How Much Can Brands Deviate from their Brand Aesthetic? The Moderating Role of Brand's Luxury Status

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*Significance.* Brand aesthetics is fundamental to maintaining a competitive advantage as brands are considered a system for the production and communication of meaning (Mazzalovo, 2012). Brand design consistency (BDC), defined as "the extent to which the product design is congruent with the brand aesthetics", plays a pivotal role in building a successful brand through the formation of strong brand associations (Goh et al., p. 272). However, creating new and distinct product designs that deviate from a brand's aesthetic may have the potential to increase the brand's interest, novelty, and memorability in consumers' minds. In practice, designers constantly navigate the thresholds of their brand's aesthetic in their design decisions; however, very few studies have investigated consumer response to differing levels of deviations from brand aesthetics. Further, to our knowledge, no studies have examined deviations from brand aesthetics relative to the luxury status of the brand – a factor that may have a significant influence on consumers' design expectations. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of BDC on aesthetic judgment and purchase intention and to investigate the moderating effect of brand's luxury status in the above relationship.

*Theory and Literature.* The concepts of halo effect and biased assimilation relating to luxury brands form the conceptual basis of our study. Halo effect refers to how evaluations of individual dimensions of an object are biased towards the holistic impression of an object, which is stronger for well-established and luxury brands (Leuthesser et al., 1995). If a product design is experienced as less congruent with the luxury brand aesthetic (low BDC), consumers may counteract the cognitive dissonance (e.g., this Tiffany design is not typical to the brand, but must be good since it is a Tiffany's design) and evaluate the product in a positively biased way that agrees with their strong positive perception of the luxury brand (biased assimilation) (Ahluwalia, 2000). Due to halo effects and biased assimilation, luxury fashion brands may have more latitude to deviate from their brand aesthetic than non-luxury brands. The above positions are tested through two hypotheses in our study. H1: High BDC products will result in more positive (a) aesthetic judgments and (b) purchase intentions than low BDC products; H2: BDC level (low vs. high) will have a greater effect on (a) aesthetic judgments and (b) purchase intention for a non-luxury brand than a luxury brand.

*Method.* The hypotheses were tested through a 2 (BDC: low/high) X 2 (Brand status: luxury/non-luxury) mixed-factorial experimental design, with brand status as the within-subjects factor and BDC as the between-subjects factor. Stimuli were handbags and BDC was manipulated based on product typicality (shape) [see Figure 1 for an Overview of Stimuli]. Based on two pretests, two stimuli (low vs. high BDC) were selected for brand status (non-luxury: Kate Spade; luxury: Chanel) based on pretest results. An Internet experiment was conducted using Qualtrics with 131 female undergraduate students enrolled at a Southeastern

University. The order of stimulus presentation was randomized to control for order effects. Pre-existing scales measuring aesthetic judgment (DV), purchase intentions (DV), brand design consistency (manipulation check), product typicality (control variable), brand familiarity (control variable) and perceived brand status (manipulation check) appeared after each stimulus.



*Figure 1.* Overview of Stimuli

*Resutls.* The manipulation of BDC and brand status was successful and all scaled measures demonstrated adequate reliability. H1 and H2 were tested through repeated measures analysis of covariance with BDC as the between-subjects factor, brand luxury status as the within-subjects factor, product typicality as the covariate and aesthetic judgment and purchase intention as the dependent variables. BDC had a significant main effect on purchase intention [non-luxury: Wilk's $\lambda$ = 0.84, $F_{(1/128)}$ = 18.43, $p$ = 0.000; luxury: Wilk's $\lambda$ = 0.89, $F_{(1/128)}$ = 8.31, $p$ = 0.005] and aesthetic judgment [non-luxury: Wilk's $\lambda$ = 0.84, $F_{(1/128)}$ = 20.71, $p$ = 0.000; luxury: Wilk's $\lambda$ = 0.89, $F_{(1/128)}$ = 16.26, $p$ = 0.000],
with high BDC (vs. low BDC) products receiving more positive aesthetic judgment [luxury: $M_{highBDC}$ = 4.32; $M_{lowBDC}$ = 2.93; non-luxury: $M_{highBDC}$ = 5.04; $M_{lowBDC}$ = 3.55] and purchase intentions [luxury: $M_{highBDC}$ = 2.30; $M_{lowBDC}$ = 1.71; non-luxury: $M_{highBDC}$ = 2.92; $M_{lowBDC}$ = 2.11]; hence supporting H1a and b. There was also a significant 2-way interaction effect for brand status and BDC on purchase intention [Wilk's $\lambda$ = 0.96, $F_{(1/129)}$ = 4.81, $p$ = 0.030, $\eta^2$ = .036], but not on aesthetic judgment [Wilk's $\lambda$ = 1.0, $F_{(1/129)}$ = 0.63, $p$ = 0.80]. Specifically, BDC level (low vs. high) had a greater effect on purchase intention for a non-luxury brand [$M_{Non-luxury*BDChigh}$ = 3.02, $SE$ = 0.14, $M_{Non-luxury*BDClow}$ = 2.03, $SE$ = 0.19, Mean Difference = 0.98, $p$ = 0.000, $\eta^2$ = .192] than a luxury brand [$M_{Luxury*BDChigh}$ = 2.29, $SE$ = 0.19, $M_{Luxury*BDClow}$ = 1.71, $SE$ = 0.11, Mean Difference = 0.58, $p$ = 0.002, $\eta^2$ = .043]. Hence H2a was rejected, while H2b was supported.

*Implications.* Findings of this study exhibit that high BDC (vs. low BDC) evoked the most positive consumer response for luxury and non-luxury brands. The overall BDC effect however, was more salient for non-luxury brands which indicates that they have less latitude to deviate from their brand aesthetic than luxury fashion brands. Luxury brands are able to leverage the halo effect as perceived brand design inconsistency does not impact consumers' purchase intentions as strongly and thus, possess more designer freedom. This study provides important implications on how designers and brand marketers can use these insights.

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