

A study of brand image management in the luxury eco-vehicle industry in China

Dr. Saud Taj¹

Shan He²

Ashraf Nasir³

Rimsha Ashraf⁴

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate brand image management strategies for luxury eco-cars in China. Through analysis, the work will find an improved way to fuse the traditional luxury image with the emerging environmentally friendly image for luxury car brands, summing up effective brand image management strategies that will cater to the Chinese market.

A conceptual framework was adopted to collect primary and secondary data and achieve the aims and objectives of the study. Semi-structured interviews were adopted as the research approach; five luxury car brand managers answered more than 14 questions about brand image management by telephone from China. Secondary resources such as academic journals, articles, and business reports were used where available.

¹Institute of Management Sciences, University of Balochistan Quetta.

²Glosgow caldonian University London Campus, London United Kingdom,

³Institute of Educaion and Research, University of Balochistan Quetta.

⁴M.Phil Scholar Department of Commerce University of Balochistan Quetta.

The finding shows that luxury car brands attach great importance to environmental models of brand management, and the environmentally friendly image may be combined with that of luxury for the brand to bring new vitality to advertising. The analysis shows that different brand management strategies produce different results, thus affecting the public image of the brand differently. The work established an eco-car image management strategy for luxury car brands to help them solve new challenges specifically in the emerging green vehicles market in China. The implementation of eco-vehicles is a business practice that has a positive impact on social progress and environmental protection. An effective and environmental image management strategy can add value to the social responsibility aspects of luxury car brands, and this approach has long-term benefits.

Keywords: Brand image management strategy, luxury car brand, luxury eco-car brand image

Introduction and background

This study aims to investigate the brand image management strategy for luxury eco-vehicles in China's market. The size of a country's luxury market is correlated with the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (Keith et al., 2015; Kaperer, 2010). China's GDP has grown from 21,631 billion yuan in 2006 to 40,120 billion yuan in 2010 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011) and Chinese luxury consumption has risen to the degree that it now ranks among the world's biggest luxury consumers (Keith et al., 2015; Bain, 2012). The rapid growth of income has increased material consumption, so that over-luxury consumer purchasing is becoming steadily power in China. Such an emerging market has attracted a large number of luxury brands to enter the Chinese market, competing for a

market share. This phenomenon has led luxury brands to become more accessible and lose their exclusivity (Keith et al., 2015; Dubois and Paternault, 1995). The main area of luxury brand management relates to exclusivity and accessibility and a basic decision regarding how far to globalise and how far to democratise (Keller, 2009).

Luxury car brands were some of the first be acceptable imported luxury brands in China's market and they are a symbol of luxury and wealth. For Chinese consumers, luxury car brands represent identity and social status. China has become one of the largest luxury car markets in the world for all major luxury car brands and it is predicted that the Chinese luxury car market will become the largest market for luxury car manufacturers by the end of 2017 (China Weekly News, 2013).

Literature review

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of the previously published work relevant to this study. It starts with a review of brand image and brand image management including importance of brand image management for the company and strategies. Then, it will consider the luxury brand image, including the definitions of luxury and luxury brand management. Following that, it will consider the general literature on the concepts of luxury eco-vehicles in China, including a luxury car brand image in China, the definition of an eco-vehicle, and the relevant regulations in China. This chapter will particularly look at the research on China's luxury eco-vehicles market and their brand image.

Definition of brand image

Aaker (1991) defined a brand image as a "set of brand associations that are anything linked in memory to a brand, usually in some meaningful way". This definition links brand image directly to the brand. In other

words, this is what consumers think of the brand, for example, labels such as high quality, high price, or inexpensive, and so on. Also, Bivainienė (2007) defined a brand image as a “multifunctional set of tangible and intangible features, which allows the consumer to identify the product”. These tangible and intangible features play an important role when the consumers are making purchasing decisions. Meanwhile, the brand image is comprised of many elements. Latif and Islam et al. (2014) pointed out that the initialize AASARC could explain brand image content. The elements making up AASARC are namely awareness of the brand, an association of the brand, superiority of the brand, affection towards the brand, resonance of the brand, and corporate social responsibility.

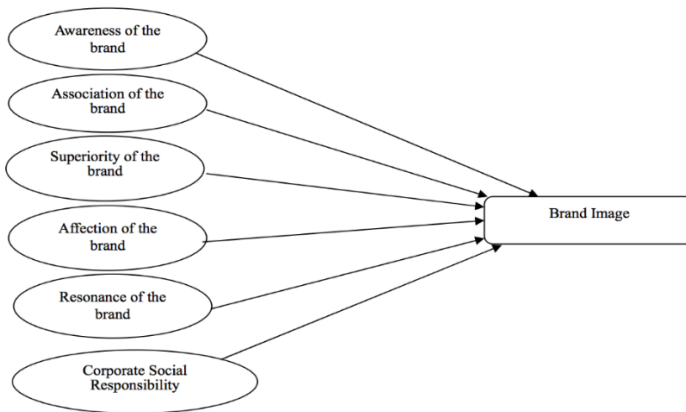


Figure 1: AASARC model (Latif & Islam, et al., 2014).

These six elements may give a company a competitive advantage in the marketplace and enhance the organisational reputation for the company. Meanwhile, Keller (1998) assigned three divisions to brand association: attributes (including products, price, experience, and personality) benefits (functional benefits and symbolic advantages), and attitude. The brand association has been expressed as the strongest, most favorable, and unique contribution to the brand image (Keller, 2003).

Generic literature on brand management

The importance of brand management

From consumer perspective, why brands matter? Firstly, if customers recognized a brand, they not only engage with it, but also make a product decision. Secondly, consumers offer their trust and loyalty to a brand that they understand well. Thirdly, “brands can also play a significant role in signaling certain product characteristics to consumers”. Additionally, knowing a brand can reduce the risk associated when consumers make product decisions. Managers consider brand management necessary because of the above factors (Keller, 2012, p-9). The author also pointed out: “brand management is about gaining power, by marking the brand more known, bought and engaging”. There are three factors that form a brand system: brand concept, brand name and symbols, and product or service (see the figure below). The management of these three elements ensures effective management of the overall brand.

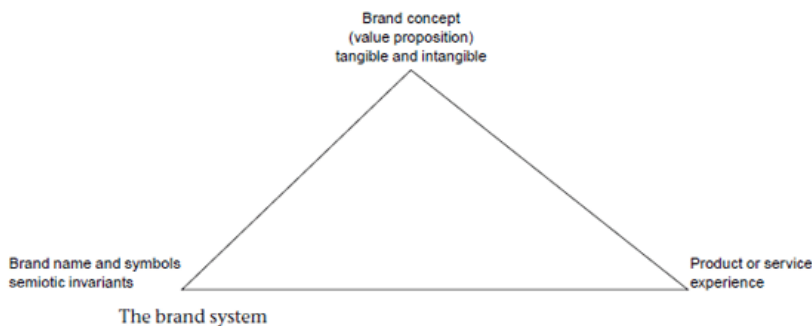


Figure 2: The brand system (Kapferer, 2012).

These three elements seem independent but are interrelated very closely. As Martinez et al. (2008) pointed out, the greater the consumers' familiarity with the brand's products, the better their evaluation of the

general brand image. This view can be explained as the better the general brand image, the higher the perceived quality of the brand's products. Furthermore, consumers' familiarity with the brand positively influences the product brand image, which will directly influence brand extension.

Brand image management strategies

After recognizing the importance of brand management, brand planning is the first step in the brand management strategy. "The branding strategy of the firm provides guidelines as to which brand elements to apply across the products it offers" (Keller, 2012, p-46). It means that the branding strategy needs to consider the brand-product matrix, and brand hierarchy. The brand-product matrix is a "graphical representation" of the brand and its products, which have been sold by the firm. Brand hierarchy involves dividing the brand products into natural, common, and distinctive. The branding strategy needs to involve auditing the capabilities of the company, evaluating the external and internal issues in the brand, then developing a brand plan that specifies realistic brand objectives and the strategy to achieve them (Chernatony, 2011). "The new rules of brand management" (Kapferer, 2008) show that the next two steps after brand planning are "brand strength" and "brand equity". The strength of the brand is about considering the brand distribution (size and global category sales of each store); and brand equity relates to the current financial value of the brand itself. People can believe in the quality of the brand, but if they do not choose the brand, the brand equity may be lower than before. As a result, a strong brand should carefully manage brand strength and equity when a brand needs to achieve high level.

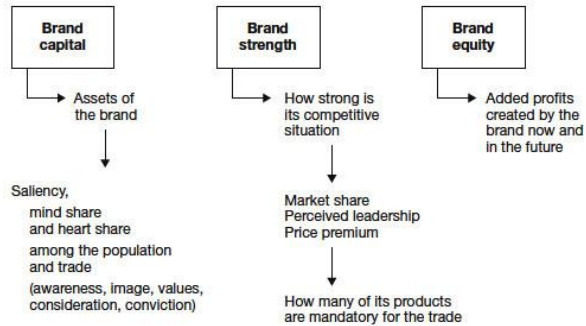


Figure 3: From brand values to brand value (Kapferer, 2008).

For the purposes of brand management, the brand image, products, and customers are the three most important elements. Among them, a customer-based brand equity (CBBE) concept could provide a unique view on how to build, measure, and manage a successful brand (Keller, 2013). According to Keller (2013), the way to illustrate the mean by CBBE is to consider one of the typical results of product sampling tests. The simple explanation is that the customers will be divided into two groups, the ones who are aware of the brand, and the ones that are not; these two groups will present different views on the same product. Through analysis of survey results, it would be easy to find out how customers feel about the brand, the relationship between the customers and the brand, and also the relationship between brands and products.

On the other hand, one of the most efficient methods of brand management is the management of the product itself, meanwhile the code strategy among the branded product management strategies is product-brand tracking (Keller, 2013). This means using both recall and recognition measures by asking specific questions. Thus, when measuring 'low-level' brand association, questions should be asked regarding performance and imagery attributes, and functional and emotional benefits. Furthermore, when measuring 'high-level' brand association, like consumers' feelings

and their overall opinions of the brand, have they changed their attitude or behavior towards the brand in recent months, and if so, the reasons behind this (Keller, 2013). Such layered product tracking can help managers to create a clearer understanding of their product image on different levels, which contributes to brand management. Having discussed the brand image, the next section will then explore the definition about luxury brand.

Definition of a luxury brand

It has long had the definition of luxury, “The word ‘luxury’ derives from the Latin luxation, meaning distance: luxury is an enormous distance” (Kapferer, 2012, p-66). In general, the definition of a luxury brand is inseparable from the following aspects: the scarcity of the product, brand awareness, a high price, and excellent service (Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Silverstein and Fiske, 2003; Kapferer and Bastien, 2012). Phau and Prendergast (2000) defined a luxury brand as such: “Luxury brands evoke exclusivity, have a well- known brand identity, enjoy high brand awareness and perceived quality, and retain sales levels and customer loyalty”. Similarly, Beverland (2004) provided the six interrelated component dimensions in the model of luxury branding (see the figure below), which added brand heritage, product integrity, endorsements, and marketing to the definition of a luxury brand (Moore and Birtwistle, 2005).



Figure 4: Model of luxury Branding (Beverland, 2004).

Also, as Heine (2012) explained, “Luxury brands are regarded as images in the minds of consumers that comprise associations about a high level of price, quality, aesthetics, rarity, extraordinariness and a high degree of non-functional associations.”

Luxury brand management

Luxury brands have their own uniqueness and status, which also distinguishes them from other brands. Their unique characteristics make luxury brand management more complex than average brand management (Chevalier, 2008). “A luxury strategy is driven by an obsession: never be comparable” (Kapferer, 2012, p-67). This means that luxury brands are required to strengthen their uniqueness and become irreplaceable. “In a business so focused on effervescent youth, the mainline luxury brand may be overlooking an obvious chink in their business amour” (Gutsatz and Auguste, 2013, P-238). This study also points out four critical issues for luxury brand management. The first issue is replicating talent; when a luxury brand has been managed previously, any new managers should try to avoid “diluting the signature of the brand”; they need to protect the brand culture. Secondly, talent management is another issue. “Luxury-brand managers must be able to unify teams of designers who expect deference to their creative ‘genius’, who prefer to be managed with a light touch, who rebel against corporate conformity and who, in fact, thrive in risk.” (Gutsatz and Auguste, 2013, P-239). The third issue is updating customer service to maintain the customer’s loyalty, which is different from mass-market customer service. The fourth issue is hiring Asian executives. The international market for luxury brand products is immense (Cohen, 2007) and its growth is rapid as the number of affluent consumers in countries

such as China and India grow (Reyneke, 2012). Luxury brands will need to learn how to utilise local entrepreneurs and create “leadership duos” (Gutsatz and Auguste, 2013).

Generic literature review on luxury cars in China

Luxury cars are a type of luxury product with basic luxury properties, such as premium quality, a clear reflection of brand personality, craftsmanship, exclusivity, reputation, distinctive variation, timing, and heritage (Strach and Everett, 2016). Other luxury properties include an “association with a country of origin that has an especially strong reputation as a source of excellence in the relevant product category” (Nueno and Quelch, 1998, pp. 62-63). Luxury car drivers are usually status seekers, older or retired males, highly educated, and have a high income (Choo and Mokhtarian, 2004). “For instance, a Cadillac and a Rolls-Royce may be both perceived as luxury cars, but one compared with the other would be considered more luxurious” (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004, p. 485).

China’s automobile market has been importing since 1983; American Motors Corporation (AMC, later acquired by the “Chrysler Corporation) signed a 20-year contract to produce their Jeep-model vehicles in Beijing. The following year, Germany’s Volkswagen signed a 25-year contract to make passenger cars in Shanghai, and France’s Peugeot agreed to another passenger car project to make vehicles in the prosperous southern city of Guangzhou” (Harwit, 2001). McKinsey (2013) defined the ‘luxury’ segment in China as cars costing from 200,000 yuan to 1.2 million Yuan (\$32,000 to \$190,000), which excludes ‘ultra-luxury’ cars that command even higher prices. BMW, Audi, and Mercedes-Benz are three German luxury car brands that entered China’s market in the early 1990s and took a large share of the market. In 2013, Audi and BMW’s annual sales

surpassed 400,000 cars in China, accounting for 31% and 24% respectively of their total global sales. In contrast, the 2013 Mercedes-Benz global sales, while also exceeding 1.4 million, were only half of Audi and BMW's sales in China; there is still a small room for improvement in Mercedes-Benz's sales (Hurun Report, 2014).

Luxury car brand image in China

According to China's luxury car brand identity customized research in 2014, some luxury car brand images are very clear, such as Audi, BMW, Land Rover, and Mercedes-Benz (see the table below).





Brand	Brand image in China
	Associations with business, recognizable, practical and cost-effective
	Tyrant, a symbol of nobility, associations with fashion
	Passionate, dynamic, unique
 Mercedes-Benz	High international reputation, social status, a long history

Table 1: Luxury car brand image in China (luxury car brand identity customized research, 2014).

Moreover, the brand owners become recognizable and part of the brand image. Also, according to China's luxury car brand identity customized research (2014), luxury car owners have general characteristics such as young, highly educated, and with a high income. Male owners accounted

for 76% of the total sample, and married owners accounted for 90%. The occupation of luxury car owners is more likely to be senior professional managers, business owners, and civil servant-based. From an education aspect, most of them had an undergraduate (97%) or master's degree. More than 6% of luxury car owners have experience working abroad, and nearly 1% has lived in foreign countries for more than three years. Due to the unique client base, and the unique characteristics of the brand, luxury car brands in the Chinese market will have their own particular management strategies, which will be valuable to explore and research.

Generic literature review on eco-vehicles' background information in China

Definition of an eco-vehicle

An eco-vehicle is otherwise known as a green vehicle; it is a road motor vehicle that has a less harmful impact on the environment than comparable conventional internal combustion engine vehicles running on gasoline or diesel, or one that uses certain alternative fuels (R.I.C. publication, 2005). The classification includes hybrid electric vehicles, plug-in hybrid electric vehicles, battery electric vehicles, compressed-air vehicles, hydrogen and fuel-cell vehicles, neat ethanol vehicles, flexible-fuel vehicles, natural gas vehicles, clean diesel vehicles, and some sources also include vehicles using blends of biodiesel and ethanol fuel or gasohol (Green Vehicle Guide, 2010).

Generic literature review on the regulations and legislation relating to eco-vehicles in China

In order to prevent motor vehicle emissions polluting the environment, on January 1, 2000, China started the implementation of light-duty automobile pollutant discharge limits for the first phase of the standard. A

standard gasoline engine or diesel engine vehicles have a maximum design speed greater than or equal to 50km/h for light vehicles, according to the reference quality limits of 2005. China began to implement the second phase of the standard on July 1, 2007. The start of phase III standards began in 2010 with full implementation of the fourth stage of the standard beginning after that. From January 1, 2008, Beijing began to implement the fourth phase standard (Lanjian, 2010). Under the influence of the concept of a low-carbon economy, consumers will be more inclined to choose a more eco-friendly way to travel; the purchase of eco-vehicles will gradually become more and more popular (Dayuan, 2011). “The greening of road transportation, through improved energy efficiency and use of alternative fuels, will affect the way industries respond to market change” (Lin, 2003).

Social changes determine that the market, and the product must be changed (Kotler, 1994). The rise of the concept of environmental protection signified the beginning of the ‘green market’. The new products for the green market need targeted strategies and management (François and Loïc, 2009). Since 2010, Beijing and other major cities have introduced minibuses (gasoline vehicles) to control the number of cars. There is a predetermined limit, and only a driver can buy a car (Fuel vehicles), and they need to obtain their license from the plate lottery (Beijing Interim Provisions regulating the number of passenger cars, 2010). However, owners of pure electric cars and hybrid vehicles have incentives to own these cars. For example, in Beijing, the charge for getting a fuel vehicles’ license is only 0.45%, while the eco-vehicle charge is 38%. Meanwhile, Shanghai gives free licenses for eco-vehicles as long as it is a pure electric car (Shanghai and Beijing limit licensing policy, 2014). The introduction

of these legal provisions brought great business opportunities for eco-vehicles in the Chinese market.

Generic literature review on luxury eco-vehicles in China

Generic literature review on eco-luxury

Recently, some studies have shown that luxury brand customers are more considerate of the co-construction of value, rather than passive recipients of firm-created value. For some people, they are making purchasing decisions in ways that align with social responsibility and environmental values (Tynan et al. 2010; Demetriou et al., 2010). “By successfully transforming an outer regulation into inner regulation, individuals move towards greater autonomy and more effective functioning” (Gibson and Seibold, 2013). This means that the world's attention to environmental topics and related products can affect the brand choice for customers, making eco-luxury more popular. When consumers do their luxury purchasing in ways that go beyond individual happiness, their consumption choice is motivated by a desire to contribute to a better world and a better future (Armstrong, 2009; Glasser, 1998; J.G. La Guardia, 2009; Schwartz et al., 2010; Gibson et al, 2013).

Luxury eco-vehicles in China

Throughout this investigation, it was not difficult to find that many luxury brands have launched eco-cars, and have experienced good sales in the Chinese market. Through analysis and investigation, the four luxury brands' eco-cars that have had successful sales in the Chinese market have been summed up (see the table below).





Brand	Brand image	Eco-car	Sales volume (2015)
	Luxury, revolutionary, environmentally friendly,	Purely electronic car	3025
	Environmental, energy saving, pioneering, fashionable	BMW: eco-friendly series	29513
	Fashionable, stardom, environmentally friendly	Mercedes-BlueTEC series	9802 (In the first quarter)
	Fast, luxury, sense of mission, pure power	RX series	17187

Table 2: Luxury eco-vehicle brands (Resources from China authoritative auto website, 2015).

Methodological framework

We now set out the methodological framework adopted to collect primary and secondary data and achieve the aims and objectives of the study. In order to understand the purpose of this process, the structure of the research ‘onion’ (figure 5) will be considered. The study will then move on to consider the ethics of the work, outline the limitations and finally present the summary. Business and management researches need to be aware of the philosophical commitments involved in the choice of research strategy; this will significantly impact not only what should be done, but also how

the researcher understands the process of the investigating (Saunders et al., 2012).

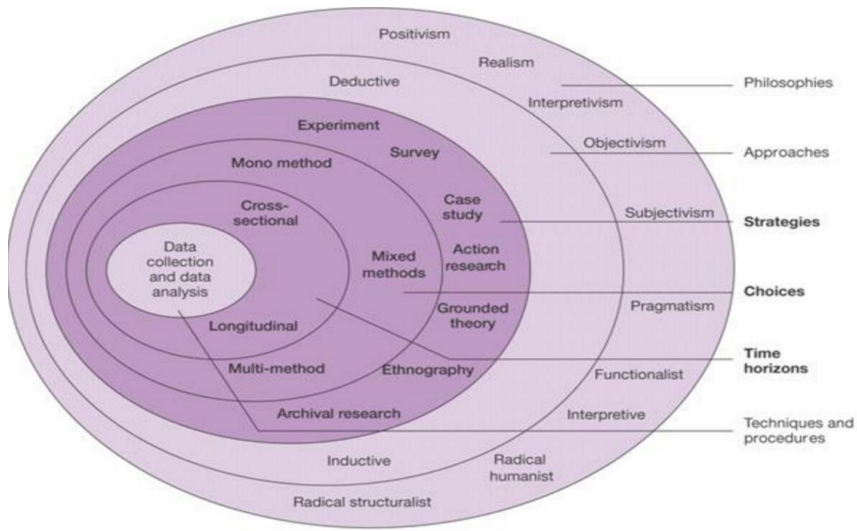


Figure 5: The Research Onion (Sanders et al., 2009)

The philosophy of this work will mainly connect the researcher's knowledge and the process developed (Saunders et al., 2012). Ontology and epistemology are the approaches used in this study. "Ontology is concerned with nature of reality" (Saunders et al., 2012, p-130). This definition refers to the way in which researchers are influenced by real world, for example, social environment, culture or human behaviour. The nature of this study is individual work; a subjective view is chosen as a way of understanding the reasons and motives. Since the study is focusing on luxury eco-car brand image management, the way people think about eco-cars and how the company could manage the brand image to improve sales in China, the research is inevitably dominated by a subjectivist view. Epistemological work considers data on resources, it needs more akin to the position of the natural scientist (Saunders et al., 2012, p-134).

Positivism is an epistemological position that advocates the application of the methods of natural science to the study of social reality (Bryman et al., 2015). The social world is of course too complex to be reduced simply to a law. Therefore, interpretivism is aligned to the subjectivist position as it underlines the importance of empathy; the people who undertake the research need to have the ability to understand the subjective meanings and social interactions motivating behaviour. China's auto market environment is complex; a number of policies and regulations related to eco-vehicles have been promulgated recently and decisions on how to manage brands need to be considered based on these complex factors. Interpretivism can be applied in this study to develop a better understanding of why these management strategies are more efficient in China.

An inductive approach is adopted in this research; consequently, the researchers will be collecting data to explore a phenomenon, identify themes and create a conceptual framework. This is in contrast to a deductive approach, which would involve collecting data to evaluate propositions or hypotheses related to an existing theory.

The inductive approach is closely linked to the data collection theory; qualitative data collection involves interviews, and thus a small sample will be adopted in the research. Qualitative data combines a variety of methods in order to establish different views of phenomena (Saunders et al., 2012). By interviewing luxury car brand managers, the strategies they use to manage the brand image will be collected as data. The interviewees are carefully selected: five luxury car brand managers have been invited to participate in this study. These respondents have all been practitioners in the luxury car brand management field for more than five years. Through interviews with experts, we may obtain more meaningful data and

information, such as the real situation about luxury eco-cars in the Chinese market, enabling us to understand the real challenges brands are currently facing from a managers' perspective. Analysis of the data results will be used to identify the most efficient strategies such as luxury eco-vehicles promotion activity. The inductive approach is linked to the interpretivism research philosophy, which recognises the importance of developing an understanding of the manner in which humans interpret the social world and thus their subjectivism.

A qualitative survey method is adopted in this study. Qualitative research is associated with an interpretive philosophy; the researchers need to make sense of the subjective and socially constructed meanings expressed about the phenomenon studied (Saunders et al., 2012). In this study, brand image management strategies are related to different brands, which means that each particular organisation context may require different questions related to the topic; consequently, semi-structured interviews are used. Four different luxury car dealership integrated brands and one luxury car brand dealer were selected to participate in this study, these are: Tesla, BMW, Mercedes and Lexus. These four luxury car brands' eco-vehicles are the most influential in China. While we were selecting luxury car brand dealers for comprehensive interviews, we contrasted the advantages and disadvantages of each brand. Different brands in the same market (China's market) will use a different management model, due to the different positioning of the brand (brand image, market segmentation and products). In such a complex context, the answer is also complex, and there is no standard answer; therefore, open-ended questions are required because a simple questionnaire could not provide the required of the results. Due to the nature of the interview data, the process of analysis requires researchers

to understand why this brand uses such a strategy and why other brands may not be suitable. Through comparison and summary of the different interviews, the researchers can find out the commonality and particularity.

Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedures

The procedure for collecting and analysing data consists of three steps (i) designing questions (ii) arranging telephone interviews, (iii) analysing data.

Designing questions

When conducted appropriately, the questioning should reduce the scope for bias during the interview and increase the reliability of the information obtained. The questions should avoid too many theoretical concepts or jargon since the researchers' understanding of such terms may vary between interviewees (Saunders et al., 2012). Open questions are adopted during the interviews and all the questions will depend on the respondent's position in the company and their professional knowledge.

Although the respondents are from different luxury car brands and have different positions, the interview questions will focus on a few essential points, as follows:

- 1) What brand image management strategy concepts are currently implemented in the company?
- 2) What are the brand's eco-car image management models?
- 3) What are the most effective and practical methods?
- 4) What are the brands' future management plans for eco-cars?

All the questions and research need to match the aims and objectives consistent with these four points, which will be central to the interviews; further questions will unfold for different brands. The interviews will be in

Mandarin, and will be recorded by telephone; a summary of the interviews, transcripts and schedule can be found in Appendix E and F.

Arranging the telephone interview

The five Chinese interviewees are all managers in charge of the brand management and they have all worked more than five years in luxury car companies in China. They were contacted primarily by text messages and phones calls. Table 3.2 shows the profiles of the interviewees.



No.	Gender	Age	Profile
1  TESLA MOTORS	Male	37	Tesla China sales director. 14 years luxury car sales and management experience. Location: Shanghai
2  Mercedes-Benz	Male	30	Mercedes-Benz brand manager and brand Trainer. 5 years work experience. Location: Hangzhou
3  LEXUS	Male		Lexus general manager of East China Location: Hangzhou
4 	Male		BMW sales director of East China Location: Beijing
5 	Male		Luxury car club manager Location: Hangzhou

Table 3: Interviewees profiles

Analysing the data

Five-digit respondents interview conducted in Mandarin and all full record conversation by telephone. By repeatedly listening to the interview, data analysis and research results will be transcribed from Mandarin to English and it is important to interview questions and answers will be translated into English as well. The whole process of reviewing and transcribing took approximately 2 hours per interview.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were considered throughout. The surveys were completely anonymous. The interviewees were all fully aware of what their data would be used for and each of them was given a prepared introduction and consent forms were signed. Given that the respondents are brand managers, their positions are relatively high level and thus important in the company, so the content of the interviews do not involve any commercial secrets. All interview recording and transcripts will be deleted once the dissertation is completed and marked. Further, a copy of the final dissertation will be available for the respondents to have access to on request.

Validity

Keats (2000) points out that validity is about the accuracy of the research and its instrument have to measure that the process and method can accurately express researchers' attempt. Here, this refers to misunderstandings and misinterpretations during the interviews that could affect the accuracy, and thus the validity. Some precautions were taken in this regard, such as sending emails or text messages to respondents before the interview to explain the purpose of the interviews and issues that would be relevant to the discussion and allow the respondents time to prepare themselves prior to the meetings. The transcripts for the semi-structured

interviews were also sent to a sample of respondents to confirm the data's accuracy; this was important to ensure the research's validity.

Limitations

The principle limitation of this research is the sample size. There are very limited numbers of luxury car brands in China can producing mass production scales for eco-car models; the brand image management is also generally in the pilot phase, and the number of luxury eco-cars consumers can buy from the market is still limited, so this led to some limitations in choosing the brand. The five respondents were all found by the author's own social network; the original plan was to have seven interviewees, but for various reasons, two of them dropped out. The respondents' identity and position determine the sample's scarcity. Further, due to their busy work schedules, some of the interview plans were failed. Furthermore, due to the eight-hour time difference between Britain and China, communication and interview times presented certain difficulties during the procedure.

Findings and Discussion

Luxury car brand image in China

Luxury car brand image in China essentially insists on maintaining luxury image while pursuing innovation. On the one hand, this method seeks to illustrate the luxury nature of the item and highlight the identity of the Chinese market and years of heritage on the other hand, with the current need to constantly add more and develop, this method aims to bring vitality to the brand.

As the literature review mentioned above, the new rules of brand management are "brand strength" and "brand equity" (Kapferer, 2008), which means that the brand can be strengthened by changes in branding

and in the product itself. For example, Mercedes-Benz changed their slogan from “the best or nothing” to “the untiring spirit in pursuing the best” to refresh the brand image. They wanted to create a new concept for the brand, not only by pursuing the best, but also by considering what people love. Lexus, on the other hand, chose to change and innovate the products themselves to enable the brand to attract more customers; the manager explained this as follows:

“We give much attention to the changes of appearance and style, to make them younger and more active.”

Lexus’ main consumer group is currently over age 40, but now the brand is trying to attract people under 40, people born in the 80's and even the 90's, attempting to make brand image younger and more dynamic.

Compared to these luxury car brands that had early entry into the Chinese market, the pressure is high on newcomers in terms of how to distinguish the brand and provide consumers with an impression that distinguishes the company from others. New entrants require a detailed plan about brand image management. Tesla entered China’s market in 2014, for example, and it made a brand image plan based on three steps: first, lead an “emerging trend” and make people curious about it; second, undertake promotion so customers gradually come to understand the nature of Tesla as an electric vehicle; and third, Tesla’s manager explains:

“Now, we are in the third stage. Tesla is trying to educate customers in China: what is an electric vehicle? How to accept the concept of an electric vehicle more easily? Therefore, for now, Tesla's brand image in China is kind of high-end, fashionable and cool.”

By comparison, BMW emphasises their brand image based on the "future": the brand image connects closely with future trends and this emphasis,

therefore, provides the foundation for the brand's eco-car. The interviewee focused on BMW's style to draw the big picture, answering as follows:

“...Accelerates the revolution of transportation modes of the future.”

By analysing the interviews, it can be seen that these four luxury car brands are mainly concerned with brand image, although they use different approaches to brand image management, some strengthen the brand to improve the brand image content, and some consider “brand equity” like the product in order to strengthen the brand image (Kapferer, 2008). Brand image is an integrated undertaking and an integrated marketing communication programme can enhance brand advancements in information and make significant contributions to brand equity building (Maja et al., 2014).

For luxury car brands, introducing eco-vehicles is different from traditional methods of introducing a new model. Energy-saving, economic and environmental factors impact this image; but can these elements exist alongside a luxury image in the same brand? This question will be discussed in the following part.

The relationship between the traditional luxury image and the eco-image

Luxury brands are frequently shown to be sensitive compared to other brands; they easily diminish in hedonic potential and decreased brand value (Henrik, 2009). This means that luxury cars need to take special care in brand image management in order to avoid diluting the brand value. The interview questions considered the relationship between the traditional luxury image and the eco-image, such as emerging conflicts. In this regard, the respondents' answers are almost uniform; they believe that eco-vehicles not only do not dilute the brand's luxury reputation but also inject new vitality into the brand image and add a new level to “luxury”.

Most brands choose attempts to combine the concepts of environmental protection and luxury, for example, Lexus try to keep their luxurious properties on the details of the interior of the car, they still the focus on luxury handicraft, but use new environmentally friendly materials for decoration to instead of leathers. The manager from Lexus explained in the following way:

Lexus

“Lexus is just trying to combine the concept of both. That's to say, we are trying to make eco-cars luxury”

The Lexus’ manager was very proud of this strategy and believed that is the most appropriate strategy to combination of luxury and environmental protection as the same time.

It is a trend that people are paying increasing attention to environmental protection; BMW has added this feature to their traditional brand image, combining the eco and the traditional luxury image. BMW, as a luxury car company with the largest market share in China, also hopes to seize the opportunity to trendset. The manager expressed their view as the following:

“i (BMW eco-car model) is not just a vehicle type with innovative design, but also accelerates the revolution of transportation modes of the future.”

BMW are confident in their eco-car as a new product; they believe it can apply the concept of sustainable development across the entire value chain. Mercedes-Benz chose to combine luxury and an environmentally friendly well-intentioned outlook; on the one hand; the company found a way to ensure brand luxury substituted position by increasing the eco-cars’ price. On the other hand, they enhanced the automotive appearance in order to

make the eco-car more attractive to young customers. The manager from Mercedes-Benz said:

“Benz eco-cars are still classified as luxury cars, and they have high prices.”

The interviewee added:

“Benz eco-cars have added more configuration and adjustments for appearance, making it more attractive to customers.”

Compared to Mercedes-Benz, BMW and Lexus, all of which are mature luxury car brands and have decades of established reputation in China, Tesla has a particular situation. As an eco-vehicle company, Tesla only produces eco-cars and, from the perspective of Chinese consumers, there was no background information before Tesla came on the market with eco-cars. This presents the company as a new innovator in the field of luxury eco-cars, rather than a luxury brand that also sells eco-vehicles. The manager from the comprehensive brand dealers said that:

“Personally, I think Tesla will be a trend like Apple: fashionable, cool as the concept on the Internet, high-tech. Moreover, it will diffuse to different groups of people.”

The dealers obviously is attracted by Tesla; in addition to expressing that the brand image is beyond recognition, he also give Tesla high hopes in the future. While Tesla, in their own brand image positioning, implements an eco-car brand image as a main image with added elements of luxury, the focus is on the greenness and the environment rather than luxury. Tesla’s manager explained their brand image as the following:

“So, we want to tell our customers, rather than selling luxury cars only, we actually want to sell eco-cars.”

By analysing that luxury car brands are actively framing a bridge between the luxury image and the environmentally friendly image, it is clear that although the methods vary, the goal is the same. In China's market, luxury and environmental protection are two concepts without prior links, at least in the luxury car market; large displacement and an expensive price is an expression of luxury attributes. Now, however, luxury car brands are trying to add the environmental protection concept to the luxury field, which can be considered an exploratory attempt in the Chinese market. The motivations of customers to purchase luxury goods are self-indulgence, hedonism and celebration of a person or a moment (Kapferer, 2009). In contrast, luxury car brands are now also trying to consider purchasing motives in the green market, which include the relationship between the marketing disciplines, the public policy process and the natural environment (François and Loïc, 2009; Coddington, 1993). Overall, this combined approach is very suitable to the current needs of China's market.

Brand image management strategy for the eco-car

Throughout the analysis of the relationship between the luxury image and the environmentally friendly image, it can be seen that not only are both able to exist in harmony but also they influence and promote each other to some extent. Brand image management for eco-car models has been largely used to improve and strengthen the original image. The comprehensive brand dealers described eco-car image as following:

“...For the improvement of human health and the environment. In a word, a healthy image”

The publicity images for eco-vehicles are often focused on the theme of environmental protection, for example, advertising that they use environmentally friendly materials and high-tech skills in their cars. This

method attempts to guide the public to associate social responsibility with their brand image. Lexus adopted an eco-image by advertising the materials they used in the eco-vehicles; the respondent explained this as the following:

“For eco-cars, we advertise the materials and the process of energy consumption, rather than buying out TV show advertisements like conventional fuel cars.”

In addition to the traditional way of advertising, the phrase “education market” was widely used in reference to a brand image management strategy in the interviews. "Education market" means that the company uses a communication platform (media, Auto Shows) to propagate their environmental philosophy. This strategy is different from traditional methods of promoting the brand image of only one company's brand. The "education market" strategy is able to drive the development of the entire market of eco-vehicles. It is more like a foundation to build skyscrapers. Thus, the more the "education market" works, the easier it will be to publicise the independent brand image. The method Lexus used in their education strategy was to conduct an event called “the year of hybrids”. Introducing their hybrid cars, this activity included auto shows that allowed customers to get a hands-on experience of eco-cars and learn their working principles; cars were available for showcases and test-driving so clients could be sure they could feel and recognise them. The interviewee said with regard to this that:

“We educate customers in detail, from the choice of car components to the choice of eco-friendly materials and wastewater treatment, etc.”

For each brand, the way they undertake market education is different; this can allow consumers to understand the brand's different personalities.

Mercedes-Benz explained that their eco-car image promotion acts as propaganda both online and offline, such as advertisements in magazines and other media, online advertisements, promotion ambassadors in offline stores and auto shows. The interviewee also commented that:

“...For special groups of people, such as overseas students, teachers, officers, we will make special offers and promotions for them.”

The brand chooses its own strategy for "education marketing", which will help enhance the brand image in the consumers' minds. Science and technology are the most dominant features for Tesla; they choose a strategy most suited to the brand positioning. The respondent explained their unique education strategy as follows:

“We persist with our ways, and we let the excellence of Tesla propagate among our old clients so new clients will recognise it and continue to propagate it by themselves.”

By comparison, BMW's strategy is different. BMW tends towards the details of promotion by strengthening the product features and enhancing the brand influence, for example, teaching consumers how to use electric vehicles. The manager gave a straightforward explanation as follows:

“The eco-car series is able to bring customers of luxury cars from new market segments. The powerful construction of a sub-brand image and the perfect charging services are beneficial for the promotion of eco-cars.”

By analysing the interviews, it can be seen that the education market as a key strategy for luxury car companies has been adopted to manage the eco-model's image. Without changing the original brand value in highlighting various new products. However, no matter what kind of brand management strategy the company adopts, they must all pay attention to the fact that a product or sub-brand does not dilute the driver brand. This new product

can specify segments as a new factor for the brand. An organisation can use common prefixes or suffixes to denote this new product (Takalkar, 2014). This means that luxury car brands can vigorously promote the image of eco-vehicles while consolidating the existing brand image.

The importance of regulation and policy

In our literature review the regulations and legislation relating to eco-vehicles in China are noted. It is important for brands to decide their management strategy, conforming to the trend and seizing the opportunities offered by policies and regulations. Cooperating with the government is one of the most valuable strategies for luxury car brands in China. Tesla took efforts to be included in the government list of eco-models. For example, if the brand car in the list of government eco-car promotion models, there is a list of preferential policies, such as car allowance, not limiting the license plate, the peak of the travel permit, etc.). Lexus' intention is expressed even more clearly: "We hope to be able to get more support from the government and that our eco-cars will be approved by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology. This is of great importance for now."

For China's current traffic situation, particularly in the big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, if a brand could provide convenient travel and also without many restrictions on travel time respects for customers, it will have big advantage for the brand when consumers consider the reasons to buy eco-car. Further, a brand has the ability to cooperate with the government may have positive impact on brand credibility. Mercedes-Benz mention that: "Eco-cars really have long-term benefits, especially for our next generation. We are striving for a blue sky for our children."

Each country has a different geographical, social and cultural background, and thus the country image (CI) of each luxury brand exerts a different influence on consumer perceptions and behaviours. Particular luxury brands are considered more valuable in one country than in others because the economic and social value of brands can differ based on collective ideas (Jung and Lee, 2013; Jung and Sung, 2008; Kim, 2012). When an equitable CI resonates with a brand, this leads to greater awareness, higher perceived quality and stronger brand loyalty (Baldauf et al., 2009) through the growing presence of the brand in the global market (Kleppe et al., 2002). Incorporating cross-cultural issues with the CI effects might provide a reliable way for academia and the fashion industry to explore global luxury fashion branding.

Relationships with rivals

The relationship between competitors, to some extent, reflects the brand's positioning, and even the brand's own image and competitors' brand image are connected closely. For example, in China, Mercedes-Benz and BMW names often appear together, on the one hand, they are competing for the same market share; on the other hand, they also maintain a common luxury car brand image. It can be said these two brands present overall image about "Germany made" Therefore, questions like "How do you consider the relationship between brands?" were asked in the interviews. The answers given by the luxury car brands were, again, virtually the same, essentially emphasising the importance and uniqueness of their products. Especially for eco-vehicles, where there are no overlapping products, brands will not be too concerned about competition policy. The respondent from Mercedes-Benz expressed their confidence as following:

“...We will do our best, and we will not care too much about the factors from outside”

Although Mercedes-Benz does not pay much attention to competition strategy, only focus on its own deficiencies. The interviewee also added:

“They (BMW) have a more specific identity for eco-cars, but Benz hasn't put the concept of eco-cars specifically on the slogan or general propaganda. At this point, BMW is better than us.”

Eco-vehicles as the new image of luxury cars; the major brands seem to focus on the development of the image and product performance and are not too concerned about competition with rivals. Most of the brands consider their products to be unique with no opponent. There is no doubt that brands being confident in their products will contribute to creating a healthy and positive brand image, but now the major luxury brands are all choose to ignore the market competition. In the current situation, competitors do not seem to consider this matter but over time, an increasing number of luxury car brands will be added to the eco-car market and a competition pattern will eventually form.

The barriers to brand image management

As mentioned above, some brands encounter misunderstandings about their luxury eco-car brand image in their customer groups, especially in the differences between public awareness and the specific message the brand actually wants to convey'. In this case, the brand image is not accurate enough, causing misunderstandings among consumers. Consumers easily form a “self-brand connection” based on the congruency of the “brand-image” (Rares et al., 2013). For luxury cars, this means that the car owner image comprises a combination of the customer's own image and the product image. A clear image for car owners not only means clear brand

positioning, but also good communication and increased customer loyalty. Especially for Tesla, the respondent explained the situation as following:

“The situation of 'panic buying' in China was actually not beneficial for the whole brand image. People felt like Tesla was only affordable for the rich, and not close to the public, which meant Tesla's brand image was not perfect.”

The interviewee added:

“We hope that customers rather consider Tesla as a fashionable, cool and environmentally-friendly vehicle than imagine it as 'a toy of the rich'. So far, we have made great efforts in building this kind of brand image for Tesla”

Tesla's concern about their brand position is that the consumer groups are similar to traditional luxury car customers and not the environmental consumers the brand expected. The comprehensive brand dealers confirmed Tesla's concerns:

“They want to buy an electric car, not because they actually need it, but for the trend. As the rich, they need to chase the trend ... in China, Tesla is inexplicably recognised as a symbol of luxury and high status. Therefore, people buy it not just for environmental protection.”

Comprehensive brand dealers act as a transmitter of brand image; they use their basic interpretation of the brand image and then disseminate their own understanding to the consumers.

The facts have proved that the things that Tesla was worried about in terms of brand image interpretation errors have indeed occurred, and little has been done to alleviate the phenomenon. For consumers and comprehensive brand dealers, Tesla brand recognition has not changed, and they are willing to accept such a brand image.

Lexus has a similar problem to Tesla. Due to the fact that the owners' images are not clear enough, consumers are confused about the brand image, asking, for example, "Is this brand really suitable for anyone?" Or "Is my identity suited to this brand?" Such problems dilute the distinction of the brand image.

The Tesla brand image positioning is unclear and Lexus owners' image is unclear, which, to some extent, affects the overall image of these two brands and therefore presents a barrier to brand image management. A series of measures to undertake product promotion, educate the market, clarify brand positioning and establish a proper car owner image is imperative for luxury car brand management, especially when new products arrive into the mass market.

Through analysis it can be seen that Tesla and Lexus have brand image uncertainty problems; if consumers were uncertain about some brands they were asked to re-evaluate the brand value; the notion that the consumer is brand-omniscient has been challenged (Amit et al., 2004). If the brand can't deliver a clear enough image for consumers, this will confuse them. Such doubts will not only affect the brand's position in consumers' minds but will even create a crisis in the consumers' confidence in the product quality, thus affecting brand loyalty.

Traditional luxury car brands already had their own unique brand image and market share, but for eco-vehicles, all of these brands are on an equal footing. Luxury car brands on the one hand carefully maintain the luxury image, and on the other hand, they actively ensure the environmentally friendly image is promoted faster and better, integrating it into their overall image.

It is worth mentioning that in the interviews the value of the eco-car image for the brands was considered to be beyond any new model; it not only represented profit but also more social responsibility. Through analysis of the interviews, it has been found that the luxury car brand environmentally friendly image should emphasise the trends of the future and innovation, which will have a positive impact on the brand image.

Conclusion

Key findings and insights

One of the key findings of this study is the relationship between the traditional luxury image and the eco-image. The brand image of traditional luxury cars includes high quality and expensiveness, highlighting the car-owners' social status, these characteristics may be seen to conflict with an image that promotes energy-saving and environmental protection. However, in fact, the brands not only believe that these elements are not in conflict with their eco—models, instead, luxury brands are now considering these new environmental elements and refreshing the brand image, for example, by injecting images of dynamic design, technology, and future factors into the brand. The companies are also all trying harder to promote the new eco-model in China's markets.

Another important finding in this research is that luxury car brands have transferred some effective traditional luxury model promotion strategies to their new eco-cars, such as auto exhibitions and media advertising for “brand strengthen management” (Kapferer, 2008). However, more importantly, the brands have tried to explore some new strategies to develop the image of eco-cars and make them more likely to be accepted by the market. For example, they have tried to “educate [the] market and customer”; this critical new strategy was mentioned many times in the

interviews and refers to brands trying to make the product itself a factor in the brand image to attract consumers. The CBBE model (Keller, 2003) has also been adopted as a new strategy. The most efficient methods of brand management involve managing the product itself, which can help the brand move from “low-level” to “high-level” (Keller, 2013).

A practical strategy for brand image management in China is also one that closely and actively involves government planning and cooperates with regulations. As was mentioned previously, China is promoting a "green road" program and also introducing eco-vehicles to consumers are an important part of this program; therefore sales prospects for eco-cars in China are very optimistic. The government encourages consumers to choose eco-vehicles and is introducing relevant policies to encourage consumption and purchases of eco-vehicles. Through this vigorous promotion by the government, the brand image can be said to “catch a ride” by being involved in the public environmental awareness education as propaganda, which can also make the brand image more socially responsible and make the brand preferred in the public mind. As mentioned above in the findings and discussion chapter mentioned, Lexus and BMW were the first two brands to realise the importance of this and begin to participate in it.

Recommendations

According to Keller (1998), the most important factor in the brand image is a brand association, including attributes, benefits, and attitude. This means that an influential brand image should consider the quality of a product, prices, practical experience and brand symbol. For luxury car brands, product quality and product prices are semi-casual attributes for consumers; the importance in the association is experience and symbolic

advantage. A clear car-owners' image should be conducive to positioning the brand image for consumers. As discussed above, especially in China's market, consumers attach significant importance to the image of car-owners; Tesla and Lexus, which have unclear brand image positioning problems, could also adopt this strategy as a solution.

Developing a strong brand needs to involve auditing the capabilities of the company and evaluating the external and internal issues in the brand (Chernatony, 2011). This means that the internal, luxury eco-car image should inherit the traditional luxury image from the brand itself, along with the brand's style. In terms of external issues, luxury car brands need to continue their "education market" strategy and build on the progress, until consumers accept the brands' eco-image. Through the analysis of the above in the interviews section, it can be found that Lexus and Mercedes-Benz' models, such as presenting eco-vehicles at exhibitions, test driving and explaining the raw materials, are efficient methods to educate the market.

Another important strategy is positive integration of the brand image to the lifestyle, based on the government's promotion plan, for example, following regulations by the government, adding the brands' eco-model to government favoured brand promotion activities and utilising the social changes brought about by changes in the market (Kotler, 1994). The "green market" signified became a primary market by the rise of the concept of environmental protection (Francois and Loic, 2009). Maintaining the luxury car brand pioneer and elite images are the most important factors when luxury car companies promote their eco-vehicles.

Limitations and further research

Although this research project has achieved the study's aims and objectives and has provided effective and practical strategies for luxury car brands to manage their eco-car images in China, there are certain limitations to this research study that should be acknowledged. The interviews' basic data also can be broadened in the future, such as by adding more luxury car brands into the sample group, may improve the data set.

Time is also one of the factors limiting the study; in view of the relatively high duties of the interviewees, each interview time was relatively limited, which may have led to some problems due to insufficiently thorough answers.

Geographic limitations also limit the scope of the study to some extent; the main object of the research was Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen and Hangzhou, China's first-tier cities. Future research should include China's second- and third-tier cities, which are undertaking a fast economic development in China and are gradually becoming major luxury brand consumer markets.

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