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M'mmm, Branding: Marketing, Music, and Merchandise

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Personality or “Impersonality”?
A Case Study of a Niche Luxury Brand’s Online Emotional Branding Strategies

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Abstract
This study explores the success behind the niche luxury brand Mainson Martin Margiela (“MMM”), and mainly focuses on its social media and website strategies. An additional purpose of this study is to build a foundation for exploring how the brand successfully uses its owned media to strengthen its particular emotional branding as it relates to brand equity, as well as how the brand manages the relationship between its followers on social media. Keller’s (2001) Brand Equity Model (“BEM”) serves as the study’s theoretical foundation with some previous research that involves the model. This study also explores the potentiality of luxury brands’ digital marketing– followed by a discussion of brand community and brand cult. In applying the BEM, emotional branding and the relevant concept of brand personality are also discussed. Last, this research proposes a modified version of the BEM to analyze MMM’s online emotional branding strategies and suggests a possible method to examine such a modified version of the model in the future.

Keywords: social media, emotional branding, Brand Equity Model, niche luxury brands
Introduction

As Packard and Miller (2007) describe, several hidden emotional persuaders exist in today’s competitive market (e.g. ego-gratification). When it comes to the luxury goods market, more and more brands have noticed the importance of emotional branding. However, not every luxury marketer or brand manager knows how to trigger those emotions and how they work. Greenhill (2011) argues “emotion” as the most significant component for luxury digital marketing. He points out that nowadays, luxury consumers are willing to purchase not only physical goods, but also that they would pay more attention to a “particular emotion.”

Mainstream luxury brands were doing emotional branding skilfully in the past. However, in the year 2009, the luxury market met with an accidental depression due to the worldwide financial crisis, and the increase rate of the luxury industry declined by 8% from the rate of 2008 (Bain & Company, 2010). The entire industry has not recovered to its pre-depression status, and some mainstream luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, are still suffering the slow growth of revenues (Rankin, 2013). Meanwhile, other mainstream luxury brands like Giorgio Armani, Cartier, and Dolce & Gabbana, announced their stores’ closure in China (EJ Insight, 2013; Lu, 2014), which was considered the most hopeful luxury market in the Asia-pacific area (Chevalier & Lu, 2009). These brands are losing their old time glory.

On the contrary, some niche luxury brands are maturing fast as rising stars in the luxury industry. One splendid brand is MMM known for its avant-garde design and anti-fashion attitude. Different from other mainstream luxury brands, MMM did not deliberately build its brand personality, which is often considered a key component of emotional branding (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011). MMM’s operation relies heavily on social media use,
and the brand’s below-the-line (BTL, e.g. road show, in-store activities, event marketing, etc.)
activities are very limited. Surprisingly, MMM has successfully resisted the impact of the
2009 depression and has flourished by its exploding growth in worldwide revenues (Li, 2009;
O’Connor, 2013).

Unlike larger mainstream luxury brands, MMM is a much smaller scale luxury brand,
and it has formed its brand “impersonality” rather than brand personality outside the Internet
world. Examining the brand’s strategies on its social media and website is necessary because
of the brand’s heavy use of the Internet. Since the research of niche luxury brands is still
insufficient, this study can be treated as an icebreaker for the entire luxury industry, and the
study can also provide luxury practitioners further insight into niche luxury brands. In
addition, subsequent brand builders may obtain some inspiration from this study—helping
them to build a small niche brand that links tightly to the Internet in a cost-efficient way.

**Literature Review**

**The Brand Equity Model**

Keller (2001) proposes a consumer-based brand equity model (BEM)(see appendix A) to
demonstrate how a successful brand resonates with its consumers. Brand equity refers to the
way a product with a brand produces additional values over a product without a brand, and a
well-known brand can bring more values to a manufacturer than a lesser-known brand (Aaker,
1991). However, only consumers are qualified to judge a brand’s equity but not the brand
itself (Peter & Donnelly, 2011). Keller (2001) employs a pyramid to illustrate the structure
and the contents of the BEM— a useful tool when examining issues in emotional branding
(MillwardBrown, 2009). The components of this model have tight connections to
consumer-brand relationships (Supphellen, 2000). Generally, the BEM consists of four levels.

**Brand Identity.** According to Aaker (1995), brand identity is defined as “a unique set of associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain” (p.68). Brand identity is at the bottom of the brand equity pyramid, and it represents consumers’ question about “who are you?” to the brand (Keller, 2001, p7). At this basic level, “brand salience” is emphasized, meaning that a brand or a manufacturer needs to arouse consumers’ “awareness of the brand” (p.8). Doing a good job in building brand salience allows a brand to attract consumers at first glance, and consumers may pay more attention to that brand rather than its competitors. Some research shows that product category will influence people’s association with a brand (Acosta & Devasagayam, 2010). However, creating strong brand identity could solve the issue when people are not interested in purchasing some categories of products. In this case, their purchase decisions may only depend on brand identity (Keller, 2001).

A research by Rios and Riquelme (2008) tests the suitability of the BEM’s application for online companies. First, the researchers abstracted several elements of the BEM to construct a framework and tested these elements’ contribution to building a brand’s equity with respect to off-line companies in a statistical approach. Second, they used the same framework to examine online companies’ brand equity. Dissimilar to the original BEM, the results show that brand awareness does not significantly benefit a brand’s equity directly, but it has a direct connection with brand value and consumers’ trust for the off-line companies; however, consumers’ trust and brand equity do not have a positive correlation for off-line companies, but they create brand equity for online companies (Rios & Riquelme, 2008). These results disprove Keller’s illustration that brand awareness is the base of the BEM. Thus, luxury
brands need to notice that when they are selling goods online (such as embedding in their online boutique links in their social media content), they need to pay attention to ensure the information’s trustworthiness (e.g. size, style, functionality, etc.). Poorly managing such information may seriously damage their brand equity.

Some social media practitioners point out that creating brand identity is the first step of emotional branding (Goldner, 2010). Moreover, brand managers need to insure brand identity will be perceived by consumers at the “right times and right places” (Keller, 2001, p.8).

**Brand Meaning.** Performance and imagery lie in the second level of the model, and they construct brand meaning. Brand meaning refers to the question, “what are you?” (Keller, 2001, p7.) Frankly, consumers purchase goods from their belief that the goods can benefit them. Performance refers to the physical level of consumers’ needs (e.g. the basic function of a product) that a brand’s products can satisfy, while imagery arouses consumers’ needs on a psychological and social level (Keller, 2001). According to Nueno and Quelch’s (1998) definition, luxury brands are “those whose ratio of functionality to price is low, while the ratio of intangible and situational utility to price is high” (p.61). Generally, luxury goods have high prices with incomparable functionality (McKinsey, 1990). Some researchers argue that luxury goods should not only meet the consumers’ expectations of “high quality, expensive, and non-essential goods” but also have to meet the consumers’ desires of an experience filled with “symbolic and emotional/hedonic values” (Tynan, McKechnie, & Chhuon, 2010, p.1158).

Thus, focusing on the luxury brands’ imagery is more significant than merely looking into their products’ durability or prestigious prices.

Evidence shows that some people are not as addicted to mainstream luxury brands as
they were in the past, especially in some emerging luxury markets like China (Wen, 2012). These consumers’ taste for niche luxury brands’ may indicate that they are not only seeking traditional meanings of luxury goods’ exclusivity or uniqueness, but also they are seeking a higher level of rarity. These consumers may not prefer ostentatious luxury goods.

As a component of “performance,” price is a significant factor that influences brand meaning for a brand’s consumers and directly associates with the revenues of the brand. Yoo, Donthu, and Lee’s (2000) research applies the BEM to some marketing mix elements, and the researchers define price as a marketing mix element, which has connection with brand’s “perceived quality.” The findings indicate that a company with high brand equity can charge its consumers a higher price, because “perceived quality” and price have positive correlation, and consumers can accept high price when the brand’s “perceived quality” meets their needs (Rao & Monroe, 1989; Yoo, et al., 2000). Interestingly, according to the original BEM, price is a component of second level “performance”, but not a component of to “perceived quality”, which belongs to third level “feelings”. That suggests that the BEM may be slightly modified to meet specific marketing scenarios.

Brand Response. The third level of the BEM is brand response, which encompasses consumers’ “judgments” and “feelings” to a brand, and it asks the question, “what about you?” to the brand (Keller, 2001, p.7). The components of this level specifically stress the role of consumers in a consumer-brand relationship. This level illustrates how consumers perceive the brand in an interior and psychological way. For example, in the “judgments” category, consumers would like to compare a brand’s perceived “quality, credibility, superiority” to that brand’s competitors (p.13-14). The brand response category also includes the concept of
brand consideration, which refers to the consumers’ judgment of whether a brand’s meaning fits themselves—brand response is a higher level than brand awareness because of the deeper processing of information delivered by a brand (Keller, 2001). Brand “Feelings” refers to the “emotional responses and reactions” that a brand evokes from consumers: i.e. “warmth, fun, excitement, security, social approval, and self-respect.” (p.14).

Kuhn, Alpert, and Pope’s (2008) research sets the BEM in a business-to-business (B2B) context in order to find out whether the model is suitable in a specific business mode. The results indicate that consumers’ “feelings” is not a significant factor, while the power of a company’s representative makes more contribution to the company’s brand equity. Thus, subsequent researchers may need to pay attention to the BEM’s application in different business contexts. Nevertheless, the product selected in this study is not a physical product (an electronic tracking system). The results may be different when applying the BEM in physical goods traded in B2B. Moreover, the qualitative approach (interviews with senior buyers in a company) may not have general applicability.

Nonetheless, creating positive emotional reactions could lay a solid foundation for a brand to complete its ultimate goal, that is, the highest level in the BEM—brand resonance.

**Brand Relationships.** Keller (2001) positions brand relationships at the top of the brand equity pyramid and set “brand resonance” as its sole component. The relationship in the BEM does not only refer to a one-way affiliation as “brand following” (Acosta & Devasagayam, 2010, p.167), but also regards a brand’s effort to gratify its consumers. It is an interactive relationship. In this case, some luxury brands have lowered their status to eliminate the price barrier to some extent by launching factory and outlet stores. However, this may damage
these brands’ image, which has been built into the BEM’s second and third levels (Shea, 2013). If ordinary people could easily obtain a luxury brand, another group of people who are seeking that brand for superiority and uniqueness may become dissatisfied that others can now easily obtain the same luxury brand that they once thought of as exclusive. “Behavioral loyalty”, “attitudinal attachment”, “a sense of community” and “active engagement” (Keller, 2001, p15) are four essentials in successful brand resonance. Some researchers treat the concept of “community” as the foundation of studying brand cult (Acosta & Devasagayam, 2010) and brand tribalism (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2008). When a brand has built a strong relationship with its consumers, the consumers would “act as brand evangelists” (Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006, p.60) and become the brand’s “cheerleaders” (Goldner, 2010). This can be treated as the most mature phase in emotional branding.

Moore and Wurster’s (2007) study examines brand resonance by investigating a group of undergraduates’ opinions on two football teams. The researchers propose that self-brand connections (SBC) focus more on consumers’ “self-identity” and the brand, than on brand resonance, which emphasizes a deeper and more extensive relationship such as brand loyalty and brand community (p.64, see also Keller, 2001). The results show that emotions “mediate” the brand resonance’s impacts on consumers’ attitudes (p.64). The results also indicate that human emotions may play a significant role in the BEM’s highest level. Nevertheless, since the research is based on collegiate football games, future research on commercial activities is needed to reexamine the role of emotion in brand resonance.

In sum, making good use of the BEM can create more values for brands, and the model provides a distinct and brief framework for subsequent researchers’ analyses of emotional
branding. Moreover, the BEM allows the researchers to discuss every single component within the model’s structure and then return to a macro context of specific branding cases.

**Social Media and Luxury Brands**

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User-Generated Content” (p. 61). Dubois (2013) suggests that social media is luxury brands’ “best friend”. As a marketing expert, he argues this claim by listing two reasons. First, he believes that consumers now have unprecedented willingness to speak with luxury brands, and that they would like to share brand/product information online. Because of this, social media provides a good platform for the interaction between brands and consumers. In addition, he proposes that by using social media, brands can benefit from word-of-mouth communication and have a good opportunity to listen to their target/potential consumers. Second, he illustrates that luxury brands rarely suffer from the scandals involved with those who use luxury goods. He illustrates the idea by suggesting scandalous officials wearing luxury goods will hardly damage luxury brands’ image—luxury brands are often not addressed to the issue. However, researchers must recognize that even though launching social media sites can benefit luxury brands, some potential problems—such as the “distance” between a luxury brand and its consumers, must also be considered. The researchers should not ignore the influence of the latent consumers’ disparagement of luxury brands.

Kim and Ko’s (2012) study sets brand equity in the context of luxury brands’ social media marketing (SMM) activities. The researchers define five elements of today’s luxury
SMM activities: “entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word-of-mouth.” (p.1480). The BEM has a tight connection with entertainment (consumers’ feelings), interaction (brand resonance) and word-of-mouth (brand community). The researchers measured Louis Vuitton’s brand equity by analyzing customers’ perceptions of the brand’s uniqueness and distinctiveness from its social media sites. The results showed that Louis Vuitton’s SMM activities benefited the brand’s equity, and that the brand’s equity seriously impacts consumers’ purchase intention (Kim & Ko, 2012). Nevertheless, only employing two variables that in the BEM may not be sufficiently objective. In fact, the researchers skipped the important “brand awareness” may be due to Louis Vuitton’s popularity (the conspicuous monogram patterns on most of the brand’s product). These two variables are not determinants in the BEM. Subsequent luxury researchers may start with the first level of the BEM, especially if they are focusing on brands without distinct logos, like MMM.

Another experiment conducted by Jin (2012) indicates the potentiality of using social media for luxury brands’ management. She analyzed messages delivered by a specific luxury brand’s (Louis Vuitton) social media site’s interface (Facebook) by examining the exogenous and endogenous variables in the employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). However, due to the limitation of experimental design, the results may not be generalized (Jugenheimer, Bradley, Kelley, & Hudson, 2010). For example, in the experiment, she required the participants to view the brand’s social media sites for a period and then examined whether the messages showed in these sites would impact the participants’ off-line purchasing decisions. However, this approach cannot fully simulate a natural setting, unexpected variables (e.g. consumers have the right to close a website at anytime) will seriously influence the results.
Some researchers also explored how luxury brands’ advertisements released on social media impact social media users, who could be potential luxury consumers. Chu, Kamal, and Kim’s (2011) experiment tested whether luxury brands’ advertising on social media would influence social media users’ purchase intention. Their results show that after browsing through several selected luxury brands’ social media sites, the users who have positive attitudes toward social media advertising are more likely to be influenced by the advertising messages delivered by the luxury brands, and these users are likely to spontaneously explore more information subsequently (a strong subjective willingness) (Chu, et al., 2011). Similar to Jin (2012)’s study, these researchers hypothesize that the strength of such willingness and these users’ likelihood of purchase intention may have a positive correlation (Chu, et al., 2011). However, this research did not consider the product category’s influence on consumers. For example, among the selected luxury brands, Rolex is primarily a professional luxury wristwatch manufacturer, but other brands like Gucci, only produce fashion watches with a core business of ready-to-wear and leather goods. A watch connoisseur’s attitudes toward advertisements of luxury watches and fashion watches may vary a lot. Subsequent researchers could select advertisements of the same product line of different luxury brands on social media sites and assess theses advertisements’ effectiveness.

**Brand Community and Brand Cult**

Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) define brand community as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (p.412). This definition emphasizes the concept “admire” rather than “need.” Schouten and McAlexander’s (1995) ethnography of the Harley-Davidson
subculture implies that the brand users would like to own this specific brand rather than any
er other motorcycle brand. The results indicate that these users share identical values,
mentalities and have similar ideologies (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Since
Harley-Davidson is a cult and niche luxury brand (Cova & Pace, 2006), this study generates
greate value for subsequent research on niche luxury (fashion) brands (e.g. MMM).

Thanks to the development of the Internet, social media explains what a brand
community is. People on social media can easily follow their favorite brands’ sites without
the barrier of demographical factors: they spontaneously follow a brand, share the brand’s
information and news, discuss the brand’s products and share their comments. Now brand
users are voluntarily developing brand communities, and physical clubs or institutes are no
longer needed. The concept of brand community has embedded in social media (Zaglia,
2013).

Goh, Heng and Lin (2013)’s content analysis indicates that users’ association with brand
communities on social media can positively influence their purchase intention. The
researchers also distinguish different influences caused by user-generated content (UGC) and
marketer-generated content (MGC) inside social media brand communities, and the results
indicate that UGC is more effective (influential) with respect to a consumer’s purchasing
decision than MGC (Goh, et al., 2013). Hence, luxury brands may need to notice the
importance of inducing consumers to create positive content (e.g. positive comments on
brands) inside social media brand communities. However, negative reviews can increase
sales sometimes, because polite negative reviews or comments may be treated as wise
opinions and more reliable by other consumers (Mims, 2011; Berger, 2012; Huppke, 2014;
Cui, 2014). This phenomenon allows luxury brands to further consider their creative and innovative social media branding strategies in an all-sided way.

Some researchers also highlight the concept of brand cult, and propose that brand cult evolves from brand community (Acosta & Devasagayam, 2010). The researchers define brand cult as “an individual’s perceived sense of identity to a group of persons, with an identifiable brand in common that fosters a strong bond to the brand due to the strong group bond” (p.165). They stress an individual’s “perceived sense of identity” (p.169) among all members in a brand community. That means even if individuals have not interacted with other members in a brand community, their perception of “I am a member of this group” is strong enough to keep their association with the brand (Acosta & Devasagayam, 2010). The concept of brand cult is so different from brand loyalty, which is defined as “the situation in which a consumer generally buys the same manufacturer-originated product or service repeatedly over time rather than buying from multiple suppliers within the category” or “the degree to which a consumer consistently purchases the same brand within a product class.” (American Marketing Association, 2014) A cult luxury band is always niche, and it is not targeting the mass market. Thus, not everybody can afford the brand’s products, and merely discussing brand loyalty, which is presented in the top of the BEM, is insufficient.

**Emotional Branding and Brand Personality**

Rossiter and Bellman (2012) define emotional branding as “the consumer’s attachment of a strong, specific, usage-relevant emotion—such as Bonding, Companionship, or Love—to the brand.” (p.291) It is also a “consumer-centric”, “relational” and “story-driven” (not the traditional benefit-driven branding) approach to tightly associate a
brand with its consumers, and the ultimate goal of emotional branding is to immerse the
brand into consumers’ daily lives and experience (Roberts, 2004; Luther, 2006; Thompson, et
al., 2006, p.50). During recent years, more and more luxury brands are developing their
lifestyle product lines (e.g. Armani Casa, Fendi Casa, Bottega Veneta Home, etc.), and this
can be treated as an emotional branding strategy by luxury brands.

The word “emotion” in emotional branding may be divided into two facets. On one hand,
brands have to do above-the-line advertising (mass media) in order to arouse consumers’
emotions. On the other hand, they have to launch their BTL campaigns to maintain these
evoked emotions. These activities can better generate environmental stimuli (Holbrook &
O'Shaughnessy, 1984) to the consumers. Clearly, luxury brands can do emotional branding
more easily when they have reached the top level of the BEM.

Since 2007, Louis Vuitton has released several core values advertisements to emphasize
the brand’s “art of travel” (ILOVELV, 2013). These advertisements encompass a series of
prints and several TV commercials, and they were launched in the brand’s social media pages
(e.g. Facebook & Twitter). The brand also makes good use of the practice of corporate social
responsibility (CSR) to build its brand image. For example, the brand has supported the
Climate Project, which was organized by the former US vice president Al Gore. Other
mainstream luxury players like Gucci, Christian Dior and Chanel, also know how to manage
the relationship with their consumers through various BTL advertising activities. These
activities are always live streamed on their social media pages. Such mainstream brands
usually belong to luxury conglomerates (e.g. LV belongs to LVMH, and Gucci is a subsidiary
of Kering Group) or one itself is a conglomerate (e.g. Chanel and Prada). Such leading luxury
groups may have a relatively sufficient budget to support their brands to do large-scale BTL activities. Since BTL activities are ephemeral, social media can be treated as a good platform to extend the influence of such activities.

Importantly, brand personality is significant for emotional branding (Gobé, 2001). Also, some researchers propose that brand personality has a positive effect on consumers’ purchase intention regarding brand community (Lee & Kang, 2013). In addition, some research indicates that a brand’s “collaborative branding”, especially doing branding through social media, provides opportunities for consumers’ contribution to the brand’s personality (Malär, et al., 2011, p.46). Aaker (1997) defines brand personality as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (p.347). Brand personality makes the brand identifiable from the brand’s competitors in the same category (McEnally & De Chernatony, 1999). It is treated as a useful tool to establish the relationships between brands and consumers (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004); it also benefits the intercultural marketing, and it can increase brand loyalty (Plummer, 1985).

Aaker (1997) sampled more than 600 people to analyze about 114 kinds of brand personality traits in 37 different brands with a five-point Likert scale. This is treated as the most sophisticated quantitative theoretical framework of the brand personality study (Heine, 2010). Heine’s (2010) research of luxury brand personality is mainly based on a consumer-based approach with the “Repertory Grid Method” (p.154). This approach allows researchers to think about the equivocal facets of a luxury brand’s personality in a linguistic context. It also allows participants to conceptualize abstract characters of luxury brands, and then the researchers are able to operationalize these characters in different contexts (Heine,
2010). The research was involved in in-depth interviews with 50 luxury consumers, and the results showed 49 “brand personality traits” and 5 major “personality dimensions” (p.159). This research is a complement of Aaker’s study and provides a rudimental preparation for subsequent studies of luxury brand personality.

**The Brand MMM**

The Belgium designer Martin Margiela established MMM in the late 1980s. The brand is known for its obstreperous design and its application of deconstruction (Lynge-Jorlén, 2011). The product lines of the brand are clear at a glance, because they are strictly categorized. Almost every product is marked with a circled number among 24 aligned numbers that demonstrates to which line it belongs. For example, a T-shirt for men will come with a collar label with a number 10 circled, because it belongs to line 10, the collection for men. MMM is a veteran when it comes to using recycled materials to make new pieces of fashion goods. Its most premium priced product line, “artisanal” (line 0), which is defined as the brand’s haute couture collection, never lacks astounding designs produced with unexpected antique fabrics and vintage tapestries. In the brand’s past seasons, this collection also included some dramatic pieces such as a vest consisting of playing cards or balloons, and a boot made of several clutch bags.

**Where The Brand Lives?** Heine’s (2012) luxury brand taxonomy places MMM into the small-scale connoisseur luxury brand class. Contrary to mainstream luxury brands, these brands rely heavily on word-of-mouth networks rather than struggling for brand awareness, which sits in the first level of the BEM (Belz, 1994, p. 647; Keller, 2001). MMM is a niche, cult brand (James, 2009), and it is targeting a small group of people, as some luxury
practitioners describe the brand’s consumers as “acolytes” (Blanks, 2010).

**Anonymity.** The brand retains its mystery by a series of branding strategies. Among these strategies, keeping the brand’s anonymity is the most outstanding. The founder of MMM has accepted interviews by phone or email only and has never exposed himself in the public. Currently, only one photo of him exists in media coverage. The models on the brand’s haute couture runway always wear elaborate veils so that spectators cannot recognize who the model is. Dissimilar to other brand’s products, the runway collection of women’s ready-to-wear (line défilé) comes with blank collar labels without any mark. The packaging and the shopping bag of the brand are logo-free (only one or four stitches are at the back of a product, which are designed for cutting off) (Yoka.com, 2009). MMM always answer questions from the public in a “first-person plural, collective, and disciple-like” voice (James, 2009). The designers of MMM work together as “a group, a community, and a family” (MMM, 2014) and none of these designers accepts individual interviews. The brand never launches its advertisements on traditional media, and models in its online images usually appear with bleached faces and covered eyes. Moreover, models in MMM’s videos show neither front faces nor appear in full-body portrait. Additionally, consumers cannot find out any of the brand boutique’s contact information in a local yellow page (James, 2009).

**Brand’s owned media.** Owned media refers to the media channel controlled by a brand including the brand’s social media sites and its official website (Corcoran, 2009). The brand currently has six social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Tumblr, Pinterest and Instagram) to promote its products, advertisements, and PR activities. People are able to share the brand’s information (e.g. product information in its official e-boutique) through the
brand’s official website. Not every luxury brand owns as much social media as MMM, even some mainstream luxury brands like Louis Vuitton. MMM also keeps its “impersonality” on social media. For example, the brand skillfully uses objectified items to create dramatic emotions (e.g. using several perfume bottles to compose a heart to celebrate the valentine’s day). Additionally, the brand never interacts with its followers or replies to comments from the followers and has disabled the message board on its official YouTube site so that the followers or viewers cannot make comments.

Some fashion industry practitioners consider the brand’s official website outstanding and innovative (The Beast, 2013). The brand reconstructed its official site in 2011, and the homepage currently by default shows seven mini windows that allow viewers to optionally drag them. Four windows among them directly lead users to the brand’s social media sites (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr). This scenario rarely happens in mainstream luxury brands’ official websites, because these brands would always like to put little icons of social media at a corner on their homepage. Furthermore, the e-boutique in MMM’s official site sells only a few product lines. The brand also displays most of its collections on their Tumblr site so that it may avoid the potential expense of renting a server.

**Critiques.** The “impersonality” of the brand cannot satisfy every person in the luxury market. Some luxury industrial professionals critique MMM’s impersonal strategies as an “excessive ritual”, and they argue that the brand should be personalized with a necessary dialog between both its consumers and the public (James, 2009).

It seems MMM has tried to personalize its social media content by releasing videos with voiceover and some emotional elements (e.g. a “smiling” dice) in 2013. However, MMM
returned to its impersonality at the beginning of 2014 by launching a happy New Year video.

**The Modified BEM and Research Questions**

Since MMM’s marketing strategies are different from other luxury brands, a modified brand equity model (MBEM) (see appendix B) may help marketers explore how MMM is doing its unique emotional branding in its owned media on the Internet.

1\(^{st}\) Level: Semi-salience forms the base of the MBEM. Semi-salience refers to the brand’s only needing to show limited shocking content on social media (e.g. Line “Artisanal”) in terms of targeting a group of specific consumers and transfer them into cult-like followers. It also refers to subcultural offline activities reported in the brand’s social media sites. This also contains the brand’s use of its owned media but not traditional “paid media” (TV, magazines, etc.). Semi-salience may also help MMM screen out potential consumers, because not every luxury consumer can understand the brand’s high level avant-garde art. “Like” clicks of a specific post in MMM are social media sites may indicate the index of semi-salience.

**RQ1:** How does semi-salience contribute to the brand’s online emotional branding?

2\(^{nd}\) Level: “Performance” keeps only style, design and price, because people cannot perceive factors like “product durability” directly online. Components relate to “service” are also deleted because of MMM’s lack of online interaction and online service.

**RQ2:** What sorts of needs are MMM’s followers seeking online and does the brand’s owned media meet these needs?

3\(^{rd}\) Level: “Judgments” keeps superiority and consideration as the similar reason in the 2\(^{nd}\) level. The original level operationalizes six positive “feelings”. However, the fact is likely to be opposite in “warmth.” Additionally, “security” is not needed here due to the property of
luxury brands. Hence, “security” is deleted, and “warmth” is displayed as “warmth?” (it is more likely to be “coldness” depending on the final results of the study).

**RQ3:** How do the brand’s followers feel about MMM’s “ impersonality” showed online?

**4th Level:** “Brand community” and “brand cult” exist together here because of MMM consumers’ different behaviors. For example, people in MMM’s brand community may interact with each other, but people who are in brand cult may not do so. “Behavioral loyalty” is deleted because some people may not purchase every piece of luxury goods from MMM within the same product category. However, they might be cult-like followers.

Word-of-mouth explains how the brand uses cult-like followers (who evolve from selected potential consumers in the 1st level) as opinion leaders (or “acolytes”) and induces them to share the brand’s information on social media. The original “active engagement”, which illustrates the people that cannot afford a brand but still like to be a fan of the brand (Keller, 2001, p.15), is kept here for the brand’s potential consumers. Importantly, the original interactive “brand resonance” is modified as “brand silence” due to MMM’s impersonality.

Some luxury branding experts point out that the brand’s silence “speaks volumes” (Lynge-Jorlén, 2011).

**RQ4:** Does brand silence tend to generate more brand equity for MMM than brand resonance online?

**Method and Limitation**

An online survey will be released in several of MMM’s Facebook posts as comments. It will explore the issues raised by the research questions. The questions in the survey may be organized with a five-point Likert scale with respect to the elements in the MBEM, allowing
the brand’s followers to easily grade statements about the brand’s impersonality easily.

However, such a research method has at least two flaws. First, the results may not be
generalized since the survey will be given out in only one brand’s social media site. The
brand’s followers in the other five social media may have different responses to the survey.
Second, due to the limitation of cost, the choice of shocking content may not be objective
because standards of “shocking” cannot be well established without an experimental pretest
(Dahl, Frankenberger, & Manchandra, 2003).

Conclusion

In short, this study reviews the prior research about the BEM and the model’s
relationship with luxury goods, social media, and emotional branding. Additionally, the study
proposes a modified BEM to illustrate how MMM applies impersonal strategies to do its
emotional branding in a digital marketing context. Subsequently, the study raises a feasible
method to examine the components in the MBEM. The analysis of MMM and the MBEM
may provide valuable information to luxury and fashion industry practitioners. Moreover,
people who want to establish a niche or cult brand in other industries may gain some
perspectives from this study, leading them to develop their own innovative branding
strategies in the future. Nevertheless, this study cannot include every MMM’s branding
strategy. MMM’s other offline strategies (e.g. the brand makes AIDS T-shirt to do
philanthropy) also benefit the brand’s digital branding (Lu, 2013). Measuring people’s
attitudes toward a brand is not easy (Morris, 2012), but this initial study can be used as a
rudimentary work for exploring emotions of niche luxury brands’ social media followers.

References


Chu, S., Kamal, S., & Kim. (2011). Social media and luxury goods-A likely union? Beliefs,
attitudes, and behavioral responses towards social media advertising, brand consciousness, and purchase intention of luxury products, In Conference of The American Academy of Advertising, 70.


Appendix A
The Original Consumer-based Brand Equity Pyramid (fig. 1) and subdimensions of branding building blocks (fig. 2) (Keller, 2001, p. 7-8).

(Figure 1)

(Figure 2)

Appendix B
The modified Brand Equity Pyramid (fig. 3) and modified subdimensions of branding building blocks (fig. 4).