

Extended Abstract:

**Marketing of Ultra-Luxury Brands:
How Can Brands Motivate Rich Consumers?**

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This study delves into emotional brand attachment within the ultra-luxury sector, focusing specifically on ultra-high-net-worth (UHNW) consumers. Emotional brand attachment plays a critical role in influencing consumer loyalty, decision-making, and brand advocacy. Although much has been written about luxury brands, ultra-luxury brands, which are characterized by their exclusivity, exceptional craftsmanship, and deeply personalized experiences, require a more focused understanding. Through in-depth interviews with 21 UHNW individuals conducted at the prestigious Watches & Wonders event in Geneva 2024, this research uncovers the emotional drivers that shape consumer attachment in the ultra-luxury sector. The study finds that, beyond traditional motivations like status, factors such as privacy, a sense of belonging, personal connections with brand creators, and exclusive community experiences are key to fostering emotional attachments with ultra-luxury brands. These aspects differentiate ultra-luxury from mainstream luxury brands and highlight the importance of discretion, insider status, and community in ultra-luxury consumption. Managerial implications for brands in this sector and future research directions are also discussed.

Introduction

Emotional brand attachment is a deep emotional bond between a consumer and a brand, often influencing loyalty and advocacy. This concept has been widely researched within mainstream luxury brands, where attachment helps consumers form strong connections with brands that symbolize their identity, values, and aspirations (Park et al., 2010). In the luxury market, emotional attachments lead consumers to see brands as irreplaceable parts of their lives, enhancing customer loyalty and reducing price sensitivity (Thomson et al., 2005).

While emotional brand attachment in luxury brands is well-documented, there is a notable gap in understanding how it functions within the ultra-luxury sector. Ultra-luxury brands differ from mainstream luxury brands like Rolex or Louis Vuitton by appealing to an even narrower, more elite segment of high-net-worth individuals. These UHNW consumers form emotional attachments based on factors such as exclusivity, craftsmanship, and personalized experiences (Hudders et al., 2013). For these consumers, owning an ultra-luxury product is not only about status; it is also a reflection of their personal values, tastes, and aspirations. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the unique drivers of emotional brand attachment in the ultra-luxury segment.

Luxury and Ultra-Luxury Brands

Luxury brands are often associated with superior craftsmanship, a rich heritage, exclusivity, and a sense of aspiration (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). These brands create emotional attachments by offering not just functional value but also symbolic and experiential value. In contrast, ultra-luxury brands take these concepts to a higher level, targeting a niche market of UHNW individuals. Ultra-luxury brands operate in a realm where exclusivity is paramount, and even access to the brand itself can be part of the value proposition. This exclusivity fosters a deeper emotional connection, as UHNW consumers perceive ultra-luxury products as not just items of status but also as reflections of their unique identities and values (Fuchs et al., 2013). Ultra-luxury brands, such as Greubel Forsey or De Bethune, tend to maintain a

lower profile than mainstream luxury brands, focusing on discretion and insider appeal. These brands offer deeply personalized experiences and products, often through custom designs or limited editions, which enhance the emotional bond between the consumer and the brand (Kapferer, 2014). For UHNW individuals, the rarity and personalization of these products contribute significantly to their emotional attachment, as they feel they possess something that is truly unique and tailored to their tastes. In summary, ultra-luxury brands as compared to luxury brands are significantly more exclusive and provide a superior craftsmanship and personalization and are especially much more expensive so that they only are affordable for UHNW individuals.

Consumer Preferences Towards Ultra-Luxury Brands

UHNW consumers often prioritize privacy, exclusivity, and insider recognition over status and visibility, which are more prominent drivers of mainstream luxury consumption. Ultra-luxury consumers are less concerned with using their purchases to display wealth to the general public and more focused on aligning with brands that reflect their personal values and identity (Hudders et al., 2013). This shift has led to the rise of the "quiet luxury" trend, which emphasizes understated consumption that is recognized only by a small, elite group of insiders. Quiet luxury aligns with the desires of UHNW individuals who seek products that signify refinement, craftsmanship, and exclusivity without being immediately recognizable to the average consumer (Kapferer, 2014).

In this context, ultra-luxury brands offer more than just products; they provide a complete lifestyle experience. For many UHNW consumers, purchasing an ultra-luxury item involves an entire journey—from exclusive personalized services to private events where they can engage deeply with the brand. These experiences foster a sense of belonging to an exclusive community, strengthening the emotional connection between the consumer and the brand (Ko et al., 2019). This emotional attachment is further reinforced by the consumer's belief that their association with the brand affirms their personal identity and reflects their unique tastes.

Emotional Brand Attachment

Emotional brand attachment is a complex construct that goes beyond the functional attributes of a product. It involves psychological processes where consumers develop a deep, lasting bond with a brand. Emotional brand attachment can be described through concepts like proximity maintenance (the desire to remain close to the brand) and separation distress (the discomfort felt when separated from the brand) (Park et al., 2010). Consumers who form strong emotional attachments to brands often view these brands as integral to their self-concept, perceiving the brand as irreplaceable.

For ultra-luxury brands, emotional attachment plays a crucial role in fostering loyalty, reducing price sensitivity, and encouraging repeat purchases (Thomson et al., 2005). UHNW consumers who are emotionally attached to ultra-luxury brands are not only loyal but also willing to defend their relationship with the brand, even in the face of service failures or price increases. This attachment is built through the symbolic and experiential value that ultra-luxury brands provide, such as exclusivity, personalized experiences, and a sense of belonging to an elite community (Fournier, 1998).

Theoretical Framework: Attachment Theory and Ultra-Luxury Brands

Attachment theory, which originated in psychology to explain the emotional bonds between individuals, has been adapted to the study of consumer-brand relationships. According to attachment theory, consumers form emotional bonds with brands in a similar way to how they form attachments to people, seeking proximity to the brand and experiencing distress when separated from it (Bowlby, 1980). In the context of ultra-luxury brands, emotional attachment is driven by the brand's exclusivity, craftsmanship, and personalized experiences, which make the brand an integral part of the consumer's identity (Fournier, 1998).

Unlike mainstream luxury brands, where emotional attachment is often driven by social status and visibility, ultra-luxury brands cultivate a more intimate relationship with consumers. This relationship is characterized by high levels of brand involvement, where the consumer is deeply engaged with the brand's history, craftsmanship, and values (Park et al., 2010). UHNW consumers often take an active interest in the brand's creation process, which further strengthens their emotional bond with the brand.

Methodology: Empirical Study at Watches & Wonders Geneva 2024

The qualitative study for this research was conducted at the Watches & Wonders event in Geneva 2024, one of the world's premier luxury watch fairs featuring the finest horology brands. The event provided access to a concentrated group of UHNW individuals, allowing the researchers to explore the drivers of emotional brand attachment in the ultra-luxury sector. A total of 21 UHNW consumers, all of whom were existing customers of a single independent ultra-luxury watch brand, were selected for in-depth interviews. The sample was carefully chosen to ensure diversity in nationality and experience with the brand, with respondents hailing from countries such as Mexico, India, Switzerland, and China.

The interviews were conducted during the VIP day of Watches & Wonders, in a private and luxurious setting that reflected the exclusive nature of the event. The interview environment, which included VIP lounges and personal attention, created a relaxed atmosphere conducive to intimate discussions about the respondents' emotional attachment to the brand. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to share personal insights about their relationship with the brand, their motivations for purchasing ultra-luxury watches, and the emotional significance of being part of an exclusive ultra-luxury brand community. The chosen brand clearly represents the broader ultra-luxury segment, so that the findings can extend to other ultra-luxury brands in related categories (e.g., yachts, private jets).

Key Findings

1. Belonging to an Exclusive Community:

One of the most prominent findings was the role of belonging to an exclusive community in fostering emotional attachment to ultra-luxury brands. For many respondents, emotional attachment went beyond social status; it was about being part of a family-like community that shared their passion for the brand. Exclusive events, such as private factory tours and intimate collector gatherings, allowed consumers to form close bonds with the brand and with other collectors, creating a sense of belonging that transcended the mere act of purchasing a product. One respondent remarked, "It's not just about owning the watch—it's about being part of a family and experiencing everything the brand has to offer".

2. Craftsmanship and Personal Relationships:

Craftsmanship was another critical driver of emotional brand attachment. Many respondents expressed a deep appreciation for the artisanal craftsmanship behind their watches, which they viewed as pieces of art rather than mere luxury products. The emotional connection was further enhanced by personal relationships with the brand's watchmakers and owners. Several participants mentioned that visiting the manufacture and interacting with the artisans who created their watches gave them a sense of pride and intimacy with the brand. One respondent from Switzerland stated, "The relationship with the people who make the watches makes the entire experience personal and meaningful".

3. Quiet Luxury and Insider Recognition:

The trend of "quiet luxury" was another key factor in shaping emotional attachment to ultra-luxury brands. UHNW consumers appreciated the fact that their ultra-luxury watches, though highly valuable, were not immediately recognizable to the general public. This discretion was appealing to those who valued privacy and subtlety in their luxury consumption. One participant from India explained, "The charm of my watch is that most people don't know its worth. Only true collectors can recognize it, and that makes it even more special".

4. Safety and Luxury Shaming:

Concerns about safety and luxury shaming also emerged as significant factors in shaping emotional attachment to ultra-luxury brands, especially among respondents from regions like China where overt displays of wealth are increasingly scrutinized. In such markets, ultra-luxury consumers valued brands that allowed them to enjoy high-value products without attracting unwanted attention. One respondent from Shanghai explained, "I prefer a brand that allows me to enjoy luxury without flaunting it. It's about appreciating the craftsmanship and not having to worry about being judged".

Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that emotional brand attachment in the ultra-luxury sector is shaped by more nuanced drivers than in mainstream luxury markets. While traditional luxury brands often emphasize wealth and status signaling, ultra-luxury brands foster emotional connections through exclusivity, craftsmanship, and personalized experiences. For UHNW consumers, the allure of ultra-luxury brands lies in their ability to offer unique, deeply personalized experiences and a sense of belonging to an exclusive community. The trend of "quiet luxury," where discretion and privacy are prioritized over visibility, plays a crucial role in shaping emotional attachment, particularly in markets where luxury shaming and safety concerns are prevalent (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012).

Implications for Management

For managers of ultra-luxury brands, the findings highlight the importance of creating personalized, exclusive experiences for their UHNW clientele. Brands should focus on fostering personal relationships between consumers and the artisans behind their products, as these relationships are key drivers of emotional attachment. Additionally, managers should embrace the trend of quiet luxury, positioning their brands as symbols of refinement and exclusivity without overt displays of wealth. This approach will not only resonate with current

consumer preferences but also help brands navigate the challenges of luxury shaming and safety concerns in key markets such as China.

Future Research

Future research could explore emotional brand attachment across a wider array of ultra-luxury categories, such as private jets, yachts, or high-end art. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of emotional brand attachment over time would provide valuable insights into how the drivers of attachment may shift as consumers' relationships with ultra-luxury brands deepen. Further cross-cultural research is also needed to understand how emotional brand attachment varies across different regions and cultural contexts.

Some of the aspects that have been identified as specific to ultra-luxury brands, such as reliance on community-building events, are also seen in premium brands. For instance, brands like BMW's 7 Series use similar strategies to enhance brand attachment. This could be an interesting area for future research: which success factors are similar and which are different for ultra-luxury brands versus regular luxury brands.

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