The Luxury Brand Personality Traits
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Abstract
There is a growing interest in the brand personality concept, namely because it offers a systematic approach to developing ever more important symbolic benefits. Although luxury brands are characterised by especially strong symbolic benefits, there is only a relatively small literature base concerning the symbolic meaning of luxury brands, which was extended with the first luxury brand personality concept in a previous study. The objective of this article is to enhance the existing luxury brand personality concept with a detailed investigation of possible luxury brand personality traits. To that end, the article outlines a specific approach to the analysis of the luxury brand personality including the repertory grid method (RGM) and a specific qualitative data analysis procedure. Based on personal interviews with 51 luxury consumers, the five luxury personality dimensions were differentiated with 49 personality traits. The results offer marketers a detailed framework for the development of a luxury brand personality.

Keywords: luxury brand, brand identity, brand personality, repertory grid method
The Luxury Brand Personality Traits

The focus of brand differentiation is shifting increasingly to symbolic benefits (Kapferer 2008, p. 173) mainly because of changing market conditions and consumer preferences. On the one hand, the functional benefits of many products on the market today become increasingly equivalent and exchangeable. However, on the other hand, an increasing number of consumers are engaging in symbolic consumption and may choose a product mainly due to the similarity between their personality and the symbolic personality of the product or brand (c.f. Trommsdorff and Heine 2008, p. 1672; Vigneron and Johnson 1999, p. 434). These trends lead to an increased interest in the brand personality concept, which offers a systematic approach to create symbolic benefits (c.f. Esch 2008, p. 79).

The symbolism of luxury brands conveys to a large extent human personality traits (c.f. Vigneron and Johnson 2004, p. 490). Although symbolic benefits are an essential feature of these brands and often even exceed their functional benefits and even though Vernier and Ghewy (2006, p. 4) attest them to have an “aura”, there is only a small literature base about the symbolic meaning of luxury brands. Some authors concentrated on some particular symbolic characteristics including Dubois et al. (2005, p. 123), Esteve and Hieu-Dess (2005), Kisabaka (2001, p. 192 et sqq.) and Ourahmoune and Nyeck (2008). In most of the literature, the luxury symbolism is only mentioned circumstantially in descriptions about luxury brand characteristics (e.g. by Lipovetsky and Roux (2003, p. 51 et seq.), Mutscheller (1992, p. 65), Valtin (2004, p. 26), Vickers and Renand (2003, p. 469), Vernier and Ghewy (2006, p. 4) and by Vigneron and Johnson (2004, p. 494). In an earlier study, the literature base was extended with the first brand personality concept especially for luxury brands (Heine 2009). It consists of five distinct dimensions, which offer essential guidelines for the design of a luxury brand personality. However, luxury brands differentiate from their peer brands and build a competitive advantage with a unique combination of specific personality facets, which cannot be captured with the existing brand personality concept.

Consequently, the objective of this article is to extend the existing luxury brand personality concept with a comprehensive catalogue of personality traits, which marketers could use to compose a unique luxury brand personality. According to the explorative stage of the area of research, a qualitative methodology will be proposed that includes the repertory grid method (RGM).

The article is organised into another three parts. The second part forms the conceptual groundwork: It explains the concept of brand personality, its common research methodology and outlines the research approach of the previous study including the repertory grid method and the resulting luxury brand personality dimensions. The third part outlines the latest empirical study. It demonstrates the specific research objectives, the sampling and interviewing procedure and the data analysis approach and presents the results. The article concludes with a discussion of the results and its benefits for researchers and marketers.

1. Conceptual Groundwork
1.1. The Status of Brand Personality in Brand Management

The modern understanding of a brand is consumer and identity oriented. Brands are regarded as images in the minds of consumers and other target groups. In its dependence on the human identity, brands are also seen as having an identity. The brand identity comprises of all associations that are intended by the company (Aaker 1996, p. 68). It corresponds with the intra-company self-perception of a brand, which determines precisely how the brand should appear to the external target groups. It sets the foundations for brand positioning, which relies
only on the most relevant characteristics for brand differentiation. The *brand image* constitutes the antipole of the brand identity. It corresponds with the public-perception of a brand and is the result of marketing measures and other consumer experiences with it (Esch 2008, p. 91).

The elements of common identity concepts can be divided into two main components. The first component covers the physical-functional, mainly product-related associations to a brand and the other component includes the abstract, and emotional (c.f. Kapferer 2008, p. 171 et sqq.).

**Figure 1: The Status of Brand Personality in Brand Management**

*Luxury brands* are distinguished from non-luxury brands by product-related associations. Therefore, the essential characteristics of luxury products correspond largely to those of luxury brands and lead to the following definition: Luxury brands are regarded as images in the minds of consumers that comprise of associations with a high price, quality, aesthetic, rarity and specialty (c.f. Trommsdorff and Heine 2008, p. 1670; Meffert and Lasslop 2003, p. 6). Just as Dior differs from Chanel, it is essential for every luxury brand to differentiate itself from other peer brands. This is achieved mainly with symbolic characteristics, which are covered by the emotional brand identity component. This component corresponds largely to the brand personality, which is incorporated into the brand management process in figure 1 and explained below.

1.2. The Brand Personality Concept

According to Aaker (1997, p. 347), the brand personality refers “to the set of human characteristics associated with a brand.” It covers characteristics of a person or its style from a self-image (what a person could think about him- or herself) and a social image perspective (what others could think about a person). Aaker developed the most established theoretical framework of brand personality dimensions and a scale to measure them by drawing on research about the Big Five human personality traits. More than 600 U.S. respondents rated a set of mass market brands on more than one hundred personality traits. Aaker consolidated these traits by factor analysis to five distinct dimensions including sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. While the framework claims general applicability across product categories, the dimensions might not be very descriptive for other cultures or specific categories (c.f. Austin et al. 2003, p. 81). Therefore, other studies followed in recent years, which usually replicated Aakers’ procedure to develop specific concepts for other cultures (e.g. for Germany by Mäder 2005) and particular categories (e.g. for restaurants by Siguaw et al. 1999). In the previous study a brand personality concept was developed for the luxury segment based on a qualitative research approach using the RGM. As the current study also builds on this method, it will be explained in the next section.

1.3. The Repertory Grid Method

This method was developed by Kelly (1955) for use in the field of psychotherapy but spread into a variety of different areas of research including marketing. One of its two central assumptions is that there is no direct, immediate access to objective reality, because everything that people know was filtered by individual perception and further information processing. Accordingly, people live in their unique subjective reality and all their actions can only refer to that. Another important assumption is that people attribute meaning to something and understand something (also a person, event, etc.) by comparing it with other things that they already know. A repertoire of personal constructs helps them to group everything according to its similarity and dissimilarity in order to reconstruct reality and their position
within that. Pupils, for instance, could use the construct “fair-unfair” to differentiate between
teachers; a new teacher would be judged upon that construct with reference to teachers they
already know. This demonstrates that personal constructs consist of binary oppositions and
that every new object is assigned a position within that dichotomy (Durgee 1986, p. 34). The
objective of RGM is to uncover the repertoire of personal constructs. The challenge is that
they are often difficult to express in verbal distinctions, because a great deal of them are
subconscious. Therefore relying on simple direct questioning is inadequate. According to its
theoretic base, RGM elicits personal constructs with an iterative process that requires
respondents to compare different triad combinations of stimuli, to express their constructs and
to relate the stimuli to the construct poles. Irrespective of its specific version, RGM leads to
structured data that facilitate elaborate analysis and interpretation (c.f. Eden and Jones 1984;
Fromm 2004).

1.4. Overview about the Previous Study
The objective of the previous study was to find out the essential personality dimensions that
consumers use to compare luxury brands. Therefore, heavy luxury consumers were required,
who have a deep understanding about luxury brands and their specific meanings. They were
selected based on two criteria: At first, they had to be millionaires (defined as individuals with
a net worth of at least one million euros). The study of Dubois and Duquesne (1993, p. 42)
indicates that wealthy people are not necessarily (heavy) luxury consumers. Therefore, the
second selection criterion required that participants actually consume them regularly. These
criteria were verified in a preliminary talk before the interview. In order to cover a big variety
of personality types, the selection of participants followed a snowball approach: Initially, a
very mixed group of students was selected for a seminar course at Technical University of
Berlin (TUB) and consequently, they acquired very different interview partners mainly from
their circle of acquaintances (c.f. Schnell et al. 1999, p. 280). The sample contains 31
respondents including 14 women and 17 men, mainly entrepreneurs, managers, experts from
different industries and heirs. The age distribution was balanced between 20 and 70 years.

The interviews were conducted according to the RGM procedure by two interviewers at a
time and took in each case about one to two hours. At the beginning, the interview referred to
fashion and later shifted also to another category that was chosen by the participants.

As a prerequisite for the data analysis, all interviews were audio-taped and transcribed
leading to hundreds of pages of verbal data. Then, a content analysis was conducted according
to Mayring (2002, p. 114 et sqq.). At the beginning, the associations were roughly arranged
into main categories. Then it followed an iterative process of reviewing and adapting these
categories until a reasonable system of categories was identified and all associations were
assigned to a category (c.f. Reynolds and Gutman 1988, p. 18 et seq.). In addition, results
were compared and consolidated with the results of another researcher, who conducted an
independent content analysis (c.f. Dubois et al. 2001, p. 7). The survey led to the first brand
personality concept especially for luxury brands, which will be outlined below.

1.5. The Luxury Brand Personality Dimensions
The results of the study suggest that consumers perceive that luxury brands have five distinct
personality dimensions. They are illustrated in figure 2 and include the following dimensions
(in order of the number of mentions by the respondents): modernity, eccentricity, opulence,
elitism and strength.

Figure 2: The Dimensions of the Luxury Brand Personality
The literature supports the results and therefore the applicability of RGM. There are similarities to psychological concepts, for example in the Big Five model between “Openness to Experiences” and Modernity and between “Agreeableness” and Elitism (c.f. John and Srivastava 1999, p. 105). Although the concept differs significantly from the brand personality by Aaker (1997, p. 352), there are also some similarities, especially between “Sophistication” and Elitism, between “Ruggedness” and Strength and also between “Excitement” and Eccentricity. Furthermore, there are similarities to findings in the luxury literature, for instance between the dimension “Excentrique“ by Esteve and Hieu-Dess (2005) and Eccentricity and between “Glamour vs. Understatement Luxury” by Kisabaka (2001, p. 130 et sqq.) and Opulence.

2. The Empirical Study
2.1. Research Objectives
The objective of the current study is to deepen the understanding of the luxury brand personality with an investigation of possible luxury brand personality traits. For the purpose of this study, a trait is defined as a basic aspect of a brand personality that cannot be further differentiated into additional personality facets. The resulting catalogue of luxury brand personality traits should meet the following requirements: Traits must be relevant and meaningful to consumers and descriptive of luxury brands (c.f. Aaker 1997, p. 349), i.e. there must be luxury brands representing the traits in the eyes of the consumers. Traits should not be ambiguous or synonymous, but as clear and distinct as possible. In addition, the trait catalogue should be as complete as possible, i.e. it should contain preferably all personality traits that luxury brands represent. However, there are some challenges for the identification of brand personality traits, which will be explained subsequently.

2.2. Challenges for the Identification of Brand Personality Traits
First of all, symbolic characteristics are complex. On the one hand, there are many words that describe similar characteristics and on the other, there are many ambiguous and contextual words, which could represent different dimensions, for example “natural” or “playful” (c.f. John et al. 1988, p. 174). In addition, results of the previous study demonstrate that respondents use different words with a more or less positive connotation depending on their preferences for the personality traits. For instance, respondents with preferences for the eccentric pole described the opposite pole with “conventional, conform and boring”, while respondents with preferences for the decent pole described it (themselves) as “classic and elegant” (Heine 2009, p. 10). These requirements and challenges led to a specific research approach, which will be outlined in the following sections.

2.3. Research Principles
The modern understanding of a brand as “images in the minds of consumers […]” (as described above) demonstrates the growing consumer-orientation in marketing. Also consistent with the previous study, the research design builds on a strong consumer-orientation. This means that both the stimuli and results should originate from the consumer as much as possible. Consequently, the study builds also on the subject-subject-approach of qualitative research (c.f. Bortz and Döring 2002, p. 343; Lindlof and Taylor 2002, p. 188). This means that the respondent is not regarded as simply an object or data supplier, but as an equal partner, whose statements are principally trustworthy. However, just as a company should not increase the creative leeway of its employees without implementing some control functions (such as Management by Objectives), consumer-orientation in marketing research requires a theory-based framework – because not everything that respondents say actually represents brand personality traits. Therefore, a set of selection criteria was defined that helps to identify them.
2.4. Selection Criteria for Brand Personality Traits
Because of the ambiguity of many words that describe a personality, each trait has to consist of three adjectives. These triad combinations help to create clear and distinct traits. According to the definition of personality traits, they must be adjectives suitable for the description of a person or its style, not only for the description of an object such as “red” or “metallic”. These human characteristics must be descriptive of brands, i.e. they do not comprise physical characteristics such as “tall” or “slimy”. In addition, traits should be basic – without any possible sub-categories. They should have preferably a neutral or positive connotation according to the respondents with preferences for the respective trait. They should include possibly only common and generally intelligible words. Traits also should be as metaphorical and figurative as possible in order to ensure their relevance and practicability for brand communications. Finally, they should not comprise general evaluations such as “beautiful” or “ugly” (c.f. Mäder 2005, p. 65).

2.5. Sampling Procedure
The investigation of luxury brand images with an open interviewing approach requires participants with a sound understanding about these brands. Furthermore, it requires a preferably heterogeneous mix of different personality types to ensure that it captures all relevant constructs. Therefore, the sample of heavy luxury consumers includes a mixed group of personality types (from an old lady who inherited a big bakery chain to a young man who operates a gambling business), who all possess an extensive knowledge of luxury brands. Nevertheless, the results demonstrated that more than 85 percent of the respondents favour the discreet pole of the opulence dimension. That means that many of them are connoisseurs who might have already outgrown their period of conspicuous consumption. Therefore, the sample was extended to include aspirational and often more conspicuous young professionals. They also had to be very interested and active in luxury consumption. Consistent with the previous study, the selection of respondents was based on a preliminary talk and a snowball approach (as explained above). The sample contains 20 young professionals from a variety of industries including 12 women and 8 men between 25 and 35.

2.6. Interviewing Procedure
According to the approach of the previous study, the interviews started with an open discussion (free elicitation) with the participants according to Dubois et al. (2001, p. 7). Respondents were asked to describe a construct with at least three adjectives. Subsequently, brand associations were investigated according to the RGM procedure, which was complemented with the preference differences technique (c.f. Reynolds and Gutman 1988, p. 14). It required participants to describe in detail the differences in their preferences for luxury brands. Although respondents were free to choose their favourite luxury brands, they were not allowed to choose brands, which do not comply with the definition of luxury brands explained above. Subsequently, participants were faced with print adverts of their selected brands to stimulate them further. In addition, projective techniques were deployed to also capture brand characteristics that are subject to social bias. Participants were asked to describe characteristics that would be important to other types of luxury consumers (c.f. Fisher and Tellis 1998).

2.7. Data Analysis
The data from both the heavy luxury consumers and the young professionals was included in the analysis. The first step consisted of the data input: As mentioned earlier, the similarity between complex symbolic constructs of different people is difficult to determine. This is mainly because respondents use different words to describe a certain construct and sometimes
the same words to describe different constructs. However, it can be expected that there is an overlap of words that they use to describe a construct pole. In some cases there might be only an overlap of words describing the opposite (negative) pole. Consequently, it is necessary to find out which words are generally mentioned together to describe a construct pole (such as young and youthful). Therefore, a software tool was especially programmed using PHP/MySQL, which permitted efficient data entry and preparation. The data input screen required the project name, respondent name, positive traits and associated brands, negative traits and associated brands and trait preferences. The data was entered construct by construct for all 51 respondents. In total, the respondents delivered 487 constructs using 601 different words. The next step was to create a frequency table from a MySQL database inquiry. All words with no more than three mentions were eliminated in order to ensure the relevance of the traits for luxury brand management. There were 297 words remaining. Other inadequate words (non-adjectives, words with a negative connotation, etc.) were not yet eliminated, because they might still help to understand the meaning of a construct. Subsequently, a correlation matrix was calculated and a factor analysis was conducted using principal components analysis and varimax rotation. This led to 95 factors with an eigenvalue of more than 1. Each factor includes words that are often mentioned together and that could describe the same trait. The complexity of the symbolic meanings and the requirements for brand personality traits make it impossible to rely on mere quantitative analysis. However, the quantitative analysis helped to structure the data and to build a groundwork for the subsequent qualitative analysis, which started with the analysis of the first factor. Based on the selection criteria for brand personality traits, three words were selected that represent the trait best. The qualitative approach allows making some exceptions from the basic principles whenever it’s necessary or useful. For example, with the word “Understatement” a noun was selected in the German version because respondents mentioned it very often. Subsequently, the next factors were analysed and considered for further traits if they delivered new aspects. If a factor did not offer enough adequate words, the correlation matrix was used to identify further adjectives that describe a certain trait better. Finally, the results were translated from German into English based on a focus group with native English-speaking business students and reviewed by a professional translator. Thereby, the triad combinations made it easier to preserve the original meaning of the traits. The results will be illustrated in the following section.

2.8. Results

The analysis led to 49 brand personality traits, which are illustrated in figure 3. The objective of the study was to derive a catalogue of luxury brand personality traits (still) disregarding the relationships among them. However, for the sake of clarity, each trait was assigned to the personality dimension that it fits best (which is not yet based on empirical evidence). In addition, the figure displays the binary oppositions and related single traits. For example, there is the binary opposition “past-conscious, retrospective, non-modern” vs. “future-conscious, modern, progressive” with another single trait “traditional, classic, time-honoured”, which is assigned to the traditional pole. Interestingly, there are much more facets of eccentric brand personality traits than there are for decent personality traits. These results demonstrate that it is neither possible nor useful to constrain the trait catalogue to one-to-one binary oppositions. The resulting brand personality facets can be very specific, for example “shadowy, mysterious, eerie” or “dreamy, unreal, magical”.

Figure 3: The Luxury Brand Personality Traits
2.9. Discussion & Further Research

There are some essential benefits of RGM and the qualitative data analysis procedure. First of all, the quantitative approach is also influenced by subjective interventions of the researcher, especially by the pre-selection of traits and brands and by the determination of the number of factors in factor analysis. These decisions are even more difficult for the field of luxury, because researchers can rely only on its relatively small literature base. The qualitative research approach allowed exploration of the subject and the creation of a solid foundation also applicable to subsequent quantitative studies. According to the principle of consumer-orientation, respondents could select traits and brands as they desired. The set of traits certainly varies between different product categories. On the one hand, there might be important traits for a specific category, which are not included in the standard set of Aaker. On the other, the standard set probably contains traits that apply either to all or none of the brands in a specific category, which could lead to irrelevant dimensions. While the quantitative approach requires deleting ambiguous and contextual traits that load on multiple factors, RGM allowed participants to describe constructs with a group of words and the qualitative data analysis procedure allowed to decipher their varying contextual meanings for different constructs. Another advantage of RGM is that it delivers relevant binary oppositions, which correspond to both the human information processing and the requirements for the design of a brand identity and positioning.

The resulting trait catalogue has some practical implications for the luxury brand management. It offers marketers a detailed framework for the analysis of symbolic brand images and for the development of a brand personality for a start-up or an existing luxury brand.

For researchers, it offers a foundation for further research about luxury brand personality and to analyse its antecedents and consequences. For example, the catalogue of personality traits could be verified with another empirical study, potentially also for specific luxury industries, consumer segments or for different countries. Based on that, the catalogue could be adapted and extended with further personality facets. Moreover, the personality traits could be used to analyse the dimensions of the luxury brand personality with a quantitative consumer survey according to the approach of Aaker. In addition, the relationships between brand personality traits could be analysed in order to support brand managers in the selection of adequate trait combinations.

3. Conclusions

The methodological contributions of the paper include a specific research approach especially for the analysis of the luxury brand personality. It builds on the RGM and a qualitative data analysis procedure, which is guided from a structured, theory-based framework, but then again flexible enough to consider the ambiguous and contextual facets of brand personality. This approach is not intended to substitute, but rather compliment Aakers research methodology as it builds a fundament for quantitative empirical studies.

Besides that, the paper contributed to the existing knowledge of luxury brand management. It offers the first comprehensive concept of personality traits conveyed by luxury brands, which helps to decode the “aura” of luxury brands and assists marketers in the analysis of symbolic brand images and the development of a luxury brand personality.
Figures

Figure 1: The Status of Brand Personality in Brand Management

![Diagram showing the relationship between intra-corporate brand specifications, positioning of competitors, brand identity, and brand image.]

Source: According to Esch 2008, p. 91.

Figure 2: The Dimensions of the Luxury Brand Personality

- **Modernity**: the temporal perspective of a brand, which can either lie more in the past or in the present and future.
- **Eccentricity**: the level of discrepancy from social norms and expectations that is portrayed by the brand.
- **Opulence**: the level of conspicuousness of the symbols of wealth.
- **Elitism**: the level of status and exclusivity that is represented by the brand.
- **Strength**: the level of toughness and masculinity that is displayed by a brand.

Source: According to Heine 2009, p. 163.
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<td>honest, authentic, natural</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soft</td>
<td>Strength</td>
<td>Strong</td>
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<tr>
<td>female, feminine, womanly</td>
<td>male, manly, masculine</td>
<td>männlich, maskulin, manhaft</td>
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<td>weiblich, feminin, fräulich</td>
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<td>soft, gentle, tender</td>
<td>strong, assertive, resolute</td>
<td>stark, durchsetzungsfähig, entschlossen</td>
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<td>sanft, weich, zart</td>
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<td>graceful, dainty, charming</td>
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<td>graziose, anmutig, bezaubernd</td>
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<td>sensuous, romantic, emotional</td>
<td>direct, clear, realistic</td>
<td>direkt, klar, sachlich</td>
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<td>sinnlich, romantisch, gefühlschön</td>
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<td>carefree, unconcerned, happy-go-lucky</td>
<td>ambitious, successful, purposeful</td>
<td>ehrgeizig, erfolgreich, zielstrebig</td>
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<tr>
<td>sorglos, unbekümmert, leichteilig</td>
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References


Vernier Eric. Ghewy Pierre. La Banalisation Du Luxe. working paper 2006; No. 121. Université du Littoral Côte d’Opale.

