

Building Relationships through Stimulating Brand Experiences: The Role of Self-Expansion, Brand Identification, and Self-Esteem



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Abstract Luxury brands have the capacity to provide novel and meaningful emotional experiences which enrich consumers' sense of self. This process is known as self-expansion, a strong motivational factor for developing and nurturing a relationship. As such, luxury consumption offers more than conspicuous or hedonic value; it contributes to an extended sense of self. Such benefit appears particularly attractive for millennials, who are at a stage in their lives when they seek out experiences and search for novelty combined with depth of perspective as well as doable challenges. This study, based on 229 millennials ages 25–39 years old, demonstrates how meaningful experiences strengthen the relationship with luxury brands through self-expansion and highlights the role of brand identification and the moderating effect of self-esteem. The findings shed a new light on the motivations behind luxury purchases, beyond projecting a social image. Luxury brands can also help millennials develop new perspectives, elevate one's sense of self, enrich their self-concepts, and as such enhance strong customer-brand connection. This view becomes particularly relevant as a counterargument to some criticism to luxury consumption as linked purely to materialistic motivations.

Keywords Luxury · Self-expansion · Millennials · Brand experience · Relationship

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Introduction

One of the significant marketing changes in the past decade is the increase in customers' quest for exploratory behaviors forcing marketers to constantly create enhanced experiences (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Consumers, especially from younger generations, search for opportunities to develop their knowledge, go through new emotions, express all facets of their personality, and thus expand their sense of self (Mattingly and Lewandowski 2014).

Marketers are responding to this exploration desire by inviting customers to enter the brand universe through sharing stories about its heritage, providing unexpected services, and delighting through rich sensorial as well as emotional experiences. For instance, Chanel introduced its catalogue of stories on their website with a window "Inside Chanel" giving opportunities to learn about the brand, and Hermès developed a concept of "Hermès hors les murs" (Hermès beyond the wall) to invite for a five senses discovery. Such enriching consumption experiences create opportunities for individuals to learn, acquire skills, and engage in rich stimulating discoveries, giving rise to an enriched self-concept. Indeed, a process of self-expansion occurs when one is developing new perspectives on things and enlarging his sense of self.

Past research on brand experience has established that experiences lead to positive emotions and stronger customer-brand relationship (Brakus et al. 2009). However little work (if any) has been conducted to understand the mechanisms by which a rich experience allows customers to develop a satisfying relationship with a brand. Our paper suggests that self-expansion is a mediating factor which helps explain why certain luxury brand experiences allow for better relationship quality. In particular, this research examines the mechanisms through which brands with the ability to provide meaningful experiences develop a positive feeling of self-expansion.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Brand Experience and its Five Dimensions

Brand experience can be defined as "subjective, internal consumer responses and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli when consumers interact with brands, shop for them and consume them" (Brakus et al. 2009 p.53). The quality of a brand experience, which entails pleasure and meaning, influences brand image, satisfaction and loyalty (Brakus et al. 2009; Bapat and Thanigan 2016), and in turn brand equity (Ding and Timmy 2015).

Brand experiences engage all the customer senses on a personal level and thus are characterized by a multidimensional nature. Brakus et al. (2009) have suggested a four-factor structure that includes sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual dimensions and have demonstrated that the more a brand evokes multiple experience

dimensions, the more satisfied a consumer will be. The sensory dimension is related to how the senses (smell, sound, sight, taste, and touch) generate pleasure and imagery for the consumer. Branded elements evoke aesthetics, hedonic design, conformation, visuals, and other sensory stimuli and trigger sensorial consumers' responses. The affective dimension of the experience elicits consumer's feelings and emotions for the brand (Wang et al. 2008). These feelings are the emotional response to the interaction with the brand. The behavioral dimension of the experience refers to physical and bodily actions which consumers engage in when they interact with the brand as well as future brand consumption behaviors. The intellectual dimension refers to the thinking, problem-solving, and cognitive stimulation generated through the experience. Finally, the relational dimension refers to the intent of consumers to use brands as tools to express their values or project the ideal self to others during social interactions (Wilcox et al. 2009).

Luxury Brand Consumption

There are several factors that determine the luxury dimension of a brand and its products: delivering premium quality through superior materials (Vigneron and Johnson 2004), manufactured by hand and craftsmanship, exclusivity (O'Cass and Frost 2002), style and design (Dubois et al. 2001), pleasure and emotional appeal (Dubois and Laurent 1996), uniqueness (Heine 2010; Nueno and Quelch 1998), superior technical performance, premium pricing (Keller 2009), and the projection of a lifestyle (Hagtvedt and Patrick 2009).

Importantly, luxury is not only about the pursuit of materialism but also the search for enrichment through indulging, recreating, and exciting experiences. Such extraordinary experiences bring satisfaction and happiness more than material purchases (Gilovich et al. 2015) and create engagement through memorable events (Pine and Gilmore 1998). Because of their unique history, expertise and heritage luxury experiences are particularly intense, unique, and full of discoveries (Morley and McMahon 2011). Through a mix of aesthetic pleasure and emotions, luxury brands trigger peak experiences (McDonald et al. 2009), extending, expanding, and strengthening the sense of self (Belk 1988).

Luxury Consumption and Young Adults

Young adults, ages 25 to 39, have three main characteristics: they have accepted responsibility for one's self, have made independent decisions based on their personal beliefs and values, and have financial independence. As consumers, millennials display high levels of innovativeness, carefully consider one's need before a purchase (Gronhoj 2007), are high achievers and self-thinkers, and continually reevaluate their brand decisions. Research on young adults distinguish intrinsic and

extrinsic motivations. Besides the pleasure and satisfaction of consuming a prestigious brand, external rewards enhance social image (Eastman and Liu 2012) and acceptance from certain groups (Lee and Sean 2015) derived from publicly consuming luxury brands. We propose that for young adults, luxurious experience, because of the intensity of the emotional, sensorial, and intellectual dimensions attached to it, will be perceived as arousing and will positively impact relationship quality. Therefore we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 The five dimensions of an experience have a positive impact on overall satisfaction with the experience.

Hypothesis 2 Brand experience satisfaction has a positive impact on relationship quality.

Mediating Influence of Self-Expansion

A rich perspective to understand consumer-brand relationships is self-expansion theory (Aron and Aron 1996), which considers that people seek to expand themselves through close relationships, thus enhancing their ability to accomplish goals and solve problems, leading to ever greater life purposes. These motives have been described as exploration, curiosity, competence, and self-improvement (Aron et al. 1992).

The self-expansion model suggests that people expand their self-concepts through interactions with others, and one way to do this is through participating in interesting activities with a partner (Strong and Aron 2006). Recently, it has been suggested that between consumers and brands, rapid expansions can also take place for newly acquired brands (Mattingly and Lewandowski 2014). When a consumer is in a relationship with a brand, its identity may become part of the cognitive structure of the self (Reimann and Aron 2009). As the experience with the brand becomes significant, the consumer's perception of its value increases, and an emotional attachment surges, impacting the quality of the existing relationship.

The intensity of the expansion may be smaller for mundane, low-involvement products than for exclusive, high-involvement products (Reimann and Aron 2009). Because they provide opportunities for peak experience, luxury brands may allow for a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in life (Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi et al. 1993). This intensification of self is often characterized by personal growth in attitudes and feelings, a general sensation of learning more about yourself, and an overall feeling of rejuvenation and exhilaration (Arnould and Price 1993).

The experience surrounding the purchase of luxury brands offers opportunities to learn and discover, which should lead to a perception of self-expansion. Thus the following hypothesis is suggested:

Hypothesis 3 Brand experience impacts relationship quality through self-expansion mechanisms.

Impact of Brand Identification

As consumers find meaning through their interaction and experience with the brand, a sense of identification grows. Memorable brand experiences will drive consumer-brand identification particularly when consumer involvement with the brand's product category is high (Stokburger-Sauer et al. 2012) as is the case of luxury brands. As consumers perceive, feel, and value their belongingness with the brand, the sense of identification enhances (Lam et al. 2010). It is this closeness and the sharing beliefs that contribute to the self-expansion process as the identity being defined becomes central to the consumer's self-concept (Reed et al. 2012) and the formative value of the relationship. Therefore, the following hypothesis is suggested.

Hypothesis 4 Brand identification impacts self-expansion and relationship quality.

Moderating Effect of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to the individual's sense of worth and reflects the extent to which an individual values, appreciates, and likes him or herself (Blascovich and Tomaka 1991). It measures the general feelings of high personal self-worth and competences (Leary and Baumeister 2000). According to Rosenberg (1989), high self-esteem "expresses the feeling that one is 'good enough'" (p. 31). Usually self-expansion is associated with a sense of broader and richer self-concept. For consumers with low self-esteem, the perception of expanding oneself might be viewed as more particularly attractive in comparison to those who already have developed a rich positive self-view. Self-expansion brings new facets which may be highly appealing when one is not highly satisfied with his/her existing qualities. We thus suggest a moderating effect of self-esteem.

Hypothesis 5 Self-esteem moderates the impact of self-expansion on relationship quality such that *the lower the self-esteem, the higher the influence of self-expansion on brand relationship quality.*

Finally, the commitment to the relationship, the perception of its significance to the self, and its quality determine the strength and prediction of stability of the relationship over time (Fournier 1998) which should translate in the intention to purchase the brand. Thus, the following hypothesis is suggested.

Hypothesis 6 Relationship quality impacts positively purchase intention.

Research Design

We identified experience dimension items through qualitative interviews and verified their structure and the existence of a social dimension through confirmatory factor analysis. Later we pretested the questionnaire in order to validate all measures and scales and finally run an online surveys using Mturk to test our final model and hypotheses. Based on professional ranking of top luxury brands, we suggested a list of 15 brands. We adopted the classification of luxury brands proposed by D'Arpizio (2007) and included brands from “absolute luxury” (elitism, heritage, and uniqueness like Hermès), “aspirational luxury” (status and distinctiveness like Louis Vuitton), and “accessible luxury” (more affordable like Coach). We focused on personal intimate luxury categories (clothing, leather goods, eyewear, or accessories). In each of these categories, luxury brands create rich experiences through creativity that assures style, emotional appeal, quality of materials, exclusive and prestigious outlets, limited production, premium price, tradition of knowledge, and expertise (Kapferer and Bastien 2009; Phau and Prendergast 2000).

Sample

The study is based on millennials, young adults (25–39 years old), in the USA who participated to our survey via an online platform (Amazon Mturk). Only respondents who purchased from listed brands, at least one item worth \$350 or more, in the past 6 months, participated in the survey. A final sample of 229 respondents remained, composed of 42% female and 58% male, with 45.8% of respondents between 25 and 30 years and 54.2% between 31 and 39 years old, with 89% earning at least \$35,000 a year (median earning \$50,000) and 77% having at least an associate degree. Participants specified the brand name and the product purchased. They were asked to remember their interaction and experience with the brand from the time of purchase and responded to their perceptions as well as demographic inquiries (e.g., income, age, gender, frequency of purchase of luxury items in the past 2 years). Respondents have significant experience luxury in general as they have purchased it considerably in the past two years (46.9% purchased once their selected brand, 32.3% purchased twice, and 20.9% did more than three times). Similarly, their experience with luxury brands in general appears to be significant in the last 2 years (35.4% bought luxury one or twice, 39.6% purchased it from three to five times, and 25% more than six times).

Operational Measure of Constructs

Brand experience was operationalized with a five-item seven-point Likert scale. Two items, *I felt I was having the ideal experience* and *I truly enjoyed this experience*, were adopted verbatim from Schouten et al. (2007). Two other items, *I enjoy learning about luxury brands and products* and *I have a strong interest in luxury products and brands*, were reworded from Schouten et al. (2007) to assess how the experience reinforces beliefs about luxury brands. The fifth item, *My experience with this brand was meaningful*, was worded by the authors (see Table 1). Experience dimensions were assessed through a four-factor structure: sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual as suggested by Brakus et al. (2009). A fifth dimension “relational” was added as concluded from the qualitative study and suggested by past research on luxury consumption (Wilcox et al. 2009), reflecting the social function of the luxury brand experience. All dimensions were measured with a four-item seven-point Likert scale. Self-expansion was assessed through a modified version of the Lewandowski Jr. and Aron (2002) self-expansion questionnaire (SEQ). Brand identification was defined as the consumer’s perceived state of oneness with a brand (Stokburger-Sauer et al. 2012). Brand identification was assessed through a five-item seven-point Likert scale adopted from Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) which assessed the shared beliefs, sense of belonging, and the meaning of the brand to the individual. Self-esteem was assessed through an eight-item seven-point Likert scale, a reduced version of the ten-item original Rosenberg’s (1989) self-esteem scale. Relationship quality reflects the satisfaction, quality perception, commitment, attachment, and interest to maintain a relationship. Items related to quality and satisfaction embody the cognitive aspect of the relationship and were adapted from Clark and Phillips (2013), and items related to commitment and continuity reflect the affective aspect of the relationship and followed the dimensions of self-connection and interdependence suggested by Fournier (1998). Finally, purchase intention was assessed through a three-item seven-point Likert scale adapted from Hennigs et al. (2015) (see Table 1).

Discriminant and Convergent Validity of Constructs with Reflective Indicators

PLS includes two measures of discriminant validity: the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion and the cross-loadings. All constructs show acceptable discriminant validity. Chin (1998) suggests that the loadings for each indicator should be greater than its cross-loadings. This requirement is fulfilled for all constructs with reflective indicators. PLS allows for testing of convergent validity for reflective constructs by calculating the average variance extracted (AVE). An AVE of at least 0.50 indicates sufficient validity. All constructs’ AVEs with reflective indicators are greater than 0.50.

Table 1 Factor structures and reliabilities for reflective constructs in the final model

Items	Source
Experience dimensions	
<p><i>Affective dimension</i> ($\alpha = 0.930$) ($\rho = 0.950$)^a</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This brand induces feelings and sentiments • This brand is affective • I have emotions for this brand • I have feelings for this brand <p><i>Sensory dimension</i> ($\alpha = 0.851$) ($\rho = 0.901$)^a</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This brand appeals to my senses • This brand makes an impression on at least one of my senses: smell, sound, sight, taste, and touch • This brand has a sensory appeal • I find this brand interesting in a sensory way <p><i>Social dimension</i> ($\alpha = 0.865$) ($\rho = 0.909$)^a</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This brand improves the way society views me • Owning this brand allows me to indicate to others the kind of person I am • This brand has a positive impact on what others think of me • I like to be seen owning this brand <p><i>Behavioral dimension</i> ($\alpha = 0.886$) ($\rho = 0.922$)^a</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This brand leads me to have physical activities • This brand inspires me to engage in physical actions • This brand stimulates me to take actions • This brand encourages me to take on new behaviors <p><i>Intellectual dimension</i> ($\alpha = 0.892$) ($\rho = 0.925$)^a</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This brand invites me to discover new things • This brand encourages me to explore new things • This brand encourages my learning • I had the desire to advance my knowledge with this brand 	<p>Factor structure (Brakus et al. 2009)</p> <p>Social dimension (Wilcox et al. 2009)</p> <p>Qualitative inquiry and interviews (the authors)</p>
Brand experience ($\alpha = 0.867$) ($\rho = 0.904$) ^a	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I felt like I was having the ideal experience • I truly enjoyed the experience • My experience with this brand was meaningful • I enjoy learning about luxury brands and products • I have a strong interest in luxury products and brands 	(Schouten et al. 2007)
Self-expansion ($\alpha = 0.944$) ($\rho = 0.954$) ^a	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel an increase in my ability to accomplish new things • I feel that I have a larger perspective on things • I feel that I have learned new things • I feel that I have increased my knowledge • I feel a greater awareness of things • I feel I have added positive qualities to my sense of self • I feel that I have expended my sense of the kind of person I am 	(Lewandowski Jr. and Aron 2002)

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Items	Source
Brand identification ($\alpha = 0.956$) ($\rho = 0.966$)^a	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel a strong sense of belonging to this brand • This brand embodies what I believe in • I identify strongly with this brand • This brand is like part of me • This brand has a great deal of personal meaning for me 	(Stokburger-Sauer et al. 2012)
Self-esteem ($\alpha = 0.895$) ($\rho = 0.917$)^a	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the whole, I am satisfied with myself • At times, I think I am no good at all (r) • I feel that I have a number of good qualities • I am able to do things as well as most other people • I feel I do not have much to be proud of (r) • I certainly feel useless at times (r) • I feel that I'm a person of worth • I wish I could have more respect for myself (r) 	(Rosenberg 1989)
Relationship quality ($\alpha = 0.896$) ($\rho = 0.928$)^a	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have the intention to be loyal to this brand • I want to maintain the relationship to this brand • I am satisfied with my relationship with this brand • The quality of my relationship with this brand is high 	(Clark and Phillips 2013; Fournier 1998)
Purchase intention ($\alpha = 0.909$) ($\rho = 0.943$)^a	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will likely purchase new products from this brand • There is a high probability that I would buy new products from this brand • I have the intention to buy new products from this brand 	(Hennigs et al. 2015)

^a α = Cronbach's alpha; ρ = Dillon-Goldstein's rho calculated for constructs with reflective indicators

Test of Common-Method Variance

In order to test for common-method variance, we used the common marker variable (CMV) method recommended by Lindell and Whitney (2001). To this purpose we assess the construct intensity-seeking behavior within our survey as method factor measured with a five-item Likert scale. The selected marker shows a high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.861$ and $\rho = 0.895$). This construct is theoretically unrelated to all other constructs in the final model and thus is expected to have no relationship as indicated by the small variance accounted. The selected marker explains only 3% of the variance in the affective experience dimension, sensory (6%), social (1%), intellectual (3%), brand experience (4%), brand identification (1%), self-expansion (1%), self-esteem (2%), interaction brand identification with self-expansion (2%), relationship quality (3%), and purchase intention (4%). Since all the variances explained are very small and below 50%, the CMV methods suggest that there is no significant common-method bias in the data.

Testing the Structural Model

The final model was estimated using partial least squares path modeling (Tenenhaus et al. 2005) and PLS regression. The overall goodness of fit index GOF for the measurement model is 0.994, while GOF for the structural model is 0.903. The AVE range is 0.579 to 0.851. Thus, validity of indicators in predicting their constructs is adequate. The coefficient of determination (R^2) is the criteria to evaluate the inner path model estimates and a measure of explanatory power. These values for all endogenous latent constructs were luxury brand experience (0.723), self-expansion (0.609), relationship quality (0.618), and purchase intention (0.606). These values were considered moderate and acceptable following Chin's (1998) recommendation. Redundancy index measures the quality of the structural model for each endogenous construct taking into account the measurement model. This model specification explains 47.2% of the variance in brand experience, 45.4% in self-expansion, 47.1% in relationship quality, and 51.2% in purchase intention. These redundancies show acceptable levels, and all exogenous constructs show a large predictive relevance. The complete estimated model is shown in Fig. 1.

Findings

Overall, the model fits well, validating our hypotheses suggesting that luxurious brand experiences are a source of excitement for young adults, generating a positive feeling of self-expansion which in turn positively influences the quality of the relationship. Hypothesis 1 suggests an impact of each of the luxury experience dimensions on the evaluation of the brand experience. We accept partially this hypothesis since the affective, sensory, social, and intellectual dimensions reflect the overall experience but the behavioral dimension showed not to be significant. The four dimensions explain 72.3% of the variance in brand experience (affective 49.62%, social 25.25%, sensory 13.68, and intellectual 11.14%). There is a direct effect from brand experience to relationship quality (0.311). Thus H2 is accepted. Similarly, there is a direct causal effect from brand experience to self-expansion (0.264) validating H3. Brand identification impacts positively self-expansion (0.556) and relationship quality (0.363), thus confirming H4. More interestingly, brand experience and brand identification explain 61.8% of the variance in self-expansion (proportionally brand experience 30.29% and brand identification 69.71%). Relationship quality is a function of brand experience, self-expansion, brand identification, and an interaction effect (self-esteem and self-expansion). These four predictors explain 61.8% of the variance of relationship quality (brand identification 14%, brand experience 12%, self-expansion 25%, self-esteem 16%, and interaction self-esteem x self-expansion 33%). Therefore H5 is accepted and the moderation effect of self-esteem is confirmed. Finally, relationship quality has a direct effect of 0.778 on purchase intention. Therefore H6 is accepted.

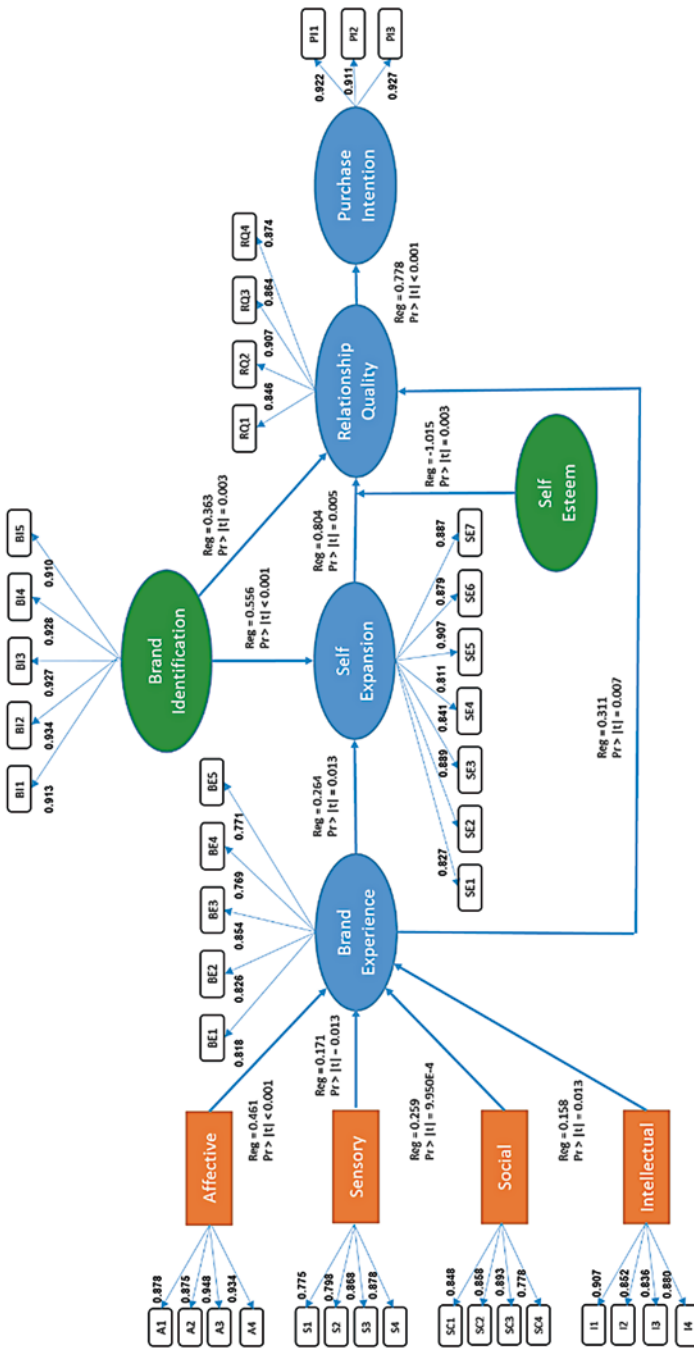


Fig. 1 Final model estimation

General Discussion

The findings of this study offer several theoretical contributions. First the study identifies a unique benefit of luxury brand experience which had not been considered in past literature. Previous researches on luxury brands have tended to focus on social image and hedonic and symbolic dimensions associated to consumption and possession of luxury brands (Nueno and Quelch 1998). Our study reveals another factor influencing the relationship quality with premium brands, centered on enriching one's sense of self. Our findings show that luxury brands provide enjoyable and meaningful overall experiences which allow for self-enrichment. It supports the argument made by Reimann and Aron (2009), which had never been formally tested, that prestigious brands provide resources for accomplishing goals and may especially expand the self.

Second, the study contributes to existing theoretical perspective on the mechanisms of self-expansion. Our results show that exciting brand experiences, which provide opportunities for consumers to go through meaningful experiences, lead to a feeling of self-expansion. Also, we demonstrate that a strong brand identification facilitates the integration of brand characteristics as part of one's self-concept. Thus, as suggested for interpersonal relationships, individuals are eager to partner with brands that provide both opportunities for discovery but also opportunities to associate with it in terms of shared beliefs. As suggested by the literature on the "optimal distinctiveness model," individuals have two opposite needs for assimilation and differentiation. A right balance in brand relationship between sense of novelty and sense of belonging is key to allow customers to broaden their self-concept.

Third, the results expand past research on brand experience. Numerous studies have established how brand experiences may lead to positive outcomes, such as enhanced relationship quality. However, the mediating factors connecting brand experience and relationship quality have seldom been investigated. Our study suggests that brand experiences, which allow for exploration and excitement, are offering new ways for further growth as a person. This self-expansion opportunity, in turn, positively influences the evaluation of the quality of the relationship with the brand. Self-expansion is provoked by both a rich consumption experience and a strong identification to prestigious brands. Also, we provide counterintuitive findings showing that the effect of self-expansion on consumer-brand relationship is limited for consumers who have a stronger self-esteem. Thus, brand experience offering exploration might be particularly attractive for those customers who feel a need for a higher self-image.

Limitations and Future Research

This study avoids using fictitious brands as stimuli, in order to evaluate the impact of a real brand experience. While we were careful to include variety in the category of brands chosen (15 brands in 4 categories), our findings cannot be extended beyond since it is expected differences in the nature of the experience and identification processes. Further research could be done in partnership with a luxury company, using a database of real buyers from one particular brand. Participants were US respondents who may have a particular view on luxury experience and brand identification. It would be interesting to compare results with European consumers who may have a very different approach to luxury, due to their cultural heritage and related consumption behaviors. Future research could also focus on different age groups. For instance, older customers who had more opportunities to accumulate experiences may see luxury less as a discovery and thus feel limited self-expansion through luxury brand experiences. As a consequence, the influence of brand identification, in comparison to self-expansion, on their relationship quality, might be stronger.

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