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Brand Identity in Luxury Fashion: Tommy Hilfiger Case Study

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Abstract: A significant aspect of the luxury fashion market is brand identity, which is important to relations with consumers. Despite its importance, brand identity in the luxury fashion industry is under-researched. Most studies focus on broader marketing techniques and financial performance, overlooking the importance of creating a corporate identity. This article defines luxury in historical, psychological, and economic terms. The author also focuses on consumer behaviour and market segmentation, referring to major players such as LVMH and Chanel, and examines market segmentation. She explores consumer loyalty and the role of brand identity in shaping perceptions through symbolism, heritage, and exclusivity. The study covers three topics: consumer understanding of brand identity, its impact on perception of luxury brands, and on customers. The qualitative approach, which included interviews with a sales representative and customers in the fashion industry, revealed that consumers have little understanding of brand identity and are unable to describe it. The results show that a strong brand identity fosters emotional bonds, loyalty, and support, thus influencing customer expectations and satisfaction. The availability of luxury consumer and retail outlets in Poland is very limited, which is why the study included participants from both Poland and the UK.

Keywords: brand identity, luxury fashion, consumer perspective, brand identity strategies

1. Introduction

The luxury fashion market, known for its exclusivity, high quality, and distinction, holds a significant place in the global market. A key element of this sector is brand identity, which distinguishes premium brands from the competition and strengthens emotional bonds with customers. Brand identity encompasses visual, aural, and experiential elements that shape consumer perception and behaviour. Despite its importance, the topic of brand identity in luxury fashion is poorly researched, usually focusing on broader marketing strategies, customer behaviour, or financial performance. Additionally, sustainability and ethical concerns are increasingly

influencing consumer choices, pressuring luxury fashion firms to be more transparent and accountable. However, there is a notable lack of transparency about their ecological and ethical policies, complicating consumers' buying decisions.

The review begins by defining luxury in a historical context and exploring the psychology of luxury consumption. It traces the history of luxury fashion from Europe's affluent courts to its current global relevance, examining factors motivating consumers to seek luxury items, such as self-concept, status signalling, and the pursuit of uniqueness. The contemporary luxury fashion market is then analysed, identifying major brands like Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy (LVMH) and Chanel, and discussing market segmentation and consumer targeting strategies.

The research defines the typical luxury fashion consumer and examines various levels of customer loyalty, considering demographics, wealth, lifestyle, and cultural influences. It explores how luxury fashion firms build and maintain distinct identities through symbolic meanings, heritage, craftsmanship, and exclusivity, emphasising the role of brand identity in differentiating luxury brands and fostering strong emotional connections with customers. The review also covers marketing and branding techniques, highlighting the importance of storytelling, personalised experiences, social media engagement, brand collaborations, limited editions, and experiential marketing.

Based on the literature review, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1. What is the understanding of brand identity among customers?

RQ2. What is the impact of brand identity on the perception of luxury fashion brands?

RQ3. What influence does brand identity have on customers?

To answer these questions, a qualitative research approach was chosen, involving interviews with six individuals: one salesperson from a premium clothing company and five clients of high-end fashion brands. The study aims to understand brand identity in luxury fashion from the perspectives of clients and staff and its impact on the company.

Structured interviews were conducted to gather participants' opinions on brand identity and exclusivity in luxury fashion. The data was analysed using thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes on exclusivity and brand identity. The article covers the scope of brand identity, focusing on luxury fashion brands with a case study of Tommy Hilfiger, conducted between April and June 2024. The article structure includes a review of luxury fashion, brand identity, research methodology, findings and discussion based on client interviews, and a case study of Tommy Hilfiger.

2. Literature Review

The research focuses on the diverse nature of luxury, looking at it from different perspectives, including social, economic, and subjective. Luxury is difficult to define, in the case of luxury fashion it is not a material object, but a concept inextricably

linked to society values and human goals (Anderson, 2015, p. 574). Luxury is socially perceived as a status symbol and a way of signalling money and power (Kim et al., 2018; Nave et al., 2018; Walasek et al., 2018). Economically, luxury is considered in terms of its significance in market differentiation (Faccioli et al., 2023) as well as its capacity to command premium pricing due to perceived exclusivity (Som & Blanckaert, 2015). The psychological components of luxury impact how luxury items meet emotional requirements such as the desire for individuality, self-expression, and personal fulfilment (Nave, 2018). One of the primary arguments is the subjective nature of luxury. What is considered luxurious varies greatly depending on individual preferences and cultural circumstances. This subjectivity makes luxury a complex and dynamic notion that is constantly redefined by consumers and the market.

Brand identity is an important component of a luxury brand's strategy, acting as the foundation for the brand's image, values, and consumer perceptions. Kapferer (2003) provided a more precise definition of brand identity. His Brand Identity Prism proposes that each brand should build its identity in six dimensions: physical appearance, personality, culture, relationship, customer reflection, and customer self-image.

Physique encompasses the brand's tangible features, such as its colour palette, design, packaging, and logo. These characteristics constitute the core of the brand's identity and are inextricably linked to its archetype, which communicates the brand's excellence.

Personality describes a brand's character or personality features, which are typically human-like. A brand's personality is shaped by its communication, which serves as the means for conveying information about its products or services, frequently personifying them in human terms. In brand identity, these characteristics develop from within the brand. Brand personality and customer self-image are inextricably intertwined, as customers frequently identify with a brand section that represents these characteristics.

Culture shows the values, beliefs, and standards that the brand supports and promotes. Brand culture serves as a company's ethical guide, that influences the way it provides meaningful experiences to employees and customers. It also influences the values behind all brand expressions, customer interactions, and internal decisions. Culture is critical to distinguishing brands from competitors and ensuring a brand's distinctiveness, as it embodies the basic concepts that characterise its products and services. This dimension displays a brand's history, core values, and underlying beliefs, making it easier to identify the strongest companies.

Relationship describes a brand's emotional connection with its customers, as well as how it communicates and interacts with them. A company's marketing culture is crucial since it is strongly ingrained in the company's entire culture and manifests itself through customer interactions. Some customers may link to a brand primarily through economic variables such as cost and income, whilst others may connect with a brand by values such as care, trust, and partnership.

Customer reflection describes how consumers perceive themselves in relation to the brand and the impression they make when using or associating with it. Customer reflection is frequently confused with the target market (Kapferer, 2003). However, it focuses on how buyers picture themselves using a certain product. Consumers use distinct brands to define and express themselves. For example, consumers may look for a product that they believe will raise their social status.

Customer self-image describes the ideal self-perception that a brand wants its customers to have when they interact with it or use its products. Understanding customer self-image necessitates identifying the characteristics with which consumers identify and the qualities they want to see reflected in the company and its products. Self-image is a collection of personal ideas, thoughts, and feelings about oneself as they relate to other objects within socially determined bounds (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1994).

Brand identity is a crucial component of luxury fashion; therefore, multiple methods of conveying brand identity to customers have been created. An example of such practice is price anchoring which is very effectively used by Hermès to create the sense of scarcity and make the product more appealing resulting in a higher price. Luxury brands are made of “time, space and blood” (Kapferer, 2008), the essence of a perfect luxury brand. Heritage and craftsmanship are essential to brand image and its cultivation, and the consistency in representation of the brand creates a strong brand image. Celebrity branding has become increasingly popular over the years (Khatri, 2006). Advertisers use celebrities to promote a positive image of the brand and increase the campaign’s reach (Johnson et al., 2023). Marketing experts use celebrity endorsements to create a unique brand identity and increase brand awareness. While this strategy can be costly, it is now viewed as a powerful strategic tool to maximise profit. Iconic products are another strategy used by companies use – creating one involves delivering a highly popular item to a certain audience, such as our luxury fashion customers. Iconic products are typically characterised by exceptional performance, innovative design, excellent quality, and distinctive features that appeal to their target market. They frequently create a sense of devotion and unity in their fans, who passionately advocate for the product. Brand extensions are a marketing tactic when a company uses a well-known brand name for a new product in the same or different industry. Launching a new product under a well-known corporate brand may get support from its current, loyal customers (Voyer, 2023). This technique, also known as ‘brand stretching’, conforms to the ideals of the parent brand or established business, serves a similar customer base, and attracts new business by entering a new market. Brand extension provides organizations with access to new markets and consumer segments. Luxury retailers are increasingly focusing on creating memorable brand experiences to meet consumer demand (Klein et al., 2016). Pop-up brand stores are temporary locations that are often open only for a few weeks, with the objective of giving consumers more affordable access to luxury brands (Bianchi, 2023). Their objective

is to provide customers with unforgettable brand experiences through hedonic purchasing value, a unique retail concept, and a pleasant environment. In fact, one of the primary distinguishing features of pop-up brand stores is their mission: by emphasising the creation of consumer experiences, luxury brands hope to increase brand awareness among both current and potential customers by encouraging word-of-mouth referrals rather than selling merchandise.

3. Research Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used to acquire in-depth insights into client perceptions of luxury and brand identity. The methodology section describes the process of conducting structured interviews with six people: five luxury brand customers and one sales representative. The decision to apply qualitative approaches, particularly thematic analysis, is explained as necessary for investigating the complicated and subjective character of luxury brand identity.

In the first phase of the research, a critical literature study was conducted to investigate several characteristics of luxury fashion brands, such as psychological aspects, market dynamics, brand identity, and differentiation strategies. After identifying research gaps and developing research challenges and objectives, a qualitative research technique was created. The next step was to prepare and conduct interviews with carefully designed questions that addressed the research objectives. Following the interviews, comments were recorded, and the research was written, culminating in the presentation of findings, contributions, study limits, and future research objectives.

A qualitative research approach was chosen over a quantitative one in order to acquire a thorough understanding of how customers perceive luxury, the reasons for their purchases, and the strategies used by luxury fashion firms to engage them. The emphasis was on acquiring interpretive knowledge rather than simply learning facts. Purposive sampling was applied to choose a diverse sample of six participants, including one luxury fashion sales professional and five clients with varying levels of interest in high-end clothing. Structured interviews were conducted to obtain precise information about brand identification and exclusivity in luxury fashion. The obtained data were analysed thematically to uncover patterns and topics linked to brand identification and exclusivity.

4. Findings

The answer to the question of what is the understanding of brand identity among customers is that most customers understand the fundamentals of brand identity instinctively; they realise that each brand is unique and can perceive how the brand displays itself as a specific look. However, when asked about their favourite brand,

they acknowledge its uniqueness but struggle to articulate why. Interviews revealed that customers do not fully realise that part of a brand identity is how they perceive themselves when using the brand's products. One respondent suggested they would like their body type represented by the brand they purchase from, implying that a lack of representation may drive customers away. Consumers have difficulty understanding parts of a brand's identity that relate to its self-image and reflection, despite understanding the cultural aspect.

When it comes to the influence of brand identity on the perception of luxury fashion brands, luxury fashion brands are distinguished by their high prices and exclusivity. Brand identity is critical in determining the perceived worth and quality of these brands. Elements such as logo design, packaging, marketing materials, and in-store encounters convey a sense of high quality and craftsmanship. According to a sales associate, brands use specific procedures to create an exclusive client experience, and strong brand identification is typically used to represent the exclusivity that premium brands require. Effective techniques include limited editions, celebrity endorsements, and exclusive events to increase a brand's attractiveness and status. Luxury fashion brands with engaging identities can elicit powerful emotional responses, such as enjoyment and confidence, resulting in deeper connections with customers. Storytelling, history, and brand values help engage customers and strengthen their connection with the brand. Luxury companies can stand out in a competitive market by using unique design elements, consistent branding, and memorable advertising. Positive brand identity increases loyalty and word-of-mouth advocacy, which improves overall market perception. Brands with strong identity, such as Maison Margiela, are seen as leaders and innovators, gaining a loyal following and increasing their position as trendsetters in luxury fashion.

Finally, to answer the question of what impact brand identity has on customers, a strong brand identity generates an emotional bond with customers, making them feel part of the brand. This intimate connection can lead to long-term loyalty and engagement. Even if buyers are unaware of the concept of brand identity, it shapes their expectations for the brand experience. Consistent and positive brand experiences reinforce these expectations, leading to greater customer satisfaction. Furthermore, brand identity conveys dependability and integrity, providing the appearance of trust. Most importantly, as noted several times throughout the research, it fosters loyalty, which is critical for businesses seeking to establish a deep emotional bond with their customers. Consumers make better purchasing decisions when they understand the identity being communicated to them. As a result, customer happiness with the purchase leads to loyalty and an emotional tie with the brand.

Additionally, participants have differing opinions on what constitutes luxury. Some associate it with high pricing and exclusivity, while others emphasise quality, craftsmanship, and tradition. This variance highlights the subjective character of

luxury, which was covered in the literature review. The key motivators for new purchases are the product's visual appeal, the desire to own it, and the need to replace existing products. While most consumers feel satisfied with their purchases, some feel no emotions at all or even negative ones, such as worry. Only a small percentage of participants were identified as loyal customers. Interviewees emphasised the relevance of brand identity in purchasing decisions. Social media was identified as an important tool for staying current on trends. However, participants voiced concerns about product quality and loyalty, with scandals potentially driving them away from their preferred brands. Most clients care about ethical concerns, social issues, and environmental sustainability.

Unique designs, brand image, innovation, and craftsmanship were all regarded as important aspects of brand identity. Effective branding strategies include appealing models, images, and event-based marketing. Participants were divided on whether brands should attract new audiences or stay loyal to their core clients, as well as on the concept of brand expansions. Heritage and craftsmanship indicate quality, and consumers believe that brand identity should be constant over time. Brand associations were seen positively if they aligned with the brand's values. Participants also stated they are willing to buy cheaper products if they are of good quality, and many believe that luxury fashion products are frequently overpriced and require justification. Visual appeal and quality are important elements in purchase decisions, and while cult products are sometimes beneficial, some people avoid them to maintain their individuality.

The typical buyer for premium and luxury fashion labels is aged 30-60, with disposable income. Employees at the studied brand are trained to successfully communicate the brand's identity to clients. This training, combined with communication through multiple media, helps the brand connect with its customers. Loyal clients seek classic, timeless goods that reflect both the brand's and their own identities. Sales representatives adhere to a standardised method to enhance the customer experience, creating a sense of exclusivity and luxury. The store environment is designed to clearly communicate the brand's identity, allowing even new customers to understand what the brand represents.

To retain exclusivity, the company restricts its sale offerings and employs a membership club to reward loyal consumers with incentives such as birthday discounts, early access to promotions, and personalised offers. Sales personnel are trained to respond to any price or quality complaints, assisting clients in understanding the value of the brand's pricing. Celebrity endorsements have proven to be highly effective in strengthening brand identity. These endorsements, combined with high-quality craftsmanship, expensive materials, limited availability, and positioning products as status symbols, make up the most successful branding strategies. Pop-up events are extremely popular, allowing customers to connect with the brand. Partnering with organizations that promote ethical and sustainable practices gives the impression of transparency, which appeals to customers. Certain

popular items are republished annually, generating a consistent income stream. The most loyal consumers are identified by their regular, repeat purchases which are bolstered by the membership club, promoting a sense of belonging and community.

Most customers do not pursue studies related to business or economics, so it is unfair to expect everyone to understand business concepts. However, even without formal knowledge, they subconsciously grasp brand identity through their experiences with the brand.

5. Conclusions

The research emphasises the complexities of the luxury market, where brand identity is more than simply a marketing tool; it is an essential component of what makes a business really luxurious. The study adds to the scholarly dispute on luxury branding by examining how brand identity influences consumer perceptions and behaviours in this industry.

The study included interviews with an industry professional and luxury fashion consumers to gain knowledge of brand identity from the viewpoints of customers and personnel. The findings show that most buyers intuitively grasp brand identity but fail to describe what distinguishes each brand. They also fail to recognise how brand identity mirrors their self-image. The study verified the importance of brand identity in producing value and building consumer relationships, with variables such as logo design, packaging, and marketing methods influencing perceptions of quality and exclusivity.

Luxury companies with strong identities create pleasant emotions like contentment and confidence, increasing consumer engagement. Strong brand identities help these companies stand out in a crowded market, increasing loyalty and advocacy. A strong brand identity fosters an emotional connection with customers, resulting in long-term loyalty and increased satisfaction. Consistency in brand identity increases trust and credibility, making it easier for people to choose and stick with a company.

The study also revealed significant limitations, such as the limited availability of luxury consumers in Poland and the requirement to include people from the United Kingdom. Future research should delve deeper into the complexity of brand identification, such as its influence on consumer behaviour and loyalty, as well as transparency in sustainability and ethical standards in luxury apparel. Addressing these gaps could provide significant insights into academic and commercial practices.

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Tożsamość marki w modzie luksusowej: studium przypadku firmy Tommy Hilfiger

Streszczenie: Istotnym aspektem rynku mody luksusowej jest tożsamość marki, za czym idą relacje z konsumentami. Pomimo znaczenia, tożsamość marki w branży odzieży luksusowej jest niedostatecznie zbadana. Większość badań koncentruje się na szerszych technikach marketingowych i wynikach finansowych, pomijając istotność kreowania tożsamości firmy. W niniejszym artykule zdefiniowano luksus w kategoriach historycznych, psychologicznych oraz ekonomicznych. Autorka skupia się również na zachowaniach konsumentów i segmentacji rynku, odnosząc się do dużych graczy, takich jak LVMH i Chanel, oraz bada segmentację rynku. Analizuje lojalność konsumentów i rolę tożsamości marki w kształtowaniu percepcji poprzez symbolikę, dziedzictwo i ekskluzywność. Badanie obejmuje trzy zagadnienia: rozumienie przez klientów tożsamości marki, jej wpływ na postrzeganie marek luksusowych oraz oddziaływanie na klientów. Podejście jakościowe, które obejmowało wywiady z przedstawicielem handlowym i klientami z branży modowej, pokazało, że konsumenci rozumieją tożsamość marki w niewielkim stopniu i nie potrafią jej opisać. Wyniki pokazują, że silna tożsamość marki sprzyja więziom emocjonalnym, lojalności i wsparciu, wpływając w ten sposób na oczekiwania i satysfakcję klientów. Dostępność w Polsce luksusowych konsumentów i placówek handlowych jest bardzo mała, dlatego w badaniu uwzględniono uczestników zarówno z Polski, jak i z Wielkiej Brytanii.

Słowa kluczowe: tożsamość marki, moda luksusowa, perspektywa konsumenta, strategie identyfikacji marki