

# LUXURY BRANDING: A CROSS CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

International marketing scholars are continuously analysing the economic and cultural scenario across the globe to identify the challenges and the role of brands in the complex global scenario. Proper branding and its communication can go a long way in the determination of the success of marketers. Culture is a significant contributor in shaping the consumer's beliefs and perceptions about brands and their behaviours. The term luxury has different meaning for different people around the world and there is scope for the luxury market to expand. The brands which were considered to be luxurious in mainly the western part of the globe have now become a domain of less developed societies.

The objective of this review paper is to explore differences in perception of consumers towards luxury brands across nations and challenges that influence sustainability of most powerful brands. This study has been undertaken to specifically study certain brands which are considered to be a luxury brand in India but probably be an ordinary brand in other cultures. 10 broad cultural clusters (Anglo, Latin Europe, Latin America, Eastern Europe, East Asia, South Asia, Africa, Mid East, Nordic, and Germanic) have been studied to detect variations in consumer personality and their perceptions. A qualitative research approach based on thorough review of literature has been adopted to meet the purpose of study.

The analysis yielded that the dimensions such as Power Distance, Individualism, etc. influences parameters of luxury and thus a highly priced brand is not necessarily the only sign of luxury. The study will help marketers and brand managers to develop 'glocal' brands as per each market's requirements.

**Key words:** *Brand, brand associations, brand perception, brand personality, cultural dimensions*

**JEL Classification:** M31

## INTRODUCTION

A marketing strategy used by companies to differentiate their products from other similar produces is termed as branding and is useful for consumers to identify different goods in a crowded marketplace. There has been use of symbols and signs since the times people started creating goods and trading. Further, Industrial Revolution provided a thrust to branding and advertising. The brand equity, which refers to the positive or negative insights of buyers towards a brand, often helps to build brand personality and consumers attach specific emotions to different brands. These emotions may vary across cultures as people around the world differ in terms of their buying behaviour and personality.

International marketing scholars are continuously analysing the economic and cultural scenario across the globe to recognise the challenges in establishing brand identity in the complex marketing scenario. There is a difference in the ways that people use to think, look and live in different countries around the world. Branding has evolved historically due to better understanding of differences across cultures in a globalised environment. Cultural and demographic variations has important implications for marketing of goods and services and proper branding and its communication can go a long way in the determination of the success of marketers. Culture is a significant contributor in shaping the consumer's beliefs and perceptions about brands and their behaviours.

This study has been undertaken to specifically study certain brands which are considered to be a luxury brand in India but probably be an ordinary brand in other cultures. The objective of this review paper is to explore how the image of one brand is dissimilar in different cultures and to emphasise on the need for repositioning luxury brands across the world for sustainability. Specifically the focus is on investigating how the global economy is offering growth opportunities for luxury brands around the world.

The term luxury has different meaning for different people around the world and is mainly defined by brands. With the society becoming increasingly consumer oriented and with higher income, there is scope for the luxury market to expand and the brands which were considered to be luxurious in mainly the western part of the globe have now become a domain of less developed societies. The worldwide market for luxury brands is assessed to be around two trillion dollars. China and India have been some of the most dominant markets in the past few years. India's economy, in particular, has been showing favourable signals with macroeconomic indicators such as the fiscal and current account deficit, inflation and the

foreign exchange reserves all showing positive growth. The annual growth rate estimates in India is the best in the BRICS area at 7.5 per cent in comparison to 6.3 per cent in China, 2.1 per cent in South Africa and quite low in Brazil and Russia.


The Indian elite class consumer is continuously on the rise and the numbers are likely to grow from present 10 million to 26 million families by 2025. The average household income will almost double by 2025, which is a golden opportunity for any global luxury brand. Also, India has a vast population of millionaires in the Asia-Pacific region.

This attractive consumer market scenario has motivated the researcher to undertake the study on luxury brands and to understand the perception of consumers towards these brands in a global context. Hofstede's (2001) cultural taxonomy has been used to define different types of cultures and to explain possible variations in consumer behaviour. The research is expected to be relevant for multinational companies who need sufficient knowledge about cultural differences in order to market their brands around the world more effectively.

### GLOBAL LUXURY SEGMENT: A REVIEW

Cross cultural consumer analysis is defined as the effort to find out to what extent the consumers of two or more countries are similar or different. Such an understanding of the similarities and differences that exist between nations is important to the multinational marketer, who must make appropriate strategies to reach consumers in specific foreign markets. Most of the world famous luxury brands owe their origin to countries like France, Germany, USA and UK. Globalization and evolution of digital technology has created awareness of luxury brands globally and the rising income across countries has made these brands global. Ranking of the top 100 brands shows the following top 10 brands. Amazon was the most valuable global brand in 2019, whereas Google secured this in 2018, according to a recent report from WPP and Kantar Millward Brown Top 100 Most Valuable Global Brands ranking.

Figure 1- Top 10 brands of 2019

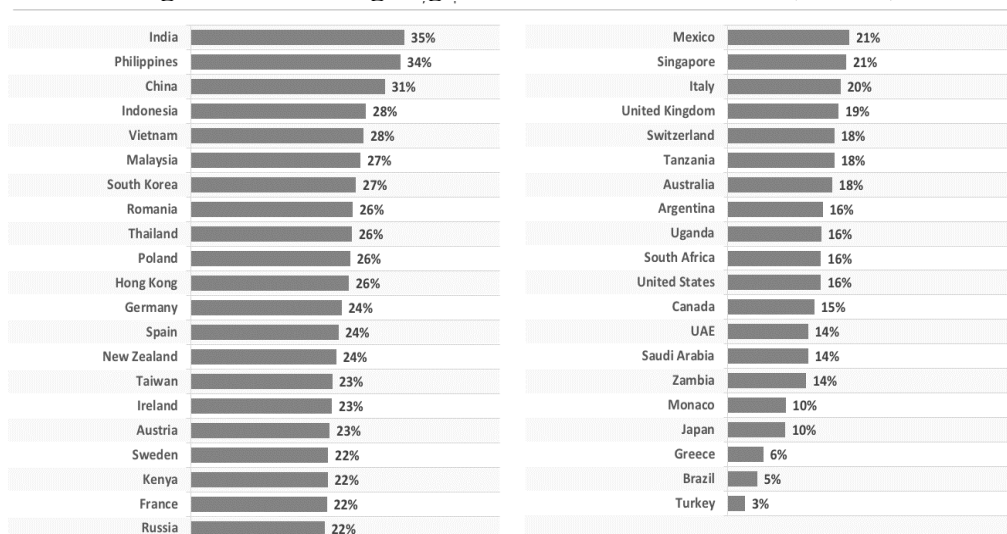
Brand	Category	Brand Value 2019 \$Mil.	Brand Contribution	Brand Value % Change 2019 vs. 2018	Rank Change	Country of Origin
1 	Retail	315,505	4	+52%	2	
2 	Technology	309,527	4	+3%	0	
3 	Technology	309,000	4	+2%	-2	
4 	Technology	251,244	4	+25%	0	
5 	Payments	177,918	5	+22%	2	
6 	Technology	158,968	4	-2%	0	
7 	Retail	131,246	3	+16%	2	
8 	Technology	130,862	4	-27%	-3	
9 	Fast Food	130,368	4	+3%	-1	
10 	Telecom Providers	108,375	3	+2%	0	

Source: WPP and Kantar Millward Brown (2019)

Foreign brands Bentley, Louis Vuitton, Tiffany, Hugo Boss, Mont Blanc have now become brands that a larger population around the world aspire for. The luxury products possessing higher levels of quality and taste are much desired today by consumers as they are not so expensive as to be out of their reach. This phenomenon is called trading up. A large number of consumers around the world are now interested in trading up due to rising incomes and growing awareness. As per Global Wealth Report 2019 by Knight Frank, India will see the maximum rate of increase of millionaires between 2017 and 2022 (Figure 2). Many companies are

building on this opportunity and have created lower priced versions to gain competitive advantage including luxury brands like Mercedes-Benz and BMW.

**Figure 2- Growing High Net Worth Individuals (HNWI)**



Luxury brands in different segments such as personal goods, cars and bikes, hotels, furniture, cruises and private jets are much desired and affordable for a large number of households. Although there are a few challenges, which this market has to face, such as presence of imitation products, failure to adopt market oriented strategies and high import rates on luxury items in some areas, the market has huge growth potential.

### **CULTURAL VALUES AND BRANDING**

Even though globalization has resulted in disappearance of country-specific boundaries, people across nations still have specific tastes and preferences due to their values and customs evolving from their domestic cultures (Zhu, Quan, & Xuan, 2006). A huge amount of research has established that the strength of powerful brands differs because of the cultural factors in the regions in which the brands exist. Due to widespread globalization of industrial organizations and increased dependence of nations on each other, there is a need for better understanding of cultural influences on branding and marketing practices. Cross-cultural research can help to identify differences in perception among consumers and challenges that influence sustainability of most powerful brands.

As with luxury, the term culture is perceived differently by different social scientists. Culture is generally defined in terms of certain parameters, which differs from one institution to another in significant ways. Hofstede is a renowned contributor to the field of culture and cultural differences. He has classified cultures on the basis of certain dimensions (Hofstede, 1998). Hofstede's has developed a set of dimensions which can be measured through survey instruments to obtain average values for a specific national culture. These dimensions are Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism, Masculinity and Long Term Orientation. The values assigned help to develop an understanding of the cultural differences between these nations. They have been explained further:

1. Power Distance (PDI): It denotes the unequal distribution of power in institutions and cultures resulting in hierarchy.
2. Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI): Level of comfort of people in a society with the degree of uncertainty and ambiguity in a given situation.
3. Masculinity (MAS): A liking for achievement, boldness, harshness and material success in contrast to a preference for relationships, shyness, attention to the weak and quality of life. Masculinity vs. Femininity is the dimension that deals with the dominance of males or females within a culture (Hofstede, 2010).
4. Individualism/Collectivism (IDV): A belief where individuals rely more on themselves as against dependence on group.
5. Long Term Orientation (LTO): This helps to understand whether people in a culture are more focussed towards the future or the past.



The behaviour of consumers and their perceptions are regulated by the fundamental values and outlook of the shared culture. In this research paper, for the sake of convenience, the GLOBE study formed the basis for the classification of the entire world into 10 broad clusters. The study reviewed consumer characteristics in 10 broad cultural clusters (Anglo, Latin Europe, Latin America, Eastern Europe, East Asia, South Asia, Africa, Mid East, Nordic, and Germanic) as outlined in GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness) study of 1991. It was undertaken by Robert J. House of the University of Pennsylvania.

Any company who wants to market its brands on a global scale needs to take factors like culture, government restrictions, demographic properties, language and other such factors into consideration. There is a growing discussion in the field of marketing communication whether to standardise globally or to adapt locally (Egan, 2007). A standardised approach is no more viable under the current circumstances. De Mooij (2010) suggested some approaches for companies to create sustainable brands:

- 1) Promote established local brands into an international one.
- 2) Global thought with local variations.
- 3) Create novel brands as per global requirements.
- 4) Buy local brands and turn them into international ones.
- 5) Develop new brand categories using existing brand names.
- 6) Employ localised products and marketing strategies.

Gender has also been one of the factors affecting segmentation of markets (Kim et al., 2006, p. 423). Hsieh (2002) found that brands carried a similar image across markets that resembled on the basis of national characteristics, cultural traits and level of economic growth. The growing middle class in developing countries is an attractive phenomenon for global marketers. Same products may have different meanings in different countries. Many brands have become luxury brands because of the fact that they have been manufactured in countries known for their competency in those products. For example, Chanel perfume is strongly associated to France; Swatch watches to Switzerland, Mercedes Benz and BMW to Germany to name a few. The individual's self-concept in a particular culture also affects the choice of a brand, as the brand is required to possess characteristics matching their own personality or the personality they aspire to have. Thus, the above discussed factors can create strong brand personalities and can be a source of luxury in different societies.

### **PERCEIVED BRAND LUXURY ACROSS CLUSTERS**

**Anglo cluster-** The modern day consumer is more concerned about his image and lifestyle that owes to rising incomes. The purchase of luxurious brands helps them to project their personality and status. Markus and Kitayama (1991) had described the Western culture (e.g., the United States and Australia) as being independent which emphasizes on self-respect and manifestation of individual abilities. In individualistic cultures, people are self-conscious and self-actualization is important. Hofstede's work (2001) has established that Western countries have individualistic cultures. Individualistic consumers focus more on design, performance and qualities of products. Individualistic consumers make decisions on the basis of their own experiences or information gathered by them (Doran, 2002). People from individualistic cultures have high brand awareness in comparison to consumers from collectivistic cultures. Luxury for consumers in this cluster is determined by quality and performance of the product and rational appeals would succeed in winning these consumers. In a high individualistic culture, there is an increasing tendency to purchase innovative and dissimilar brands.

**Latin Europe-** Latin European cluster is high on Masculinity and therefore consumers in Latin Europe prefer masculine brand personalities. These countries have high power distance index (PDI) which indicates greater tolerance for discrimination and greater need for power, wealth, respect and status (Hofstede, 1991). This cluster scores high on the dimensions, Assertiveness, Power distance, and Collectivism. People in countries with high power distance and collectivistic culture show a higher degree of brand loyalty. Consumers from cultures with high power distance seek strong brands with large market share, since these brands have achieved their position because of their best quality (Palumbo & Herbig, 2000). Power distance is related to the risk that people in that culture can take in making decisions. It is difficult for new entrants

to compete in a market with a large power distance culture because their members do not easily switch to an unknown brand. In France and Italy, luxury is strongly associated with the image of the country where the product is originally developed. Europe is known to be a destination where luxury is highly valued and France has a very strong luxury tradition. The French are very conscientious of their appearance.

**Latin America-** Latin American countries are collectivistic societies. In a collectivistic society people prefer innovative products (Yaveroglu and Donthu, 2002; Yeniurt and Townsend, 2003; Van Everdingen and Waarts, 2003); seek proper service (Birgelen et al, 2002), and are influenced by advertising appeals (Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996). There are more brand loyal customers in Brazil than America or Japan. Consumers in Collectivistic cultures are brand loyal and favour dominant brands (Robinson, 1995). People abide by group norms in this culture and consumers dislike moving away from conformity by choosing a new brand or switching brands. So, they choose the brands that are perceived to be popular (Hofstede, 2001).

**Eastern Europe-** In countries like Russia and Poland, consumers are status conscious and wish to prove that they are different from the masses by preferring luxury products. Consumers in these countries derive social prestige from the luxury brands and they communicate their social status by indulging in these brands.

**East Asia-** Japan is the most masculine country in this region. Masculine societies place greater emphasis on affluence, achievement, ambition and materialism by way of purchasing new items as this is a means for a person to show his or her wellbeing and to exhibit affluence and success (Rogers, 2003). Consumers in masculine societies are more price conscious than consumers from feminine cultures. Consumers in masculine countries are achievement oriented and performance conscious. They prefer to exhibit their status and this is why indulge in purchase of luxury products such as jewellery (De Mooij & Hofstede 2002; De Mooij 2010). Japan is considered to be a collectivistic culture. Also, East Asian countries are long-term oriented. Collectivistic cultures have brand loyal consumers and they like dominant brands (Robinson, 1995). People in East Asia only display positive emotions and have a good control over negative emotions. Bao, Zhou and Su's (2003) study indicated that Chinese were less brand-conscious but focus on their appearance.

**South Asia-** Traditionally, Asians are conditioned to idolize seniors and follow established norms and customs. People in Asian cultures show more interdependence (e.g. Indonesia) and consumer choices are dependent on others in the surroundings (Pekerti, AA, Kashlak, R, Osman-Gani, A & Pekerti, A., 2005). Philippines shows the lowest LTO index values. In Asian countries, the consumers are group oriented, and the reputation and appearance of the brands are significant motivators for luxury consumption. Consumers in developing countries of south Asia prefer brands which are manufactured in developed countries because according to them these brands elevate their social status and prestige.

**Africa-** Nigeria displays the lowest LTO index values. In South Africa, people are still very status conscious. They prefer to possess luxury brands as they are considered to be status symbols and they believe in flaunting these luxury products.

**Mid East-** Arab world is high on Power Distance, is a collectivistic society, is more of a masculine society and are high on uncertainty avoidance. Countries where people have large power distance and have social affinity show a higher degree of brand loyalty. Again because these people find it difficult to survive in an uncertain environment and are low on risk taking ability, they are less inclined towards innovative products and have low entrepreneurial spirit. Thus people living in high uncertainty avoidance cultures are more resistant towards change than people of low uncertainty avoidance cultures. Therefore there is a difference in the process of adoption of new products in these cultures (Yaveroglu & Donthu 2002; Yeniurt & Townsend 2003). Products that carry high prestige are highly sought in countries where there is high power distance. Elbashier and Nicholls (1993) study described the Arab consumers as more simple, more socially oriented and highly price oriented. They are more conventional and apprehensive of locally made products.

Many marketers (Iwata (2006), Barbaro (2006) and Al-Jadda (2005)) have described the transformation that Barbie underwent in the Middle East because of the resistance faced due to

political, religious, and cultural factors. This was due to the reason that there was a huge gap between the looks and dressing style of native Arab girls and a doll like Barbie. Barbie also faced competition from locally made dolls such as Sara and Dara that were created to compete with Barbie. These local dolls were created with traditional outfit and were available with family members, which made survival difficult for the Barbie doll.

**Nordic-** Quality of life is higher in Nordic regions (Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Finland and Sweden). Sweden and Norway are less masculine cultures. Finland is also a very individualistic country (IDV 63) and in the masculinity versus femininity scale Finland received a low score of 26.

**Germanic** –Germany scores low on power distance. Germans are more assertive, give importance to material success and value individual achievements. For the Germans luxury products should have excellent functional characteristics, should exhibit good performance and the price should be proportional to the quality of the product.

### **BRAND IMAGE IN DIFFERENT CULTURES**

As discussed earlier, consumers vary across cultures in several respects. This is why marketers around the world willing to enter global markets need to understand the customer needs and responses to internationalize their operations. The brands often adapt their product, price, promotion mix or distribution channels to the local culture prevalent in a country (Kotler & Keller 2009). Since brands create value in the minds of the customers, a positive brand image can help to sustain a brand in different cultures.

In marketing literature, the term brand image has been defined in different ways. Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) defined brand image is a matter of consumer perception which is largely subjective and influences consumer interpretation (Park, Rabolt, 2008). Brand image is significantly different in different countries as each country shows a dissimilar pattern of demand and consumption. Sometimes even the most luxurious brands around the world are perceived differently in different cultures due to the differences in brand image. Various theories and models have been discussed by different researchers from time to time to explain the determinants of brand image and impact of culture has been one of the most important determinants discussed. De Barnier, Rodina and Valette-Florence (2008) have emphasised upon three factors that influence consumers' choice of luxury brands:

- Preference based on physical features of the product, such as quality (Functional motivations);
- Preference based on aesthetic quality or the design of the product (Observed motivations);
- Preference linked to brand name or prestigious logo for proclaiming one's social status (Dubois, Laurent and Czellar 2001; Vickers and Renand, 2003).

Culture is an unavoidable consideration in cross-culture marketing. There are numerous brands which carry different brand image in different societies. In today's competitive market, luxury brands are connecting with customers in more creative ways than ever. Being closely familiar with the customers' needs, habits, values and lifestyle is an essential aspect of a strong marketing strategy. Many luxury brands have a rich history that is an inseparable part of the brand's charisma and this makes them acceptable around the world. Brands such as Bentley and Rolls-Royce are observed to have a high growth rate in recent years because there is a strong demand for ultra-luxury cars from the increasing number of super-rich around the world. China is emerging as one of the strong markets due to the strong brand personality of these cars. However, sometimes the luxury character is diluted by over distribution and therefore such brands become regular brands in many countries. Thus, many brands that are powerful luxury brands in certain cultures are regular brands in many countries due to a different brand image.

Powerful and luxurious brands such as Audi, Mercedes, Harley Davidson, Gucci, Versace, Jimmy Choo and many others which most Indians had never heard of a few decades back, have become accessible for a large population in India and are widely available. Many brands do not remain luxurious in the parent country due to their extensive availability. Keeping up the contemporary appeal and the innovative factor is crucial for sustaining brand image. Thus, an



indepth understanding of contextual factors in the local markets is essential for drawing up a sound global business strategy (Kawabata, 2009).

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR BRANDING IN INDIA**

According to the CII-IMRB report on luxury market in India titled 'Emerging Consumers of Luxury, India tier 2 and 3', around 35 per cent sale of luxury brands in India is concentrated in non-metro cities like Aurangabad, Ludhiana, Kochi, Lucknow and Kanpur. The marketers of luxury brands need to put in more effort to penetrate this ready to spend consumer segment situated in such places. Increase in purchasing power, a growing economy and liberalisation of FDI are bringing global luxury brands to domestic market. The growth rate of overall wealth (28 per cent) and HNWI population (26 percent) in India is ahead of most parts of the world due to strong equity market performance and reduction in the cost of oil imports in recent times (World Wealth Report, 2019). As per the report, there are around 2.36 lakh high net worth individuals (HNWI) in India. Japan has the largest population of millionaires in the Asia-Pacific region, with 12.60 lakh people and India is at number four. Menswear brands like Alfred Dunhill and Alexander Amosu, luxury car maker Maserati and Italian fashion brand Salvatore Ferragamo are some of the global luxury brands in India. To make it convenient for a growing number of people, most luxury brands across segments have unveiled a series of affordable luxury products to achieve larger sales volume.

As per Hofstede's research there is unequal distribution of power and wealth in the Indian society, which can be seen in the power distance score of Hofstede. People in India believe in exhibiting their position and place in the society. Caste and status have a prominent place in the society. There is Long Term Orientation (LTO) and people are persevering. The Indian culture is characterised by social values like (a) a clear hierarchical order; (b) high involvement; (c) personalized relationship; (d) avoidance of conflict; and (e) devotion and commitment and not simply pleasure seeking (Pillai, R., Scandura, T.A., and Williams E.A., 1999). India has a male dominated society and their masculinity score is 56 which indicates a high gap between standards of behaviour for men and women (Hofstede, 2001, p. 286). Consumers in India are more open to being introduced to new products and are more open minded to innovation. Mass-communication and mass-media have helped in making informed choices of new products. In many cases Bollywood movies dictate choice of luxury goods. Celebrity endorsement is common for luxurious brands as it creates brand loyalty with the Indian consumer.

India has always had a rich tradition and was referred to as the golden bird in the past. The Indian consumer because of its unique cultural characteristics broadly has two distinct classes of luxury consumers: one, which can be described as the royal and aristocratic class and who are connoisseurs of luxury and the other, which is the class of contemporary rich (high net worth individuals) who is the new Indian luxury buyer more aware of brands due to high consumption capacity and purchasing power. Thus, India is a market for luxurious brands that have a high aesthetic value as well as that help attain the modern lifestyle of the west.

Consumers in India live in a collectivistic society on one hand and on the other hand many working class consumers are aspiring for an individualistic culture of the west. The bandwagon effect is somewhat visible in India which means that consumers try to imitate the behaviour of other consumers so that they are identified as members of the group and they are brand conscious favouring prestigious brands. But at the same time Indian people want value for money and they purchase luxury goods for self-identity and well-being. More and more women in Indian society are becoming self-sufficient and self-confident, thereby turning to masculine brands as status enhancers and for improving her place within the hierarchy. In India, consumers can take sufficient amount of risk in making purchasing decisions as compared with other Asian countries (Hofstede, 2000, p. 151). Overall, Indians are considered to be brand loyal, but do not fail to try new products if they have been introduced with a proper marketing strategy. Furthermore in India, the youth is more brand conscious, and they also have high risk taking ability so they are not necessarily brand loyal (Sridhar, 2006).

However, because India has a wide cultural diversity, it is extremely difficult for marketers to penetrate into the Indian market with a common marketing strategy. Besides the cultural challenges, Euromonitor International has identified many challenges for operating in the

Indian Economy, such as poor infrastructure, widespread corruption, red tape in business procedures and skills shortages. Effective reforms are required to address these problems and improve luxury investment. The make in India initiative will further boost the entry of different brand manufacturers in India, thereby establishing a stronger brand-consumer relationship.

## CONCLUSION

In the era of globalisation, a sound marketing strategy is the main tool for companies to address the needs of global consumers with innovative brands and offers. A proper analysis of the cultural diversities within and across countries can help marketers to understand consumer reactions and purchasing behaviour. An understanding of consumer's behaviour for luxury goods will lead to overcoming the dilemma of whether to standardize the brand or to adapt branding strategies to the local contexts.

After a thorough review of literature available, this research paper has recognized the specific characteristics of Indian consumers based on their cultural profile. The findings of this study helps in identifying differences and similarities in perception of luxury brands between cultures so that marketers and brand managers are able to develop 'glocal' brands as per each market's requirements.

The brand managers operating in India can position their brands so as to suit the needs of both the traditional rich and the new high net worth individuals. The brands must keep in mind the price and quality match and must help in improving self-identity and well-being of consumers. New and innovative brands with high aesthetic value as well as contemporary nature will create strong relations between consumers and luxury brands. In future researches, the researcher intends to take into account the preferences of brands across different regions of the country, across different product categories and also motivation behind the purchase of luxury brands among Indian consumers in a quantitative study. Brand management will remain a subject of research globally to understand the role of strategic marketing in new and innovative brand development.

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