The Effect of Serif and San Serif Typeface of Luxury Fashion Logotype on Chinese Consumers' Brand Perception

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Abstract

An appropriate and well-designed logotype is essential to create brand awareness and positive brand perception. The effect of different typefaces has not been well researched in the luxury fashion sector. This paper expands on previous findings on typeface applications, in which two studies test the impact of Serif and San Serif typefaces, and three experiments test the effects of San and Serif typefaces on brand perception. Study 1 (N = 102) tests the visual complexity of Serif and San Serif typefaces; study 2 (N = 134) further investigates the visual simplicity and perceived luxury; and study 3 (N = 92) studies the brand gender of the two typefaces. The results of these three studies suggest that Serif typeface is more complex in structure than San Serif typeface. However, it does not have too much impact on the perceived luxury. Male consumers have greater gender cognitive differences than female consumers, and the San Serif typefaces are considered to be more masculine than Serif typefaces.

Keywords: Brand gender perception, Chinese luxury fashion, serif and san serif, typeface complexity, perceived luxury,

1. Introduction

Due to the increase in sales and demand for luxury goods, research on the luxury industry has increased. China, in particularly, is one of the fastest growing countries in the world, and has a huge demand for luxury items. According to Statistica, China is the world's second largest luxury consumer in 2021 (Statista Research Department, 2021). Appropriate and strong brand perception provides meaning and value to consumers, especially for luxury products, which depend on charging premium prices consumers are willing to pay (Hutton, 1997). One of the marketing strategies that stands out from the competition is to develop a unique visual appearance. Researchers and scholars have long been interested in design elements, for instance, complexity, unity and proportion (Schmitt & Simonson, 1997; Creusen et al., 2010).

There is no doubt that the selection of typeface in branding or advertising has a key impact on the overall brand perception. Throughout the current luxury fashion market, most of these brands are applied with wordmarks as their identity. By definition, typefaces are being considered to be different from fonts, but sometimes they can be used interchangeably (Lee & Shin, 2020). A typeface refers to a collection of related fonts, such as Times New Roman. Typefaces can evoke emotions and associations, as well as cognitive responses, to a product or brand. Owing to the unique semantic relationship caused by the visual attribute of font, it produces perceptual and connotative meaning. (Childers & Jass, 2002). Recently, several of the top-selling luxury fashion brands have redesigned their identities, the most obvious part of which is that most brands have abandoned Serif logotypes in favor of San Serif typefaces (Figure 1).

Previous researches focused on the psychological association from typefaces, as well as emotional responses (e.g., gentle-rough, interesting-boring, joyful-sad) (Geohman, 2016; Juni & Gross, 2008). Typeface is also one of the most critical elements of psychological distance and symbolic association (Leeuwen, 2005).

For example, San Serif typefaces are associated with competence and authority, while script typefaces evoke a sense of friendliness and warmth. Other studies have also shown that luxury fonts are considered more appropriate when consumers deal with classic, formal luxury goods (Grohman, 2016). On the contrary, if consumer feel that the

typeface is more casual and informal, they will think the brand is more harmonious and emotional.



Figure 1. Examples of recent luxury fashion rebranding. Source: Twitter

Visual complexity refers to the degree of structural complexity and the number of elements in an image (Hanna, 2004). It is a critical factor influencing consumers' preferences and perceptions of brands and items (Lee et al., 2018). However, when dealing with the visual complexity and brand perception of luxury fashion, this is subject to deliberation. Some researches have suggested that high visual complexity is positively correlated with brand preference (Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 2005), while others have given a negative answer (Michailidou et al. 2008; Tuch et al. 2009). In addition, Mulken (2014) pointed out the U-shape relationship between the two factors: excessive simplicity and complexity will damage the perception of luxury brands, therefore the moderation is the best. Kim & Lim (2019) conducted a survey on visual complexity and its influence on luxury fashion advertising. The study suggested that if the luxury brand had a high degree of familiarity, it was better to adopt simple styles, which helped increase perceived luxuriousness. On the other hand, if the degree of familiarity was low, the more complex the image, the better the effect. In this research, Jung limits his study to the advertising materials of two classic fashion brands.

Some previous researches aimed to understand the connotation of typefaces and explore the interrelation between meanings. The angularity and sharp shapes of the San Serif typeface are associated with the highest level of strength (Grohman 2016). One noteworthy contribution of Kim's (2020) study was that it showed the psychological perception based on the warmth and competence evaluation of representative typefaces (i.e., Serif, San Serif and handwriting). His research also extended to perception, engagement and attitude. His study confirmed that typographic elements are essential for conveying information and brand attitudes. Typeface gender cue is one of the key elements that influences psychological perception (Hess & Melnyk, 2016). Gender stereotypes contribute to manifesting underlying warmth or competence.

This research aims to explore and understand the interaction between typefaces (Serif and San Serif) and consumer perception of luxury fashion brands, and to reveal the two potential factors: visual complexity and gender cues and how they interact with perceived luxuriousness and psychological associations. Furthermore, the research also examines the impact of these factors on brand perception. If marketers and practitioners can comprehend the interrelation between typefaces related to logotype or other visual elements in the luxury fashion branding, they can take better action in selecting an appropriate typeface to improve brand equity (Pillai, Katsikeas, & Presi, 2012).

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Luxury Fashion Brand

The concept of luxury has already been discussed by researchers, yet there is no general consensus (Kapferer and Laurent, 2016). Luxury goods have different meanings for different people in different times and cultures ((Turunen, 2017). Currently, researchers agree that the basic term for understanding luxury fashion brands is conspicuous consumption, which helps consumers demonstrate their social status, wealth and class (Veblen, 1899), and achieve their social goals (Becker et al., 2018). Chinese consumers have a growing interest in and appetite for luxury goods, according to Xu & Wang (2011). The top selling luxury fashion brands, such as Chanel, Burberry and Hermes, are particularly popular with Chinese consumers because of their high prices and quality.

2.2 Typeface Complexity and Perceived Luxury

According to definition, typefaces are considered different from fonts, but sometimes they can be used interchangeably (Lee & Shin, 2020). A typeface refers to a collection of related fonts, such as Times. Serifs are lines that extend from the end of a character. Different typefaces carry various meanings. In this sense, typefaces are used to talk to consumers, supplement additional information or when semantics are not feasible at all (Strizver, 2014). Serif typefaces dominated the visual design in the 18th and 19th century, when these small extensions were considered part of ornamental elements (Willen & Strals, 2009). Until the end of the 19th century, San Serif typefaces were commercialized and generally recognized (Samara, 2018). San Serif means that there is no Serif. Compared with Serif typefaces, they are usually much simpler and have less contrast.

The structural difference between Serif and San Serif typefaces is obvious. The complexity of letters and typefaces depends on all the features each letter contain. Research by Moret-Tatay and Perea (2011) showed that font styles do differ. And their crew found that San Serif was generally easier for participants to perceive and process. Compared with Serif typefaces set to the same size, San Serif typefaces had the advantage of faster read time (19 ms). As a result, Moret-Tatay and Perea concluded that "Serifs do not seem to play a beneficial role in visual-word recognition – beyond being a decorative burden". Dogusoy, Cicek and Cagiltay (2016) conducted eye tracking experiment on reading speed of Serif and San Serif typefaces, which further supported the findings of Moret-Tatay and Perea. However, there is still inconsistence in the research of visual complexity of brand, especially in the field of typeface design. Based on these previous findings and experiments, the researcher proposes the following hypothesis:

H1 When used as a symbol of luxury fashion brands, Serif typefaces are visually more complex than San Serif typefaces.

Visual complexity, especially in brand building, can use brand image, attraction, and constitute to induce connotation (Favier et al., 2019). Visual complexity refers to the complexity of visual elements: their number and arrangement (Hall & Hanna, 2004). However, scholars still argue about the definition of complexity and simplicity. For example, Rogers (2003) stated that the definition of complexity and simplicity was based on the difficulty of processing the information contained in it. In an early case study investigating consumer preference, Berlyne (1971) found an inverted U-shape relationship between attractiveness and visual complexity, indicating that extreme simple or complex images can not be compared, and moderation is the key. Cox (2002) also found the same pattern, further consolidating the discovery of Berlyne. Other studies discussed the benefits of high visual complexity when considering functionality, higher quality and durability. Additionally, higher visual complexity provides more information and richer content. And in advertising, it can attract consumers' attention and promote communication (Pieters et al., 2010).

However, the opposite view shows that consumers are more positive in perceiving images with lower visual complexity. Some researchers found that low complexity visual elements make consumers feel a higher level of trust and premium (Karvoen, 2000). This is because when consumers have limited cogitative ability, the fewer visual elements, the better. As a result, they prefer images that are easy to process (Percy & Rossiter, 1983; Wu et al., 2016).

The research on how the visual simplicity affects brand building and marketing, especially in the luxury fashion sectors, is insufficient. Visual complexity has been studied in different contexts, mainly based on product design (Creusen et al. 2010), advertising (Mulken et al., 2014) and digital marketing (Tuch et al. 2009). Most of these studies focused on the mass market and general population, investigating functional products rather than hedonic items. Recently, Lee, Hur and Watkins (2018) introduced this topic into the luxury fashion area, especially the visual elements in luxury fashion social media. The luxury products (i.e., Gucci T-shirt, Burberry Sunglass) are expected to be luxurious, high quality and unique, compared with daily functional products (Parguel et al., 2016). Perceived luxury is the intermediary between visual stimulus and consumers' perception of luxury items, so it is very important in forming behavioral intentions (Gierl & Huettl, 2012).

The visual elements in branding and advertising promote luxury perceptions. Previous study conducted by Pelet et al. in 2020 found that when the visual complexity of wine design was relatively low, the authenticity, competitiveness and brand premium of wine packaging were higher. "Simplicity and serenity are the greatest luxuries" (Crewe, 2013). Because visual displays also include visual communication (Potvin et al., 2009), the use of simpler typeface forms in logos can send exclusive signals to consumers of luxury products.

Lee (2018) pointed out in the context of luxury advertising that consumers perceived scarcity more strongly when there were fewer visual elements. His research further suggested that this rule depended on the type of luxury goods.

For example, simplicity is more suited to classic style (i.e., Louis Vuitton, Chanel and Jil Sander). However, complexity has a higher sense of luxury in baroque styles (i.e., Dolce & Gabbana and Versace). Nevertheless, Lee (2018) did not specify his study on branding and typefaces, which provided a blank for this study. Therefore, the researcher makes the following hypothesis:

H2 Serif typefaces (vs. San Serif typefaces) have lower (vs. higher) perceived luxury due to higher (vs. lower) complexity.

2.3 Typeface and Luxury Brand Gender

Brand gender is a critical factor affecting brand perception. Studies show that potential buyers are gender-sensitive to specific brands or their products (Allison et al. 1980). Usually, researchers project personality onto the brand (Aaker, 1997) and combine two dimensions: brand masculinity and brand femininity (Grohmann, 2009). Research in this field has confirmed that gender cues can automatically evoke knowledge of gender stereotypes: male gender cue always represents competence and dominance, whereas female gender cue refers to warmth and kindness (Banaji & Hardin, 1996). The association between the brand gender perception and personality occurs though brand visual elements (i.e., logotype, typeface, color) and communication (i.e., endorser, advertising) as well as brand behavior (i.e., campaign, performance). The visual cue of brand appearance is more direct, and it is more convenient for people to judge and establish brand perception image (Kenny, 2004). However, existing brands have established their gender personality though the long history of brand building (Ulrich et al., 2011). For instance, Dior is considered more feminine than Mercedes; Lancome is more of a female brand than Gillette is. However, this research has not yet covered the fashion field, so this research is left to fill the gap.

Typefaces can spike specific emotional associations and gender cues. Some studies were based on this topic. But the research carried out by Grohmann et al. (2012) was to associate the design characters of typeface (i.e., the size, boldness, naturalness or elaborate) with consumers' perception of brand attributes, such as excitement, sophistication, competence and sincerity. The literature on inference based on typefaces stated that typefaces with larger curvature were deemed to have more femininity. Accordingly, typefaces with stricter strokes and the least details were considered to be more masculine (Shaikh et al., 2006).

Shaikh, Chaparro, and Fox (2006) studied 20 typefaces and established personality association with them: Serif fonts like Times appear traditional and conservative, San Serif fonts convey modern and strength. Grohamann (2016) also confirmed the previous research results, and further suggested that brands should consider carefully when applying typefaces and aligning with marketing strategies, as this would stimulate consumer's emotions, brand awareness, and affect their behaviors, such as whether to recommend. However, Grohamann's study was limited to curvature and display fonts, studying only the impact on daily functional items (i.e., battery), rather than hedonic products such as luxury fashion. Serif typefaces are mainly used for text reading due to their readability, especially when the screen resolution is low. San Serif typefaces are unadorned and least decorated (Heisinng, 2014). For example, the classic Serif typeface, Times New Roman, represents classic, elegant and feminine impressions, whereas San Serif typeface like Helvetica, indicates modern, contemporary and effective senses (Damayanti, 2013). Therefore, the researcher makes the following hypothesis:

H3 Serif typeface (vs. San Serif) can induce feminine (vs. masculine) perception of luxury fashion brands.

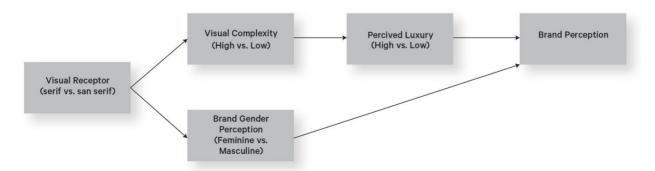


Figure 2. Theoretical framework

3. Methodology

As previous researches have shown, visual complexity can increase or decrease visual elements. In this research, using the logos of the top 10 best-selling luxury fashion brands and setting them in Serif (Times New Roman, 14 pt, regular) and San Serif (Helvetica, 14 pt, regular) typefaces, while controlling the same boldness and size, Study 1 tests and identifies the visual complexity between Serif and San Serif typefaces (H1). In addition, the researcher investigates the influence of Serif and San Serif typefaces on perceived luxury and examines the mediating effect of the visual complexity (H2). Study 3 helps identity different gender perceptions of Serif and San Serif typefaces (H3). To mimic the real life and enhance the effect, all logos are used on T-shirts, handbags and store signs (Teng et al., 2021). More importantly, brand familiarity and brand preference are found to have a positive impact on how consumers perceive these brand logotypes (Lee, 2018). Before each study, the researcher also conducts a survey of brand familiarity and brand preference.

3.1 Study 1

3.1.1 Participants and Procedure

A total of 102 online participants (N = 102) completes the survey. The participants are volunteers, mostly from Wenzhou-Kean University. The age ranged from 19 to 23 years old, with an average of 20.34 years old, of which 73.3% are female. They are also described as the main force driving luxury goods sales, accounting for 13.5% of China's total population (McKinsey & company, 2017). The participants come from wealthy families (annual household income > 500,000 CNY), which are defined as Chinese middle class (Teng et al., 2021).

The researcher creates 6 fictional brand names and the participants are told that they were high-end brands in the fashion category. The familiarity scale ("familiar", 1 = very unfamiliar, 7 = very familiar) ($M_{\text{familiarity-Serif}} = 3.11$, $M_{\text{familiarity-San Serif}} = 3.69$, t(102) = 0.38, p > 0.1) and the brand preference ("like", 1 = very dislike, 7 = very like) ($M_{\text{preference-San Serif}} = 3.73$, $M_{\text{preference-San Serif}} = 4.22$, t(102) = 0.28, p > 0.1) show that the fictional brand names are not significantly different in these two factors. Therefore, the fictional brand names are valid for the study.

3.1.2 Measure

The researcher uses multiple checks and Likert scale to measure the complexity of these two typefaces. The depend variable is the complexity of each logotype. In study 1, each logotype is used on T-shirts to simulate the real life experience. The participants are asked to measure the visual complexity of each logotype and then rate their feeling from 1 to 7. Three factors are used to measure visual complexity, namely, discrimination difficulty (1 = not difficult at all, 7 = very difficult), memory difficulty (1 = not difficult at all, 7 = very difficult), and complexity (1 = very simple, 7 = very complex) (Xu et al., 2017). These factors exhibit good readabilities previously (Cronbach's alpha = 0.82).

3.1.3 Result and Discussion

The independent sample t-test is used to analyze the data results. The result shows that the San Serif typefaces are indeed simpler than Serif typefaces ($M_{complexity-Serif} = 6.32$, $M_{complexity-San Serif} = 6.01$; t(102) = 9.75, p < 0.002), which supports to the H1 hypothesis. The result concludes that when Chinese consumers are faced with Serif and San Serif typefaces on the luxury fashion items, the former has a higher degree of visual complexity. Furthermore, the result also supports and extends the previous researches' findings. Study 2 will further study the impact of typeface visual complexity on luxury fashion brand perception, especially how it affects consumers' willingness to buy and share.

3.2 Study 2

3.2.1 Participants and Procedure

Study 2 examines the mediating effect on perceived value of luxury goods, and determines the perception of luxury fashion brands by analyzing consumers' willingness to share and purchase.

Totally 134 volunteers from Wenzhou-Kean University are involved in this study. The participants are 18-25 years old, with an average age of 19.32 years, of which 67.9% of them are female. The participants' profiles are similar to Study 1. Their perception of luxury items is also investigated before the study, as it has a positive impact on the results (Ajitha & Sivakumar, 2017). Since study 2 uses the same fictional logotypes as study 1, brand preference and similarity remain the same scale. These 6 fictional brand names are set with Serif (Times New Roman) and San Serif (Helvetica) typefaces, and applied on the store signs to simulate real life experience. According to their feelings, participants are asked to rate their perceived luxury, purchase intentions and sharing intentions based on the 7-point Likert chart scale.

3.2.2 Measure

The measurement factors of brand perceived luxury have three semantic evaluations: luxurious (1 = not luxurious at all, 7 = vary luxurious), prestigious (1 = not prestigious at all, 7 = vary prestigious) and high class (1 = Low class, 7 = high class). These three factors were promoted by Hagtvedt and Patrick (2008), and later revaluated by Lee et al. (2018), who confirmed the validity of these factors in their study.

3.2.3 Results and Discussion

The questionnaire uses one-way ANAVO to analyze the perceived luxury of the two typefaces, and the variable is perceived luxury. However, this result ($M_{luxury-Serif} = 4.38$, $M_{luxury-San Serif} = 4.12$, F(1,132) = 0.02, p > 0.1) is inconsistent with the findings of Pelet et al. on wine packaging design in 2020. The result (Fig.3) shows that the difference between the two typefaces is not significant, which indicates that H2 is a null hypothesis. The consumers did not perceive more luxury by viewing the simple logotype with different typefaces. This study reveals an interesting result: when consumers only evaluate things based on Serif or San Serif typefaces, there is not much difference in brand perception of luxury goods.

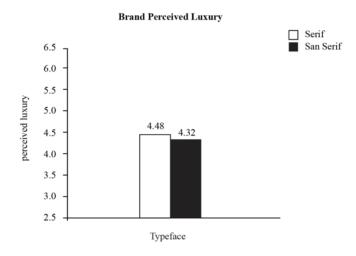


Figure 3. The brand perceived luxury from Serif and San Serif typefaces (study 2)

3.3 Study 3

3.3.1 Participants and Procedure

A total of 95 (N = 95) participants, also from Wenzhou-kean University, completes the online survey. The age ranges from 19 to 24 years old, with an average of 20.1 years old, of which 61.4% are female. The participants' profiles are similar to study 1 and study 2. The procedure of study 3 is similar to that of study 1 and 2, which collects data from participants through the use of fictional brand names, multiple checks and Likert chart scales. In addition to preference and similarity scale checks, additional brand name scales are applied to eliminate the impact of brand names (Ulrich, Tissier-Desbordes & Dubois, 2011). The brand name gender scale ($M_{\text{femininity-Serif}} = 4.34$, $M_{\text{femininity-San}}$ serif = 4.02, t(95) = 0.41, p > 0.1; $M_{\text{masculinity-Serif}} = 4.29$, $M_{\text{masculinity-San Serif}} = 3.37$, t(95) = 0.35, p > 0.1) shows that there is no significant gender difference in brand names.

3.3.2 Measures

The measure of brand femininity and masculinity is based on the 7-point Likert scale. In this study, each logotype is printed on T-shirts to simulate real life experience. The dependent variable is participants' perception of brand femininity and masculinity (1 = strongly agree, 7 = strongly disagree). The factors to measure brand femininity are "soft, tender, graceful, sophisticated, cheerful and compassionate", while the factors to measure masculinity are "macho, aggressive, performing, competitive, assertive and strong". These factors were developed and used by Grohamann (2009) and Ulrich et al. (2011), and showed effectiveness and good reliability in their research.

3.3.3 Results and Discussion

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) between subject factors and controlled covariates (brand logo similarity, preference and name gender) shows that there is a significant difference in gender perception between Serif and San

Serif typefaces (Fig. 4). The femininity of Serif typeface is higher than that of San Serif typeface ($M_{\text{femininity-Serif}} = 5.29$, $M_{\text{femininity-San Serif}} = 4.31$, F(1,92) = 6.68, p < 0.05). On the contrary, San Serif typeface exhibits a stronger sense of brand masculinity than Serif typeface ($M_{\text{masculinity-Serif}} = 4.39$, $M_{\text{masculinity-San Serif}} = 5.11$, F(1,92) = 9.13, p < 0.05). The result concludes that when Chinese consumers face luxury fashion brand logotypes, typefaces do have an impact on gender perception. Furthermore, in the two typefaces, the perceived brand masculinity is more different from the perceived brand femininity.

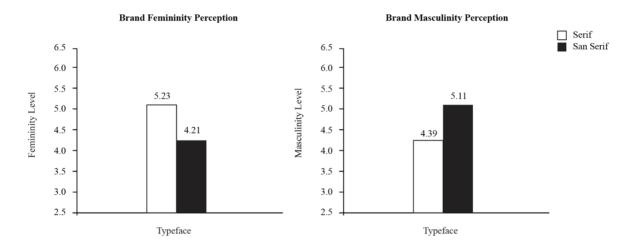
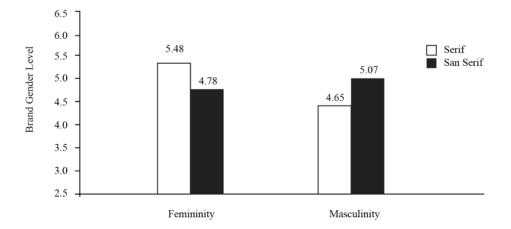
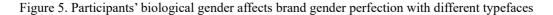


Figure 4. The brand gender perception from Serif and San Serif typefaces (study 3)

The researcher further analyzes the biological gender interaction of consumers. The ANOVA test of 2 (typefaces) x 2 (biological genders) proves that men and women have significant differences in the gender effect of typefaces in brands (F(1, 92) = 7.65, p < 0.04). Specifically, the results reveal that male consumers are perceived Serif typeface with more femininity ($M_{\text{femininity-Serif}} = 4.82$, $M_{\text{femininity-San Serif}} = 4.19$, F(1,42) = 7.89, p < 0.01) and San Serif typeface with more masculinity ($M_{\text{masculinity-Serif}} = 4.22$, $M_{\text{masculinity-San Serif}} = 5.63$, F(1,42) = 10.13, p < 0.01). For the female consumera, the difference in gender perception remains the same but more moderate ($M_{\text{femininity-Serif}} = 5.48$, $M_{\text{femininity-San Serif}} = 4.78$, F(1,50) = 4.50, p < 0.01; $M_{\text{masculinity-Serif}} = 4.65$, $M_{\text{masculinity-San Serif}} = 5.43$, F(1,50) = 6.09, p < 0.01). The results suggest that male consumers have a stronger feeling in gender perception, compared to female consumers.

Female Consumer Brand Gender Perception





4. Conclusion and Implication

The study investigates the effects of Serif and San Serif typefaces, especially for luxury fashion brands which have increased consumption but lack academic research. The study focuses on the visual complexity, perceived luxury and gender perception of the two typefaces. Study 1 examines the complexity of one of the most popular Serifs (Times New Roman, 14 pt, regular) and San Serif (Helvetica, 14 pt, regular) typefaces. The result shows that San Serif is visually simpler than Serif typeface. However, in study 2, as the researcher first assumed, the visual simplicity of San Serif typeface does not significantly transform or affect perceived luxury. In study 3, the brand gender perception of the two different typefaces differs: San Serif has more masculinity and Serif has more femininity. More importantly, male consumers have stronger brand gender awareness than female consumers.

The contributions of this research include: concentrating on the two main typeface category of Serif and San Serif, and enriching the typeface application research on logotypes and wordmarks. Most of the previous researches focused on script and machine written typefaces, and most of them were based on functional products, rather than luxury fashion goods. This research opens up a new field for the industry and will attract further researches to fill the gap. It also provides some practical suggestions for marketing personnel and designers in this field. Managers and brand designers need to pay more attention to visual elements, because these factors can be transformed into brand perception and attributes (Hagtvedt, 2011). To be more specific, typeface selection is one of the most important decisions in the whole brand building process. In terms of visual simplicity, designers should consider that Serif typefaces are inherently more complex than San Serif typefaces. However, the selection of typefaces won't have too much impact on brand perceived luxury. More importantly, managers need to take note of the brand gender from typeface decisions, especially when brands regard male consumers as their key market. Brands need to choose the right gender perception image to match their positioning strategy (Teng et al., 2021), and the perception that the brand wants to convey.

5. Limitation and Future Study

This research undoubtedly has some limitations, which provides an opportunity for future research to fill the gap. First, the research is conducted in China and the participants are all Chinese, so the geographical restrictions in the findings of this study may not apply to other cultures. Future study can introduce participants other than Chinese. Second, the typeface selection is limited to Serif and San Serif. However, in addition to these two typefaces, there are more categories, for instance, slab Serif (i.e., Rockwell) and humanist San Serif (i.e., Gill San). Furthermore, future study can investigate more Serif and San Serif typefaces to provide a more solid research foundation. The research does suggest that there is no significant difference between Serif and San Serif typefaces in terms of brand perceived luxury. However, Pelet et al. (2020) examined the entire wine packaging design rather than focusing solely on its logotype. Therefore, further study can be done to examine more visual elements, such as images, or more cohesive graphic layouts in brand building.

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