This article departs from traditional views on luxury by focusing on consumers’ experiences with what is perceived to be luxury. The empirical study is exploratory in nature and relies on consumer narratives regarding consumer luxury experiences. Beside numerous commonalities with traditional conceptualisations of luxury, the findings allow characterising consumer-defined luxuries, for instance, as (a) transient – a fact that is reflected in the flexible, escapist, and unlocking power of luxuries; and (b) private in that these luxuries support consumers’ identity projects. Building on these findings, this article contributes to existing literature by conceptualising luxury from a consumer perspective.

1. Introduction

Luxury brands are a dominant phenomenon in today’s marketplace, perhaps constituting “one of the purest examples of branding” (Keller 2009, p. 290). Traditionally, a premium image, higher perceived price, outstanding quality, uniqueness/scarcity, unnecessity, ancestral heritage, personal history, aesthetics, and experientiality characterise luxury goods and brands (e.g. Dubois/Laurent/Czellar 2001; Kapferer/Bastien 2009; Keller 2009). These traditional views of luxury have their roots in historical structures of social stratification, and the consumption habitus of the so-called leisure class (Veblen 1902). In this view, luxury signifies status and constantly needs to be re-invented and managed as a means of social distinction. Consequently, literature on prestigious luxury goods and brands is rather management-oriented, investigating how to build a luxury image which ideally results in value and wealth for an organisation (e.g. Kapferer/Bastien 2009; Keller 2009).

Postmodernity has radically altered and expanded contemporary definitions of luxury, adding pastiche and democratised forms of luxury for the masses. Furthermore, consumers nowadays are found trading up and paying more for products and services that offer greater individually perceived value (Silverstein/Fiske/Butman 2004). Consumers might not only value traditional luxury brands but also “new luxury products and services that possess higher levels of quality, taste, and aspiration than other goods in the category, but are not so expensive as to be out of reach” (Silverstein et al. 2004, p. 157). New concepts of luxury pursue this idea: Accessible superpremium products and brands describe relatively low-priced products and brands sold at the top of their category (e.g. premium vodka); Old luxury brand extensions are lower-priced versions of extremely high priced products (e.g. BMW offers extremely high priced traditional luxury products (e.g. BMW M3 Sedan), as well as lower priced product offerings including the BMW 1 series); Massstige [mass + prestige] products and brands are priced well below the extremely high priced traditional luxury brands but above conventional products in their category (e.g. Kiehl’s’ bath and body products) (Silverstein et al. 2004). Recent trends put the experiential value of...
luxury brands into focus that emphasises interactivity, connectivity, and creativity (Atwal/Williams 2009).

Building on these recent developments, this paper applies an experiential, yet consumer-centric perspective of what consumers conceive as luxury. This constructivist approach to luxury implies that any product or brand has the potential to become a luxury depending on whether consumers perceive it as such or not. Also, consumers might not only use traditional luxury in enclosed luxurious spaces or contexts, but rather integrate luxury in their everyday lived experiences. This integration might lead to new, unconventional ways of experiencing luxury, potentially leading to a transformation and extension of the traditional luxury concept. This article aims at furthering the understanding of consumers’ actual experiences of luxury by identifying (a) which products and brands consumers actually perceive as luxury and (b) how luxury relates to consumers’ experiences. In an exploratory study using qualitative interviews, the authors investigate luxury perceptions and experiences of consumers. Building on these empirical findings the authors conceptualise luxury from a consumer perspective.

2. Theoretical development: Concepts of luxury

Although commonly used in habitual language, the concept of luxury appears to be blurred in marketing literature, which is reflected in a plethora of concept definitions (Vickers/Renand 2003; Vigneron/Johnson 1999). According to Wiedmann/Hennigs/Siebels (2009), a definition of luxury should incorporate the subjectivity and multidimensionality of the construct. Traditionally, luxury brands are associated with dimensions like status and conspicuousness (e.g. O’Cass/McEwen 2004; Okonkwo 2009; Truong et al. 2008), symbolic value (e.g. Keller 2009; Vickers/Renand, 2003), uniqueness or exclusivity (e.g. Atwal/Williams 2009; Christodoulides/Michaelidou/Li 2009), non-essentiality (Wiedmann et al. 2009), quality (e.g. Atwal/Williams 2009; Christodoulides et al. 2009), premium price (Keller 2009), hedonism (e.g. Christodoulides et al. 2009; Vigneron/Johnson 2004), and extended self (e.g. Christodoulides et al. 2009; Vigneron/Johnson 2004).

2.1. The traditional managerial perspective

Hitherto, the concept of luxury has mainly been considered from a managerial perspective. The assumption that marketing managers can determine how consumers perceive brand luxury is predominant (e.g. Kapferer/Bastien 2009; Keller 2009). In general, many studies in luxury brand research suggest that management is of utmost importance as far as the success of luxury brands is concerned. Recent studies based on this assumption are manifold and cover issues relating to the concept definition and measurement of luxury (e.g. Christodoulides et al. 2009; Vigneron/Johnson 2004), positioning strategies (Truong/McColl/Kitchen 2009), brand extensions (Siegemann 2006), general guidelines for luxury management (Kapferer/Bastien 2009; Keller 2009), the perception of luxury brands across countries (Aiello et al. 2009), or luxury brand distribution via the Internet (Okonkwo 2009).

Beside the predominant management orientation of luxury brand research, an increasing number of studies show a comparatively stronger consumer behaviour orientation (e.g. Vickers/Renand 2003; Wiedmann et al. 2009). Wiedmann et al. (2009), for instance, develop a four-dimensional framework based on consumer luxury values regarding financial, individual, functional, and social aspects. Their model is based on Vigneron/Johnson’s (2004) so-called ‘Brand Luxury Index’ scale, but instead of focusing on both consumers’ personal- and non-personal oriented perceptions of luxury, Wiedmann et al. (2009) assume that luxury value merely depends on consumers’ personal perceptions. Vickers/Renand (2003) attempt to empirically identify the conceptual dimensions of luxury goods. They assume that consumers use these products to symbolise their individual and social identities. Their empirical work reveals that the instrumental performance dimensions (1) functionalism, (2) experientialism, and (3) symbolic interactionism characterise luxury products. The intensity of the dimensions might vary according to the product category. Generally, all dimensions were more pronounced for luxury than for non-luxury/standard products in the same category.

2.2. Democratisation of luxury

A recent phenomenon in luxury branding is the emergence of positioning strategies that are targeting a broader range of customer segments (Truong et al. 2009). This approach differs from the traditional view of luxury insofar, as using mass marketing strategies and simultaneously accentuating the exclusivity dimension of luxuries seems to be a paradox (Okonkwo 2009). Nevertheless, ”mass” luxury strategies have become more common in recent marketing practice. Increasing interest in this area manifests itself in a rising number of marketing publications (Truong et al. 2008), even though they offer only limited empirical evidence (Truong et al. 2009).

Research refers to this phenomenon of more and more consumers trading up as ”democratisation of luxury” or the “luxurification of society” (Atwal/Williams 2009; Tsai 2005; Yeoman/McMahon-Beattie 2005). Truong et al. (2009) use the denotation “Masstige” brands to describe the emergence of a new kind of luxury brands that are accessible for a broader consumer group. Essentially, this concept refers to middle-class consumers who tend to become more aspirational and demanding in terms of premium brands due to a rise in disposable income, resulting in increased affluence (Yeoman/McMahon-Beattie 2005). Mandhachitara/Lockshin (2004) provide the example of premium Scotch whisky brands in Thai department stores to which they refer to as “Fast Moving Luxury Goods” (FMLG). Their analyses reveal that the
product was considered to be an affordable luxury, and customers hardly react to price changes. Contrary to traditional luxury items, general characteristics are high category turnover, a small number of price changes, and large displays. In general, recent studies in this area tend to concentrate on “masstige” positioning strategies (Truong et al. 2009), pricing issues (Mandhachitara/Locks- hin 2004; Yeoman/McMahon-Beattie 2005), or distribution and merchandising (Mandhachitara/Locks hin 2004).

Although recent research increasingly incorporates consumers’ individual perceptions of luxury brands, the predominant view still seems to be rather managerially oriented. This fact not only applies for traditional luxuries, but also for the investigation of “new luxuries”. Substantially, the assumption prevails that luxury brand managers can control what is perceived as luxury. Despite few exceptions, consumers’ experiences remain under-researched in the context of luxuries.

However, accepting the view that consumers determine what they perceive as luxury requires taking into account consumers’ individual experiences.

2.3. Experiencing luxury

Research acknowledges that in today’s postmodern society, experiential marketing represents a global trend that can be observed in many business sectors (Atwal/Williams 2009; Keller/Lehmann 2006). In general, research on consumer behaviour investigates consumers’ conscious sensory experiences with consumption objects like arts (Joy/Sherry 2003), the Internet (Joy et al. 2009), high-risk consumption activities (Arnould/Price 1993; Celsi/Rose/Leigh 1993), or the individual body (Thompson/Hirschman 1995), as well as consumer experiences with stores (Sherry 1998), and brands (e.g. Brakus/Schmitt/Zarantonello 2009; Schmitt 1999).

Although previous consumer behaviour research well documents the importance of consumer experiences, this field has received rather limited attention in the context of luxury brands. Atwal/Williams (2009) provides an exception by describing experiential marketing in the context of luxury brands as enriching the offer of products by providing interactive, tangible, and physical experiences for consumers. In line with the view adopted in this study, Atwal/Williams (2009) assume that consumers and luxury brand marketers interactively co-create brand experience. Based on this presupposition, they develop a theoretical framework that distinguishes between four ‘experiential zones’, based on the dimensions intensity of experience and customer involvement. Their theoretical framework includes the zones (1) aesthetic, rating high on intensity and low on involvement, (2) escapist, which is high on both involvement and intensity, (3) entertainment, which is classified as low on both dimensions, and (4) educational, which is defined as a zone of high involvement and low experience intensity. Although Atwal/Williams (2009) incorporate the concept of consumer experience into their framework, they do not corroborate their conceptualisation by empirical data. Another recent study by Gistri et al. (2009) investigates consumer experience in the context of consumption practices of luxury counterfeits in Italy. Gistri et al. (2009) use a consumption practices typology that was developed by Holt (1995). They find evidence for four different consumption practices: (1) consumption as experience, (2) consumption as play, (3) consumption as integration, and (4) consumption as classification. Following Holt (1995), they define consumption as experience of psychological phenomena that are inherent in the aesthetic, hedonic, and emotional dimensions of consumption. In contrast to Gistri et al. (2009), this study applies an exploratory approach instead of relying on an existing theoretical framework to investigate consumers’ luxury perceptions and experiences. The authors extend Gistri et al.’s study further by collecting data across four countries and do not focus on a specific product category, or on counterfeits.

3. Empirical Study

3.1. Sample and method

This empirical analysis is qualitative and exploratory in nature and aims at gaining first insights into consumers’ experiences with, and related perceptions of luxuries. Accordingly, the authors make no claim in terms of exhaustiveness of the results. Similar studies show that collecting six to ten interviews is necessary to achieve this goal (Coopland 2005; McGrath/Ones 1995; Schembri/Merrillees/Kristiansen 2010), and in line with that, six participants were interviewed in each of the four countries constituting the sample, namely, Austria, Finland, Spain, and South Korea. The rationale behind the choice of these countries is the consideration of multiple European regions including one Northern, one Southern, and one Central European country to gain a cross-European perspective on consumer luxury perceptions. These countries represent developed luxury markets that are, however, not characterised by a particularly outstanding luxury tradition. Countries with a strong tradition in luxury, such as France and Italy, did not qualify for this study as luxury tradition and nation pride may become a predominant factor in consumers’ perception of luxury. Furthermore, the sample includes one Asian country to cross-check the findings for differences that result from a quite short tradition of luxury consumption. Due to language problems and resultant difficulties concerning the interpretability of the data, the authors had to remove three Finnish respondents, one Spanish interviewee, and two Austrian respondents from the analysis. Similar to other studies in the area of luxury consumption (e.g. Aiello et al. 2008; Wiedmann et al. 2009), female respondents are overrepresented in this study. The sample consists of management students and young professionals with a university degree. Graduating from university and getting into professional life respectively represent two

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Shankar/Elliot/Goulding (2001) argue that consumer narratives allow gaining insights into consumers’ experiences. Narratives are the most natural way for humans to acquire, store and retrieve knowledge (Bruner 1991; Hiltnen 2002; Mc Kee 2003; Weick 1995; Woodside/Sood/ Miller 2008) and “the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful” (Polkinghorne 1988, p. 1). Storytelling allows consumers to relive earlier experiences and to share their interpretations of events and outcomes with others (Schindler/Holbrook 2003).

Building on these assumptions, the authors chose to conduct narrative interviews using open, grand tour questions as a starting point for encouraging consumer storytelling regarding their experiences with luxuries and respective consumer luxury perceptions. Consumer stories revolve around products and brands consumers actually bought, use and consider being luxury, and include consumers’ perceptions of luxury, purchase and consumption experiences. The interviews took place at respondents’ homes to ensure a natural interview setting. Each interview was tape-recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. For the purpose of this article, the authors analysed all texts passages related to consumers’ perceptions and experiences of luxury. Interview transcripts comprising all relevant excerpts averaged 6 single-spaced pages and totalled 104 pages from the 18 interviews.

In the data analysis, the authors followed an inductive categorisation process (Spiggle 1994; Kreiner/Hollensbe/Sheep 2006). In order to reduce researcher bias in the analysis, all three authors (a) independently read the stories consumers forwarded; (b) inductively derived major themes and issues arising throughout the stories; (c) assigned codes to each theme; and (d) ultimately met to compare and discuss their independent codings and to come up with a combined catalogue of major themes characterising consumer luxury experiences, based on cross-case analysis (cf. Kreiner et al. 2006). The authors’ theorising is inductive in that it involves iteratively deriving theory from the data material. Additionally, the authors also compared emerging themes from the data with existing literature so that both informed the interpretation and conceptualisation of luxury from a consumer point of view.

3.2. Findings

Consumers use and experience a variety of products and brands they perceive as luxuries (see Tab. 2 for an over-

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### Table 1: Sample characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Disp. Income (€)</th>
<th>Professional Status</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>&lt; 500</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Austria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>&lt; 500</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Austria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>&lt; 500</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Austria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>501-1000</td>
<td>Young Professional</td>
<td>Austria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1001-1500</td>
<td>Young Professional</td>
<td>Finland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2001-2500</td>
<td>Young Professional</td>
<td>Finland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
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<td>Jenny</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>501-1000</td>
<td>Young Professional</td>
<td>Finland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
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<td>Robert</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1001-1500</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>501-1000</td>
<td>Young Professional</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>&lt; 500</td>
<td>Young Professional</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>David</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1001-1500</td>
<td>Young Professional</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>&lt; 500</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>&lt; 500</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>&lt; 500</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
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<td>Patricia</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>&lt; 500</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>&lt; 500</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>&lt; 500</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>James</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>&lt; 500</td>
<td>Young Professional</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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view on the products and brands respondents mentioned).

Consumers perceive mainly those products and brands as luxuries that are in their opinion high-priced, of good quality (i.e., trustable, durable, reliable, hand-made, custom-made, from a certain country of origin associated with high quality), and usually “worth the money”, that is, having a good price-performance ratio. Even though consumers oftentimes use these products and brands in everyday situations they perceive them as exceptional or “special” (Susan, 26, Austria) as well as exclusive and prestigious. For consumers these characteristics are, for instance, reflected in the product itself, its packaging, communication, and distribution. Exceptionality and exclusivity appear to be more strongly related to the purchase situation and its special places, rather than to the everyday consumption situation.

### 3.2.1. Luxury purchase experience

Products consumers perceive as luxuries are usually sold in expensive, well designed retail stores with a luxurious, pleasant atmosphere and professional, specialised service personnel that closely interacts with customers. These enclaved servicescapes (Caru/Cova 2007) are commonly perceived as “forbidden places” (Nancy, 29, Austria) or “another world” (Susan, 26, Austria). Having been there and having purchased is the entry ticket for a novice to the world of luxury and adds meaning to the overall experiences consumers have with their self-defined luxuries, or as one respondent puts it,

“it was a nice experience to buy it, in a way the shopping situation was very nice, and it was nice to like carry the special bag with me and then it was nice to take it home and open the packaging for the first time. And all in all, it was just like I think like a sort of luxury or luxury product in general should be, like that they would convey nice and special feelings as a whole”.

(Tim, 33, Finland)

Luxurious feelings often arise in the purchase situation, which is consistent with the literature on traditional luxury (Keller 2009). The generation of pleasure in this exclusive purchase situation seems to be a common means to evoke positive feelings of comfort and passion in retail stores. Furthermore, personal interaction with the sales personnel is an important component of the luxury purchase experience.

“I feel kind of, it’s really a personal situation, it’s kind of a situation where I get in close contact with the sales people, where I specify my needs and my wishes... So it’s just like a very personal exclusive situation which is not ‘everyday’ for me. It is not an anonymous situation where you go to Bipa or dm when I’m just in a rush and I need a deodorant stick from Hugo Boss. It’s more that I’m going into the shop and decide to let me consult about the newest one.”

(Daniel, 28, Austria)

In this special consumption situation, consumers experience an intimate relationship with luxury brands, which is not at all an everyday experience. Non-anonymity as a consumer seems to be a decisive constituent of the luxury purchase experience, and helps distinguishing “everyday”, profane consumption from the luxury experience. As luxuries are prone to lose their exclusivity through everyday consumption, an exclusive purchase experience is even more important as a means of creating the aura and social mystique of a luxury brand (Berthon et al. 2009). As Caru/Cova (2007) point out, consumers immerse themselves in experiential spaces that help them escape from their daily lives, where they feel secure in a thematised world full of multi-sensorial stimuli, as described below.

“... the Hollister concept store is built to look like a Florida mansion, like a mansion in the tropics ... you have like a dark wood furniture and ... and you got the music and you got the same perfume like smelling in the air and all the personnel are dressed in the compa-

---

### Table 2: Luxury products and brands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Products Brands</th>
<th>Retail brand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mascara</td>
<td>Clinique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cream</td>
<td>Anayaki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deodorant, Deo stick, Perfume</td>
<td>Hugo Boss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black leather purse</td>
<td>Gucci</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coat</td>
<td>Calvin Klein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blazer</td>
<td>Dior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeans</td>
<td>Levis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmetics</td>
<td>La Roche Posay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eau de Toilet</td>
<td>Hollister California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riding boots</td>
<td>Parlati boots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Champagne</td>
<td>Marc Jacobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bag</td>
<td>Gucci</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallet</td>
<td>True Religion, Diesel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeans</td>
<td>Gucci</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallet</td>
<td>Louis Vuitton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bag</td>
<td>Gucci</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Das Erstellen und Weitergeben von Kopien dieses PDFs ist nicht zulässig.
ny's clothes and they are like picked out for their looks, so they are all like young and beautiful. And that you immediately get the feeling that 'oh my god, this is such a fun and nice brand that I have to buy in to it' And you almost start to think 'what can I buy from here?' So it is like a premium retail experience in itself to go to that particular store ... you go to the place where you can only get that brand and you get the feel of the feel of the brand from the shopping experience.”

(Tim, 33, Finland)

Especially in purchase situations involving accessible luxuries, positive feelings are sometimes mixed with contradictory feelings. Cognitive dissonance occurs as a result of entering an atypical world that is completely different from the consumers’ worlds. Respondents report that this discrepancy will arise due to several reasons, for instance, lack of congruency between the individual style and the retail environment style, or spending an amount of money on luxuries that is not in line with the individual budget.

“I'm not that person that is putting on that much make-up, I felt a bit weird (laughs) because it was all about make-up and also the shop assistants were like really dressed up and also...yes, the whole make-up on their face, like perfectly painted dolls. And I came there by bicycle and I was sweating (laughs) and in my sporty clothes, which was an interesting feeling. But it, yes, it has a special atmosphere.....It’s not like an everyday feeling, when you walk in there, at least not for me.... I felt a bit relieved when I left afterwards. That's weird...I mean I was happy to have my product but on the other hand I felt like being in the wrong place, because I'm not like those Barbie dolls who are dressing up and... like chicks (laughs).”

Susan, 26, Austria

In general, purchase situations seem to be characterised by intense emotionality of customers deriving from memories, love, desire to finally hold the product in their hands, and other deep emotions that are related to the imagined past and future consumption of luxuries. Purchase experiences contribute to luxury in that they provide those wonderlands and “forbidden places” for consumers to escape everyday profanity. Consumers dive into a multi-sensorial physical and social environment that rescues them from their life as anonymous consumers, and recognises them as individuals. Yet, luxury experiences also produce contradictory feelings as luxury consumption is also associated with overspending and a stereotype of luxury consumer, which produces a misfit between consumers’ little luxuries and traditional views of luxury consumption.

3.2.2. Luxury consumption experience

Several themes emerge with respect to how consumers experience products and brands they perceive as luxuries. Consumption experiences encompass: (1) possession rituals, (2) everydayness and special consumption contexts, (3) precious moments, and (4) transformative experiences.

Possession rituals. Consumers tend to integrate intense emotions and feelings from intense purchase experiences into their own consumption contexts. McCracken (1986) and Heilbrunn (2007) already describe that rituals or acts of passage serve to connect the public purchase with the actual private consumption situation. According to McCracken (1986), individuals tend to apply possession rituals enabling them to extract meaning from products and integrate this meaning into their daily lives, thus occupying physical, mental, and symbolic space (Heilbrunn 2007).

“I think, the first time, when you use it, when you have never used a luxury cream before, then you open it, you have a wonderful packaging, it’s like a ritual to open it and to smell it, to smell the special perfume, to see, maybe there are ‘Glitter-Things’ in it like no other normal product has. So, it’s the first time, when you use it and then you see ok, it’s something really special…”

(Nancy, 29, Austria)

These occupied spaces are characterised by strong, positive feelings like pleasure, convenience, and trust. A luxury becomes, for instance, the friend you can always rely on, the caretaker, someone to treat with respect, someone to hug. Literature refers to person-object relationships of that quality as special possessions (Belk 1988), which are incorporated into people’s extended self through various consumption rituals, such as hugging, collecting, and habitual product use.

“So there was a box, a wooden box that he put on the table and just whatever you felt you had in your pocket or something, you just put the money in there and then he opened the bottle. And it was, god it was so good. It was like the best Champagne I ever had, it truly was. And afterwards I was hugging the bottle, someone took a picture of that, and I had it a long time in my laptop. ... I still remember the feeling and how it felt to have something that good... I need to say, that I was almost crying, because it was so good.”

(Lisa, 37, Finland)

Everydayness and special consumption contexts. Contrary to traditional luxuries as defined in literature, consumer-perceived luxury products and brands are oftentimes “not every day ordinary things but used every day” (Susan, 26, Austria) or at least on a regular basis. However, everydayness does not seem to apply to South Korean respondents. They rather stick to the traditional use of luxury and restrict the use of luxuries to specific consumption situations.

“I don’t use those kinds of products every day, when I come to school or something like that. Sometimes when I go on a date or something like that, or when I meet friends or when I go to see teachers or something like that when I go on an appointment meeting people.”

(Mary, 21, South Korea)
Interestingly, the consumption experience seems to vary according to the degree of luxuriousness and different situations respectively. On the one hand, respondents tend to use different products of the same brand in order to adapt the degree of luxuriousness to the situation. The versatility of luxury products helps consumers to use them in different situations and flexibly adapt their meaning to the various contexts. As consumers use them on a regular basis and in many contexts, luxuries need to be versatile by definition.

"... it suits better with rainy days, but I think that I could use it in different contexts, like going to work, put it somewhere, or going out at night, for going to a club, so its versatile and passionate, it's very good. I think this kind of clothes for me is very flexible... Obviously not for going to a football match or something, but yes, I would say so, it adapts very well to different contexts."

(Michael, 32, Spain)

As demonstrated above, the meaning of luxuries tends to vary according to the appropriateness of the actual usage situation of the luxury product. Respondents report especially positive consumption experiences in situations that hold strong meaning for the individual and therefore "justify" the usage of luxury products regardless of their higher prices. What is interesting, though, is that luxuries seem to be focused on one precious piece instead of adopting a luxurious lifestyle for one specific luxurious consumption context.

"It's a special thing when you are, when the hobby is so important to you. Horses are so important, riding is so important to me. Otherwise I wouldn't even think about to spend that much money on this kind of thing... That is the most important for me. I'm the boots-girl (laughs). Yes. I can survive with less, but I don't want."

(Jenny, 28, Finland)

As real luxuries are sparse and mostly limited to just one product/brand, respondents also identify inappropriate consumption situations that — according to their view — are not compatible with the usage of their chosen product. A desire to protect the product/brand from inappropriate use and damage becomes evident. This fact underscores the luxury character of perceived luxuries, which are treated with respect, and which people care for. They become special possessions (Belk 1988), which also implies fears of loss and separation.

"...actually we went climbing, I took the purse with me, but this was just the first and only time I wasn't thinking that we are going on the mountain, it's not appropriate probably. I'll soil it and it will be dirty overall."

(Karen, 24, Austria)

"So sometimes, I take my Parlanti fine boots, because I know that we are riding inside, and I know that they are safe from the water, but when I'm not sure, if it is gonna rain, and we are maybe outside, and they are dirty and everything, those are the days when I'm not using them, because it's too dirty, too much water and too much dirt and I'm feeling sad, because I want to use them, and I have to leave them behind."

(Jenny, 28, Finland)

Contrary to respondents in the European sample, South Korean respondents seem to deem situations inappropriate, in which they confront individuals of lower income with their luxury products. Respondents mention various reasons for that inappropriateness: first, low-income individuals might perceive luxury as offending and second, to avoid being credited with negative personal characteristics, such as immoderateness or dishonesty.

"In western culture, if I tell you, your parents are rich, then I think you don't feel bad, but in Korea most people think that rich, many rich people are not honest. Most of the Koreans don't respect rich people, but I think in western culture many people do respect rich people."

(Linda, 26, South Korea)

Precious moments. Respondents also report about consumption experiences in everyday situations that turn into special moments when involving luxury products/brands. In this case, luxuries get an escapist character; the consumer uses them to escape from ordinary life and to enjoy a precious moment of luxury.

"I don't buy Champagne for a special occasion or something like that. I buy, so that I have it, whenever I feel that I want to drink it. ...Thursday night, we had Sushi. And I figured out, because I have these small bottles of Champagne 'yes, today is a good day to have Champagne'. There is something special in that moment; like nothing can ruin it anyway... nothing can spoil the moment when you open the bottle of Champagne."

(Lisa, 37, Finland)

"I would say, you feel secure and protected and you give yourself a treat... emotions when putting cream into my face! ...you are enjoying your time. Like you have so much stress in your daily live and then you take time for yourself and then you just take the best products and enjoy those 10 minutes of relaxation."

(Nancy, 29, Austria)

An important aspect of these precious moments and of luxury product/brand consumption experience in general is the multisensory component of brand experience (Brakus et al. 2009; Joy/Sherry 2003). Many of those multisensory experiences the respondents in this study report involve touch or taste. Belk/Coon (1993) already describe the daily rituals of touching and holding objects in your hands as a way of connecting with one's objects of devotion (Pichler/Hemetsberger 2007), a kind of relationship that transcends sheer materialism.

"It's rather like thinking how it comes out of the bottle and how it tastes (laughs) rather than recognising something significant in the outlook like think of compa-
Transformative experiences. Additionally, luxury products and brands support consumers in temporarily or permanently transforming themselves. Luxuries in general have the potential to change individuals and transform them into their ideal self, as for instance making them “a better rider”, or “a better person”. Individuals feel magically transformed by what they drink, wear and use, which is independent of social approval. Recently, Hemetsberger et al. (2010) and Hoppe et al. (2009) refer to this phenomenon of individuals feeling transformed by what they consume as the self-transformative power of brands. These transformative experiences seem to be constituent characteristics of luxury as experienced by consumers.

“I don’t know, the main feeling is that they are so much better, when I’m riding. They are feeling so much better, I can do my riding better with the boots, at least I think so. I don’t know, is it really true, but I feel so, I’m better with my boots... it is positive, because they are just for me, they fit me better, it’s a special feeling. They make me a better rider.”

(Jenny, 28, Finland)

“When I’m wearing it, I feel like I’m a special person.”

(John, 24, South Korea)

A further outcome of these transformative experiences is that consumers ascribe luxuries the quality of being hidden supporters. The use of luxuries can ultimately support individuals in their individual identity projects (Bauer/von Wallpach/Hemetsberger, 2005; Thompson/Haytko 2009) and would/Thompson 2010) refer to consumers’ processes in their ordinary lives, to escape from the profanity of their surroundings and integrate luxuries into their consumption context.

Tab. 3 provides a comprehensive overview and a comparison of the major assumptions underlying the traditional versus the consumer-centred approach to luxury.

The escapist quality of luxuries becomes manifest in meaningful contexts and precious moments. They make people, hobbies, relationships and oneself meaningful, worth being treated with love and respect. Luxuries accomplish to transform common everyday situations into special moments. Similar to Atwal/William’s (2009) description of escapist qualities of luxury brands, consumer-defined luxuries show qualities of high intensity and high involvement with a consumption experience. Luxuries allow consumers to experience something extraordinary in their ordinary lives, to escape from the profanity of everyday life.
Furthermore, luxury products and brands are transient in nature: they are required to be flexible and versatile, that is, to support consumers in adapting to different situations and contexts. Throughout the process of appropriation consumers ascribe meanings to products or brands that identify the product or brand as luxurious and adapt these meanings to usage situations they perceive as appropriate. This finding is consistent with Kleine/Kernan (1991) who argue that context influences the meaning people ascribe to consumption objects. Consumers purposefully transfer these self-defined luxuries to new situations and everyday contexts that might not have been associated with traditional luxury products and brands, making them “everyday” luxuries. Depending on situational and contextual roles as well as related wants and needs, a consumer might also perceive a product or brand as luxurious in one situation/context while keeping it hidden in another situation/context that is considered as inappropriate. This new flexibility might be a necessary condition for consumers to remain loyal as perceived luxuries provide unprecedented, more frequent usage opportunities in different contexts than traditional luxuries. Due to their versatile applicability, luxuries are not necessarily perceived as unnecessaries even though consumers state that they do not need them, but they are rather essential to them on an everyday or regular basis.

In contrast to Veblen (1902), the findings show that the consumption of luxuries does not seem to be predominantly motivated by the desire for status and conspicuousness. Consumers rather value the experiences with luxuries due to their ability to generate special moments that are associated with their private contexts. Rather than demonstrating wealth or status, luxury consumers hide their possessions and keep them in privacy. This finding underlines luxuries’ role as important hidden supports, and resource for relating to oneself. Hidden supporters help consumers in portraying, and temporarily transforming into an idealised self. Transformative experiences enabled by brands (Hemetsberger et al. 2010; Hoppe et al. 2009) describe the ability of luxuries to alter one’s self-understanding for the time of the product use. These transformative experiences are apparently linked to self-appreciation and a critical awareness of individuals’ corporeality. The authors cautiously conclude that luxuries, as consumers define them, are quite intimate and private objects, relating to consumers’ selves; becoming integral parts of consumers’ selves, rather than to aspired roles in society.

While European and South Korean consumer luxury experiences largely correspond, the motives for hiding luxuries are diverse. Whereas European consumers report fears of loss and separation as the main motives, South Korean respondents are hiding luxuries in order not to offend lower-income individuals and to avoid being credited with negative personal characteristics, such as dishonesty. Consequently, South Korean consumers seem to restrict the use of luxuries to specific consumption situations that justify the usage of special products and brands.

5. Conclusion and future research

This article contributes to existing theory on luxury branding by conceptualising luxury from a consumer perspective. This study extends existing research in at least two important ways that are related to the experiential aspects of purchasing and consuming luxuries. First, the
findings reveal that luxury experiences are in most instances characterised by transience that is reflected in the flexible, escapist, and unlocking power of luxuries. Second, the study illustrates that luxuries’ support of consumers’ identity projects is much more private than previously assumed in the context of traditional luxury goods. On the one hand, what consumers perceive as luxuries obviously differs from what literature suggests; on the other hand the study also shows numerous commonalities. As a summary of these findings the authors conclude that luxuries as defined by consumers are valued at least as much for their luxury experience as traditional or democratised luxuries. The major distinction, however, lies in its disconnectedness to social class and conspicuousness, and its intimate connection to the consumer’s self.

As this study is exploratory in nature, future research needs to investigate into different target and age groups in order to be able to support or reject the assumption of transience and privacy of consumer luxuries. An interesting aspect in this regard would be the comparison of countries with a strong tradition and history in luxury consumption and emerging economies with a comparatively short tradition in luxury consumption. The findings provide some initial evidence for the existence of differences between consumer luxury experiences in countries characterised by different stages of market development. However, further studies are necessary to deepen the understanding concerning these important issues.

Luxury as a commonly used notion also applies to immaterial things in general. Investigating into immaterial, integrative and co-creative luxuries offers a broad field for future research. How do consumers, for instance, perceive luxurious services and tourism offers? What characterises them, what are the common denominators? Further, when luxury is perceived and experienced by consumers, what are the processes by which consumers ‘luxify’ these experiences? In which way does the current economic climate influence consumers’ luxury experiences? Are non-essentiality, quality, price, symbolic value, status, and conspicuousness still valid concepts, or does a need exist to redefine luxury as rather essential, transient, escapist, private, and unlocking? With this study the authors provide a first re-conceptualisation of luxury, and hope to encourage more research on consumer experien-


