand. The overwhelming majority of research in this area has focused on a notion of luxury in a generic sense. We felt that studying a particular brand would help us to tease out the nuanced dimensions of the 3 parts of our framework. Secondly, Tod's is an Italian brand that focuses predominantly on a few key products, namely shoes and leather goods, but with a number of associated brands. The founding family still own a significant proportion of the brand and thus have control over the brand positioning. Finally, it has a strong international presence including a number of large flagship stores.

Using a variety of media including: the Tod's website; various promotional materials; associated marketing and posts linked to key brand advocates; and 4 blogs from the Flagship stores in Knightsbridge, Mayfair, New York and Tokyo; we undertook a content analysis focusing on the strategic positioning of the brand and related this to the experience of the brand by consumers in store.

An iterative process of coding was conducted with emergent themes grouped into related clusters and positioned within the constructed framework using tabular analysis. Two researchers analysed the data independently and then compared coding schemes with their separate interpretations combined.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Our findings are structured around Wiedmann et al's., 2009, dimensions of value: financial; functional; individual and social.

Financial: From our data price is not a signifier of value, it is not discussed. Tod's is sold as a life-style brand; the products are not the main feature in marketing communications, rather the consumer is buying into the experience. The price of the product represents a bundle of values comprising a wider experience: *"Amazing shoes, who cares about the price."*

In addition when reflecting on the blogs, there was notable consumer frustration at service levels that did not equate with their expectations when making a purchase of such value:

*"The Manager talked to me like I was some bum off the street. He was rude and should not be a manager by any means. Called corporate office, waiting for a response... when you run one of the best shoe brands in the world, your customer service has to match."*

The flagship store and its resonance with the brand is important because it moves the purchase from simply functional product associations up a level and the experience becomes part of the value associated with the product (Manlow and Nobbs 2013). The congruence between store image such as atmosphere, aesthetics and quality of merchandise in the store and brand personality needs to be strong. In addition, for the knowing consumer, this is implicit and expected. What is notable is that this is seldom mentioned in the data we examine. We suggest that this is why it is so jarring in their experience when reality does not fit with expectations and the consumer feels let down and emotionally disappointed: *"The attitude and lack of product knowledge was disheartening."* Good or bad memories of the experience impacts on the continuing values of the brand held by the consumer and may have

an impact on future purchase behaviour and attitude towards the brand: *“Saleswomen at this store are amazing. Not only are they really cute, but they're incredibly helpful.”*

Function: Functional attributes of Tod's products are apparent in each domain. The brand position emphasises function for example, workmanship, precision, hand tools, quality, and durability: *“Tod's shoes are fantastically well made. They're some of the most well-made shoes I've ever had.”*

These values cannot be separated from traditional skill and everything that this knowledge is based upon. Thus there is a strong relationship between the functional attributes of the brand and the quality of the materials; intangible qualities that are bound up with craftsmanship, expertise and heritage.

With regards to the quotes on consumer blogs, there seems to be less understanding of the brand story and intangible qualities. They focus on the product as they see it without an understanding of the processes bound up in it. While there is a consensus that Tod's shoes are well made, of high quality, durable but at same time they are seen as conservative, sedate and preppy: *“They look good, but they don't look fashionable”*. The timelessness is not seen as a positive thing and it is unrelated to the usage.

Individual: The notion of self and self-identity is evident on the web page. Self concept is not about conspicuous or continuous consumption. Products don't need to change and they last a long time. Consumers who buy the brand appreciate the values bound in the products and can be described as satisfied, unpretentious and rational functionalist (Hennings et al., 2009).

*“Born as the brand's first bag, the D Bag has always expressed its values and the highest quality. This bag in all its details reveals a centuries-old tradition of craftsmanship and of great attention given to each step, from the selection of leather to the final finishing. The material from which the D Bag is constructed, is carefully selected and is treated with natural techniques. Every season the bag is enriched with new colors and leathers. Made from iconic calfskin leather and in precious python, the renewed shapes are both timely and timeless in elegance.”*

Consumers are viewed as purposeful, generous and passionate and the brand positioning on the webpage is based on the rationale that you don't need to follow the crowd and be ultra fashionable and this is reflected in the selected endorsements. They are intellectuals, creative Italian artists and artisans, not widely known and on the margins of popular culture.

*“With this series of "Italian portraits", Tod's is celebrating the typically Italian talent for combining beauty with know-how, style with tradition and aesthetics with ethics, having always made this lifestyle their forte. A style rooted in Italian culture, marked by conscientiousness, refined ideas and a respect for the past and for traditions.*

*These are images of men of quality, some adult and others very young, who know the meaning of friendship and Italian-ness, and who all agree about that style, apparently innate but actually inherited, and at any rate inimitable. They are photographed in their own environment, which reflects their attitude founded on doing things well in a concrete fashion and doing good in a sincere way.*

Social: Positioning the brand is not about conspicuous but of referent value. This is related to intellectualism, Art and aesthetic sensibilities that capture beauty, grace and loveliness through a nuanced and subtle understanding of the Tod's brand. *"Whether it is a case of responsible entrepreneurship or sustainable agriculture, of "good" art or other instances of excellence, the subjects were chosen for their good manners, pride, sense of responsibility and competence, from which their implicit "good taste" stems."*

### **Theoretical and Management Implications**

In the blogs the store environment is not considered. This may be because the consumer experience of the store are aligned between the brand personality, the store personality and the consumer personality traits...*I am a Tod's person and buy into the Tod's lifestyle.* We may infer that there is a high degree of congruence in terms of brands functional qualities and psychological attributes within the flagship stores and that therefore the store becomes a place to reinforce the brand. The congruence distance is manifested when the consumer expectations of the brand are not met.

From our initial analysis there seems to be a mismatch between consumer brand perceptions and brand positioning as evidenced on the webpage and the blogs. In the majority of cases a key factor is when the service experience does meet with the service level expectations when purchasing Tod's products. Building on Porter and Clycomb (1997) we argue that the actual service encounter is critical and can either reinforce or undo all the corporate efforts to present the functional and symbolic qualities of the brand. We suggest that customer service and sales personal influence the degree of congruence between the consumer personality traits, brand personality and store personality.

Our contribution adds to a growing body of work (Wiedmann et al., 2007) that helps explain luxury consumption by focusing on the dimensions of value. This work is enhanced by adding from our findings the dimensions of time value, social responsibility value and knowledge value. These additional value dimensions are clearly embedded in the Tod's brand.

First, the value of time has been shown to underpin all the dimensions of luxury discussed above. This appears to be multifaceted and related to aspects of brand longevity and history; time is embedded from idea to final product; waiting time; time involved in acquiring and owning time. By acknowledging time, the Tod's brand is both timely and timeless.

Second we highlight social values. The brand endorses the view of itself as worthy and virtuous. It links clearly to wider humanitarian causes as well as involvement and continuing synergy with the Arts patronage. Tod's embodies a certain lifestyle, intellectualism that is generous and good.

Finally, the value of knowledge is critical. The expertise, intellectualism and culture embedded within the brand effuse Italian-style and Italian-ness firmly rooted in their native culture. Brand stories are choreographed with Art, grace, elegance, beauty, history and heritage. For the consumer wearing Tod's is a signifier of understanding the package of all these elements. It is an understatement of knowledge embedded in the brand and of something exclusive, intangible and valued. The final price of a luxury product is a bundle of

all these values, most of which are intangible and invisible, but the consumer has to be educated enough to know what they are buying into. In the case of the Tod's brand, the extravagant/ prestige seeker (Heine 2009) is unlikely to appreciate the nuances and intellectualism of such a subtle brand.

Our findings reinforce the importance of store image and the relationship with store personality in terms of connection with the brand personality. All elements of store image, for example physical conditions, atmosphere and aesthetics are taken as given and not commented upon by consumers on the blogs. The overwhelming majority of conversations focus around personal experiences and interaction with the sales person. An explanation may be the base line of expectations with respect to other store details because the people entering Tod's flagships stores are very aware of the brand and brand image. When the consumer experiences happen to be negative there is a disconnection between their consumers' understanding of what the brand represents and personification of the brand through the salesperson. This knowledge and understanding of the products' function and symbolic connections with the brand must be communicated to the consumer. In so doing, the sales encounter mirrors the brand status through appropriate interaction.

It is difficult to try to understand the entire picture at this level and the congruence between brand personality, consumer personality and store personality. It becomes more complicated when trying to understand levels of overlap between individual items within the constructs. Further research is needed to test and refine our framework to determine the strength of relationships we have proposed based on this pilot study.



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