The Effect of using Serifs in Brand Names on Luxury Perception

Abstract

Fonts play a significant role in establishing a distinct brand identity. In this study, we investigate how the inclusion of Serifs affects consumers' perception of luxury. We use two sets of stimuli: actual brand names and ad hoc-designed fictitious brand names.
Our findings show that the presence of Serifs has a positive impact on luxury perception. This is evident from the high scores in dimensions such as opulence and elitism, as per Heine's luxury brand personality framework. A key practical implication of our research is that marketers and designers may find it advantageous to choose Serif fonts for brands that aim to evoke a sense of luxury among consumers.

Keywords: brand identity, font type, serif, luxury, consumer decision-making

Typeface of brand names: the role of Serifs in the perception of luxury

Introduction

In recent decades, interest in the psychological and physiological factors driving consumer behavior has grown within marketing literature (Shiv & Yoon, 2012). Scholars have explored cognitive decision processes and the role of emotions in consumer purchasing. This trend is seen in consumer psychology and emerging consumer neuroscience (Shaw & Bagozzi, 2018; Plassmann et al., 2015). Additionally, specific brand design elements, like font modification, have gained attention for their impact on consumer perception (Lieven et al., 2015). However, does a golden inscription on red satin truly convey luxury? Doyle and Bottomley (2006) found that font-product congruity influences perceptions of logos, impacting brand identity (Walsh et al., 2010). In luxury, symbolic value is crucial (Hennigs et al., 2013; Park & Ahn, 2021). Brands aim to stand out individually (Wänke et al., 2007). Elements in brand design enhance visual salience, aiding identity (Van Der Lans et al., 2008). Key elements drawing consumer attention to brand names remain undefined in marketing. Brands are adapting logos to align with market trends. Fashion luxury brands, icons in urban culture, shift toward inclusivity with basic Sans Serif fonts (Pedeliento et al., 2021; Zanette et al., 2022). This study examines the role of Serifs in luxury perception through font selection. We offer three contributions: demonstrating brand design's influence on perception, showing how Serifs enhance luxury perception, and proposing practical implications and research directions.

Luxury Brand Personality and Typeface Personality
Previous studies have examined how fonts in brand names are linked to consumer perceptions (J Mackiewicz & Moeller, 2004). Luxury items and perfumes often use italics, scripted, ornate fonts associated with "luxury" and "dignity" (Poffenberger, 1923; Doyle & Bottomley, 2004; Magnini & Kim, 2016).
In 2008, Grohmann highlighted another dimension by demonstrating the link between brand recall and the use of compressed fonts. This insight was further expanded by Pillai et al. in 2012, who explored how font size influences comprehension, adding to the nuanced understanding of font psychology in branding.
These insights suggest that fonts mirror the traits of target consumers, thus adding a layer of personalization in brand strategy.
A significant expansion to the brand personality domain in the context of luxury brands was made by Heine in 2010. Heine proposed a nuanced framework for understanding luxury brand personality, introducing five specific dimensions: Modernity, Eccentricity, Opulence, Elitism, and Strength. This framework suggests that luxury brands not only convey traditional aspects of wealth and exclusivity (Opulence and Elitism) but also incorporate contemporary values (Modernity), unique or unconventional attributes (Eccentricity), and a sense of durability or resilience (Strength). This comprehensive framework has since provided a deeper insight into the complex personality profiles of luxury brands.

Font Type and Serifs
Typefaces hinge on line, weight, orientation, and size (Thangaraj, 2004). Serifs, short lines extending from letters, serve as a salient feature (Merriam-Webster, 2021). Serifs boost reading speed and fluency (Arditi & Cho, 2005; Bernard et al., 2003; Mohamad Ali et al., 2013; Im et al., 2010). Serifs reflect Formal, Mature, Practical, and Stable traits (Juni & Gross, 2008).

This research addresses Serifs' impact on luxury perception in logos and visual identity creation. We hypothesize that Serif fonts enhance luxury perception compared to Sans Serif fonts. The study aims to provide practical managerial insights.

Methods

Design and Participants
This ongoing study has employed a one-group post-only quasi-experiment. Participants assessed fictitious brand logos (anagrams) with and without Serifs in font type (see *Materials*). The sample included 13 men and 14 women, aged around 23.11±2.7 years. This demographic choice aimed to explore perceptions among a group of young consumers, who are relatively new to the luxury brand landscape. Focusing on this specific group allowed for a detailed investigation into how young individuals begin to perceive and react to luxury brands. All participants evaluated test stimuli after one exposure (see *Procedures and Measures*).

Materials
A set of 100 internationally recognized apparel brand names was initially chosen ("original brand names" or OBNs). Brands were classified as luxury or non-luxury based on their official websites and expert evaluations (according to Heine's framework). Luxury brand names with and without Serifs were considered, resulting in a subset of 13 luxury and 15 non-luxury fictitious brand names (FBNs). Control brand names (CBNs) were also selected.

Procedures and Measures
Participants viewed 108 brand logos for 3 seconds each and rated triads of adjectives on a 5-point Likert scale based on Heine's framework. The experiment lasted 30 to 40 minutes.

Statistics
The mean values ± standard deviations are presented for each questionnaire dimension from Heine's framework, as well as for the "Luxury Index" which combines the "Opulence" and "Elitism" dimensions. In the subset of Fictitious Brand Names (FBNs) with Serifs from the "non-luxury" original brand name group, four values are missing. To account for repeated measures, fixed-effects linear regression models are utilized to compute p-values. Additionally, logistic regression assesses whether the Luxury Index effectively classifies luxurious brand perceptions. Statistical analyses were conducted using R Studio, version 3.6.2.

Results
Among the sample of original brand names (OBNs, N=100), the prevalence of typefaces with Serifs was 58% in the subset of Luxury brand names and 34% in the subset of non-Luxury brand names.
We showed a significant difference for the dimensions of Opulence and Elitism between Luxury and non-Luxury CBNs (see Table 1). We hence performed a logistic regression model considering as dependent variable the belonging to the group "Luxury", and as independent variables both the average total score of HQ and the average Luxury Index (LI) attributed by the two experts (RL and SG) to the list of OBNs. The LI was defined as the sum of the dimensions Opulence and Elitism. Our findings show that the LI was a good classifier of the group of brand names (Luxury or non-Luxury) (β= 3.51, p-value= 0.0015), while the total score of HQ was not (β=-0.09, p-value= 0.75).

Finally, we compared brand names with Serifs to those without Serifs, by testing 100 FBNs (50 for each group). Results are summarized in Table 2.

Also, for these FBNs, designed to disentangle brand identity and brand name perception, we found significantly higher perception of brand names as luxurious (Luxury Index) for Serif anagrams compared to Sans Serif ones. Moreover, comparing the subset of FBNs with Serifs to the subset with Sans Serifs, it can be noticed that the mean value of Luxury Index for FBNs derived from luxury OBNs in the Sans Serif subset is even lower (5.54 ± 2.18) than the mean value of Luxury Index for FBNs derived from non-luxury OBNs in the Serif subset (5.77 ± 2.12); the corresponding t-test returns a p-value of 0.0514.

Discussion

Our research delves into the connection between the use of Serif fonts in brand names and how consumers perceive those brands as luxurious. Our empirical study reveals that Serifs play a significant role in shaping brand perception, enhancing the dimension associated with luxury when compared to brand names without Serifs, known as Sans Serif fonts.

While previous empirical studies have explored the use of Serif fonts primarily for improving text readability (e.g., Keage et al., 2014), there has been limited research on evaluating text appraisal based on font type (Chaparro et al., 2006). Within the vast array of marketing strategies, the importance of meticulously selecting the right font to enhance a brand's identity often remains underestimated (e.g., Henderson et al., 2004).

For established luxury brands, isolating individual factors contributing to the perception of luxury can be challenging.

In our experimental setup, we systematically identified the contribution of Serif typefaces by carefully selecting, generating, and evaluating fictitious brand names. Brand names are a crucial element in crafting a visual brand identity, and the influence of typefaces on visual salience is well-documented. Notably, the relevance of fonts, including specific elements like the presence of Serifs, in the realm of luxury brands has been an underexplored research area.

Managerial implications

The managerial implications are quite immediate. Serif typefaces can be harnessed to establish a brand identity with luxury attributes, whereas Sans-Serif fonts may be favored when a brand aims to convey messages of affordability, accessibility, strength, or modernity. From the initial stages of brand design to the subtle messages the brand imparts to consumers' subconscious (as described by Zaichkowsky, 2010), fonts serve as pivotal elements in communicating specific brand images or promotions to observers (consumers) (as also discussed by Doyle & Bottomley, 2006).

Fonts have the potential to tap into latent archetypal knowledge within consumers.

Companies should confront the challenge of selecting the appropriate font, particularly when launching a new brand or product, rebranding a product line, or repositioning themselves in the market. Moreover, combining marketing tools such as storytelling with specific fonts can facilitate the delivery of effective emotional messages. These synergistic marketing strategies aim to enhance the appraisal and trust associated with brand identity, ultimately leading to long-term revenue growth for the firm. Lastly, a careful use of fonts can help avoid litigation costs stemming from trademark or copyright infringement.

Limitations and Future Research Activities

One of the primary limitations of this ongoing study is the small size of the sample. However, the specific age range (i.e., young consumers) offers a unique insight into a demographic segment still developing their brand perceptions and preferences. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the need for a broader and more diverse sample. In future research, we aim to expand our participant pool to include a wider age range and various population segments, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of consumer reactions to brand logos.

Conclusion
In summary, this paper presents empirical evidence that underscores the importance of using Serif fonts to communicate a sense of luxury in a brand name. The influence of fonts on the evaluation of luxury brands has received limited attention until now.
Advertisers and designers can leverage the use of Serif fonts when aiming to evoke consumers' perceptions of luxury, particularly in terms of opulence and elitism or exclusivity.
Future research activities applying consumer neuroscience techniques could potentially provide additional insights into the role of fonts and other visual elements in shaping brand identity and influencing brand evaluation.

Tables

Table 1. Comparing Heine's axes scores among CBNs. Luxury vs non-luxury

Heine's framework axes	Original Luxury (mean±sd)	Original non-luxury (mean±sd)	p-value[a]
Total score	15.8±3.4	15.0±2.9	0.021*
Elitism	3.6±1.2	3.0±1.2	<0.001**
Opulence	3.5±1.1	2.9±1.1	<0.001**
Modernity	2.8±1.1	3.1±1.0	0.019*
Eccentricity	2.7±1.1	2.7±1.0	0.628
Strength	3.2±1.1	3.2±1.0	0.943
Luxury Index (Elitism+Opulence)	7.1±2.1	5.9±2.1	<0.001**

[a] Fixed-effects linear regression models.
Significance codes: *<0.05, **<0.001
Data of continuous variables are expressed as means ± standard deviations.

Table 2. Comparing Heine's axes scores among FBNs. Serif vs non-Serif

Heine's framework axes	Serif (mean±sd)	non-Serif (mean±sd)	p-value[a]
Total score	14.2±3.6	13.5±3.5	<0.001**
Elitism	3.0±1.2	2.6±1.2	<0.001**
Opulence	2.9±1.1	2.5±1.1	<0.001**
Modernity	2.7±1.0	2.7±1.1	0.379
Eccentricity	2.7±1.1	2.6±1.1	0.065
Strength	2.9±1.1	3.1±1.2	<0.001**
Luxury Index (Elitism+Opulence)	5.9±2.2	5.1±2.1	<0.001**

[a] Fixed-effects linear regression models.
Significance codes: *<0.05, **<0.001
Data of continuous variables are expressed as means ± standard deviations.