

## **QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF LUXURY BRAND CHARISMA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to conceptualise the term ‘luxury brand charisma’, and thus provide a working definition and identify key themes and sub themes that can be used to inform the secondary stage of this research, being scale development. The research paradigm chosen was pragmatic as this study is part of mixed methods research and pragmatism allows for inductive and deductive reasoning through qualitative and quantitative methods (Saunders & Thornhill 2012). As part of a mixed methods research, the qualitative phase investigates the phenomenon from a consumer perspective. This research employed a qualitative methodology utilising 2 semi-structured focus groups with a sample size of 9 participants, utilising a convenience sampling method from general consumer population. Data was coded using NVivo and analysed using narrative and thematic analysis techniques, by analysing the words and meanings across various sets of data (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 86). Findings have shown two key emergent themes from the focus groups, which are supported through the findings within the luxury and charisma literature. The limitations of this research is that it is only using a limited sample comprising of 9 participants from an Australian sample. This research adds value by making significant contributions by extending and building theory; holds managerial implications for policymakers and brand managers in shaping and communicating brand charisma; additionally findings can be used in the early stages of scale development and research framework.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Charisma is an abstract concept from the social science domain; particularly of interest in the investigations and use in sociology and anthropology. Inherent to these fields which manage social relationships and human behaviour; hence we see the effects of charisma become a focus for most streams of inquiry and interest (e.g. O’Cass 2004; Bensman and Givant 2012). Broadly, charisma for the purpose of this research is concerned with the secular definition of charisma (e.g. Dow 1979, Shamir et al. 1993), and not the original proposition of Weber (1925) which charisma is connotative with ‘supernatural endowment’ or ‘gift’. Charisma is examined as a skill that can be used to exert influence and demand cohesion, hence in luxury branding the dominance over consumers and the ability to influence and create communities. It should be noted that this research focuses on the conceptualisation of the term to unite the personalised charisma, typically associated to dynamic individuals such as Steve Jobs; and the depersonalised charisma that is not inherent to a specific individual. The key issue however if the fragmented studies throughout the literature have not unified these orientations and therefore no conceptualisation of charisma within many disciplines of the social sciences literature. This can be attributed to, in part, the very nature and construction of the phenomenon itself.

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Charisma is viewed to be a social construction (e.g. Jaeger 2011; Dion and Arnould 2011) due to the interaction between the leader and follower; hence the ‘measurement’ of charisma is usually defined from followers’ perceptions of the specific behavioural attributes of the leader (Conger et al. 2000; Weber 1925). Additionally, limited studies have examined the charisma phenomenon from the perspective of consumers, and none to date in the context of defining luxury brand charisma. The focus of luxury as the context to explore the charisma phenomenon can be attributed to the close likeness and shared salient attributes as to how the brand-consumer relationship mimics very closely the charismatic relationship between leader-follower. Due to confounding need for luxury brands to grow, remain competitive and yet retain their prestige and luxury (Phau and Prendergast 2000) in a highly dynamic and volatile industry in incredibly cumbersome. Therefore, the need to construct and identify the luxury charisma of the brand is key for sustainable and defined relationship building.

### **Research Gaps**

Based on the extended literature review, the following key gaps have been identified:

1. To the best of my knowledge there has been no conceptualisation of luxury brand charisma in marketing and branding (e.g. Smothers 1993; Dion and Arnould 2011)
  - a. Lack of working definition for brand charisma and lack of research framework and scale to measure brand charisma
2. Diminutive studies have used the concept of charisma in luxury branding or marketing

This study aims to address one key research question and objective, as part of a larger study:

**RQ1:** What is luxury brand charisma?

Obj 1: To conceptualise luxury brand charisma and develop a working definition

## **THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING**

Charismatic Leadership Theory (Conger and Kanungo 1994) has been used extensively throughout the literature, and is frequently used to examine the behaviour among relationships that rely on a power dynamic such as leader-follower relationships; or in this context brand- consumer. The attribution of charismatic leadership is based on follower perception, hence the behaviour of the leader is seen as the expression or demonstration of charisma. Interestingly studies have examined how ‘leaders’ make their followers feel and thus influence their perceptions and behaviour. Brands, like leaders, are inspiring or attract awe due their sense of order, coherence and continuity (Martin 1961), but sustaining impersonal charisma is crucial to be maintained or ‘kept alive (Weber 1925). Therefore, charisma needs to be formulated, articulated and curated over time in order to remain relevant and inspire imitation or belonging through desire. The CLT is utilised as this is the examination of what makes the brand-consumer relationship so unique in the context of operationalising charisma.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The sample size for this study was nine participants, across two independent focus groups consisting of general consumers. Focus groups allow for dynamic interaction among participants and facilitate the elicitation of thoughts and expansion of comments from others (Carter et al. 2014). Therefore focus groups permit the in-depth inquiry and results in detail rich data beyond just capturing stories but rather the meaning behind these stories, working towards a comprehensive description of the phenomenon (Forman & Damschroder 2007). Convenience sampling method was used, via personal network to obtain participants. Participation was purely voluntary as no incentives were provided, however refreshments were catered.

The research has been structured into a semi-structured format, whereby the initial consent is verbally obtained from the participants, then subsequently into three main parts. This research has utilised a multi-method qualitative approach which comprises of gathering data regarding the charisma phenomenon in particular to assist in the conceptualisation and exploration of luxury brand charisma. In a brief schematic overview the stages of the focus group were as follows: firstly, general thought elicitation exercise was completed by asking participants to write down how they would define luxury brand charisma and then discuss as a group. Secondly, individual moodboards are constructed using materials obtained from luxury and fashion magazines (e.g. Vogue, Harper's Bazaar) which was used to address the same term. Lastly, participants were asked to explain their moodboards to the group and this allowed the researcher to probe further and additional opportunity for group comments and interaction. The close of the focus group asked participants to select their top five words to describe luxury brand charisma. Due to the numerous sources of data, NVivo was utilised in the coding process and to assist in a systematic approach in the coding of the data to ensure that analysis by the researcher would be systematic. Prescribed methods was used in the coding and analysis of the qualitative data (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2009).

## **FINDINGS**

The findings of the study reveal that there is a strong emergent link between the characteristics associated with luxury and those associated with charisma. These could be the salient describing terms, hence the prominence of charisma within the luxury strategy. From the findings emerged two main themes that focus on firstly, how the brand is presented and the second, related to the emotional aspects of how the brand made consumers feel. Numerous sub themes were elicited and could be broadly categorised into the above. The findings across participants were fairly consistent, with clear subjective nuances between some participants in terms of their approach to the various stages within the focus group. For some participants certain themes were more prominent than others. Further the findings provided some insight into the various categories or brands that are typically associated with luxury and thus the context of the topic 'luxury brand charisma'. Lastly, the findings facilitated in a more comprehensive conceptual definition of the term, as whilst the literature was used to support the development, the perspective of consumers could also be reflected in the definition due to the relationship, which is core to charisma. Overall the findings provide some foundational insights into consumers' perceptions and interpretation of luxury brand charisma. The information gathered from the focus groups provide some useful information to inform the second phase of the research project,

involving scale development. These include for example a conceptual definition of luxury brand charisma, and the elicited brands or categories that could be considered for stimulus.

## SIGNIFICANCE

### Theoretical Contributions

- Building and extending the current holistic charisma literature and thus extending the CLT (Conger and Kanungo 1994) into marketing and branding literature
- Conceptualising luxury brand charisma, which has not previously been addressed within the research
- Identifying brands and categories that are strongly associated with luxury brand charisma phenomenon

### Methodological Contributions

- First qualitative study to assess consumer perceptions of luxury brand charisma, or charisma in a luxury context (e.g. Dion and Arnould 2011 assessed brand perspective of charisma).

### Managerial Contributions

This study aims to provide a blueprint for luxury brand managers, owners and policymakers on:

- How consumers perceive luxury brand charisma and the salient attributes and themes derived from the analysis. This could be used within the marketing and branding strategy to further augment the brand communication and engagement.
- Build stronger brands that are resilient to market changes and fluctuation due to the strong development of relationships and communities.

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