

What is Wrong about Being Uncomfortable?

Lester W. Johnson

Franck Vigneron

Franck Vigneron and Lester W. Johnson's retrospective on their award winning paper, "A Review and a Conceptual Framework of Prestige-Seeking Consumer Behavior" (<http://www.amsreview.org/articles/vigneron01-1999-retrospective.pdf>) winner of the Best Article in AMSR's first ten years.

In marketing there are two valuable concepts to follow. It is important to make a just noticeable difference and to seize opportunities. Writing a successful paper is a bit similar. A 'just noticeable difference' would be a contribution and 'opportunities' might be the possible implications. It is also essential to take calculated risks which may create in authors a feeling of being uncomfortable. We have felt uncomfortable many times. Sometimes it just happened but other times it was because we tried to do something different, something which was new but from which we could learn a great deal.

Professor Lester W. Johnson is an American-born academic who went to Australia in the mid-1970s. He completed his PhD in Econometrics at the University of Connecticut in 1975. Early in his career he grew an interest in researching and teaching marketing, and now has more than 35 years of teaching, researching, and consulting experience. He was recently (2004) elected one of three inaugural Fellows of the Australian New Zealand Marketing Academy (ANZMAC). He is currently a Professor of Management (Marketing) at Melbourne Business School, The University of Melbourne and he was previously Professor of Marketing in the Graduate School of Business at the University of Sydney, where he was also Director of their Ph.D Program.

It was at the University of Sydney that Lester became Franck Vigneron's PhD supervisor in 1995. Franck had just finished a Masters thesis at the University of Stirling in Scotland where he studied branding strategies of successful luxury organizations. Franck had felt uncomfortable in Scotland because he came from France and did not speak English proficiently, but this soon changed as he enjoyed his studies and was increasingly motivated to learn English. Later in Australia, he felt uncomfortable again because of the long distance to Europe and the amount of work required in the future to complete his PhD. Professor Johnson was uncomfortable when he realized he knew little about the subject his PhD student wanted to work on, but he was critical in planning the focus of their research for the next three years.

Rather quickly it came to their attention that the construct of luxury had not been sufficiently operationalized. At the time, there were only a few studies published on the subject and it seemed important to conceptualize the multidimensional factors defining luxury brands.

As time went by and they worked on this subject, the relevance and size of the market of luxury brands had increased dramatically, and with China entering the consumer world of luxury, this trend had only gained further interest.

Franck completed his PhD in 1998 and they were looking for a journal that would publish the conceptual part of their empirical research. As they were offering a paper which had a great deal of originality, they were conscious that it was important to select a publication which had a reputation to be innovative and ground-breaking. The *AMSR* was a perfect opportunity as it had the reputation to be forward and open-minded.

About two months after we submitted our paper, we received the feedback from three anonymous reviewers. It was obvious that two of the reviewers did not like our framework and basically rejected the paper. However, one of the reviewers, who later disclosed his name (i.e., Morris Holbrook) argued that the paper had great potential and offered some constructive comments which enhanced the clarity of the paper. Joe Cote, who was the editor at the time, suggested we followed Holbrook's suggestions and he took the responsibility to publish our paper after we made these changes. Admittedly, we were all placed in uncomfortable positions because this paper seemed to be saying a bit more new things that one would like a paper to say. Pioneering is difficult and it often takes the vision of a few good people to make it happen.

Until 1999, there were two schools of thought for defining the reasons for consuming luxury brands. One traditional viewpoint proposed that the consumption of luxury brands appears to have public and social functions, whereas another framework supported the rather private emotional value gained from this consumption. In summary, these frameworks focused either on interpersonal or on personal effects but not on both.

Thus, the main contribution from our paper was to establish a balance between personal and interpersonal oriented motives for luxury consumption, and to bring the two concepts together in a single framework. Professor Holbrook's main suggestion was to divide the personal effect into two different effects where the emotional and quality values would be independent and build two consumer typologies, i.e., the hedonist and perfectionist. His suggestion greatly enhanced the balance and realism of the conceptual framework.

In conclusion, the results from this paper were twofold: (1) development of a consumer behavior model for the consumption of luxury brands and (2) definition of the attributes of a luxury brand. Thus, we would say that our just noticeable difference was to put together two existing concepts (i.e., personal and interpersonal), and to operationalize the concept of luxury at a time where people needed it (i.e., the opportunity). It is OK to feel uncomfortable. When you make your life a long learning experience you may face more opportunities to feel uncomfortable. Any new situation will give you a level of discomfort. Being uncomfortable pushes you on a performance/anxiety curve.