



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Journal of Business Research



# Should luxury brands say it out loud? Brand conspicuousness and consumer perceptions of responsible luxury

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 21 April 2016

Received in revised form 12 December 2016

Accepted 26 December 2016

Available online xxx

## Keywords:

Corporate social responsibility

Luxury

Brand conspicuousness

Consumer perceptions

Self-identity

## ABSTRACT

Recent literature suggests that consumers do not necessarily perceive luxury and corporate social responsibility (CSR) as compatible, which might result in unfavorable consumer responses toward responsible luxury. The present study addresses this issue by investigating the effects of an important aspect of luxury brands' branding strategy, namely, relative brand conspicuousness, on consumers' attitudes toward responsible luxury brands. A dual mediation process underlies these effects. Specifically, brand conspicuousness influences (1) the extent to which consumers perceive a responsible luxury brand as socially responsible and (2) consumers' perceptions of self-congruity with the brand. As well, consumers' self-identity moderates the latter effect. In turn, both perceptions affect consumers' attitudes toward the brand. The current research thereby stresses the need for luxury brand managers to evaluate how their strategies affect consumers' evaluations of their luxury brands when promoting responsible luxury; this article also provides important guidelines for effectively managing CSR and branding strategies together.

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## 1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR), which reflects a company's "commitment to minimizing or eliminating any harmful effects and maximizing its long-run beneficial impact on society" (Mohr, Webb, & Harris, 2001, p. 47), is at the forefront of the global corporate agenda. Luxury brands are no exception. Many luxury brands already engage in CSR, and the notion of "responsible luxury" receives considerable scholarly attention too. Yet several studies suggest that consumers do not perceive luxury and CSR as compatible concepts. For example, Achabou and Dekhili (2013) show that consumers respond negatively to the use of recycled materials in luxury goods. In a survey of 966 luxury buyers (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2014), 36.1% admit that the notions of luxury and CSR are not necessarily incompatible, but 33.8% emphasize this incompatibility, in part due to perceptions that luxury promotes superficial lifestyles and contributes to sustainability issues (e.g., uses polluting manufacturing processes, encourages overconsumption, symbolizes wealth inequality). Torelli, Monga, and Kaikati (2012) also show that when a luxury brand communicates about CSR, consumers perceive that something is *not right* and respond with lower evaluations than if the brand provides no CSR information. Yet according

to Janssen, Vanhamme, Lindgreen, and Lefebvre (2014), when luxury brand products possess two specific characteristics—being scarce and enduring at the same time (e.g., diamond jewelry)—consumers' perceptions of the potential compatibility between luxury and CSR improve.

Other factors also might affect the perceived compatibility of luxury with CSR, and identifying these factors is of critical importance for luxury brands that want to develop and promote their responsible luxury but avoid the negative consequences of such a strategy (Torelli et al., 2012). In this sense, in addition to product characteristics, the branding strategy used to establish the product in the market likely matters. Luxury brands often rely on a brand conspicuousness strategy, in line with consumers' conspicuous consumption tendencies to consume highly visible goods to display their wealth and gain social status (Veblen, 1899). On the consumer side, conspicuousness is a central motivation for buying luxury items (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996; Truong & McColl, 2011) and an important part of many modern lifestyles (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014). Because consumer segments differ in their status needs (Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010; Kapferer, 2010), companies might respond by strategically emphasizing or downplaying features of their products that can help consumers signal such conspicuousness. The present study investigates and shows that the extent to which a responsible luxury brand uses such a brand conspicuousness strategy affects perceptions of the compatibility of luxury and CSR and determines consumers' attitudes toward these responsible luxury brands. This study also highlights the mediating variables—CSR beliefs and perceived

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self-congruity with the brand—that explain the effectiveness of a brand (in)conspicuousness strategy, for the specific context of responsible luxury brands, and puts forward consumers' perceived self-identity as a moderator.

## 2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Despite many attempts to define luxury (e.g., Fionda & Moore, 2009; Vickers & Renand, 2003; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004), little consensus exists about the exact meaning. Chandon, Laurent, and Valette-Florence (2016, p. 300) highlight that “the luxury domain ... is tied unquestionably to consumers' perceptions of luxury brands.” As several scholars note (De Barnier, Falcy, & Valette-Florence, 2012; Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2014), a major difficulty in defining luxury and luxury brands stems from luxury's idiosyncratic nature, in that “what is luxury to one may just be ordinary to another” (Phau & Prendergast, 2000, p. 123).

The purpose of this article is not to pursue a comprehensive overview of luxury definitions but rather to address aspects that might be relevant to responsible luxury branding. Whether consumers perceive a brand as a luxury brand may depend in part on the abstract brand concepts—or “unique, abstract meanings” (Park, Milberg, & Lawson, 1991, p. 186)—that they associate with that specific brand. As Torelli et al. (2012) note, abstract brand concepts interact with CSR information to affect consumers' evaluations of responsible luxury brands. In particular, abstract brand-associated concepts (Park et al., 1991) can affect brand evaluations through automatically activated motivations (Chartrand, Huber, Shiv, & Tanner, 2008). Schwartz (1992) proposes four broad motivational values, which express and serve specific goals: self-enhancement, self-transcendence, openness, and conservation. Some values come in motivational conflict, such that the pursuit of one type inhibits the achievement of another (e.g., self-enhancement vs. self-transcendence; Maio, Pakizeh, Cheung, & Rees, 2009), whereas others are motivationally compatible (e.g., self-transcendence and openness). Drawing on Schwartz's (1992) theory, Torelli et al. (2012) argue that CSR tends to be associated with self-transcendence values, such as caring for society, whereas luxury brands link primarily to concepts that emphasize self-enhancement values, such as conspicuousness, hedonism, or success (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2009; Han et al., 2010; Mandel, Petrova, & Cialdini, 2006). Because CSR-associated self-transcendence values conflict with luxury-affiliated self-enhancement values (Maio et al., 2009; Schwartz, 1992), Torelli et al. (2012) find that consumers experience a sense of unease or disfluency in response to responsible luxury, and this unease in turn provokes unfavorable brand evaluations. However, the effect may vary with the relative conspicuousness of the branding strategy used by a responsible luxury brand.

### 2.1. Brand conspicuousness and CSR beliefs

Brand conspicuousness is the extent to which a brand blatantly draws attention to branded items, such as prominently displaying a logo on products and using attention-getting colors or designs. This definition draws on the concept of conspicuous brand usage, that reflects “situations in which a consumer blatantly draws attention to the brand, such as by flaunting or name-dropping” (Ferraro, Kirmani, & Matherly, 2013, p. 478). The definition also resonates with brand prominence, or “the extent to which a product has visible markings that help ensure observers recognize the brand” (Han et al., 2010, p. 15). Luxury brands might adopt a conspicuous branding strategy or else a more inconspicuous one. In the designer handbag category for example, some luxury brands (e.g., Botega Veneta) adopt inconspicuous branding strategies, such that the brand mark appears only inside the bags, which feature sober designs and colors. Other brands (e.g., Louis Vuitton, Gucci) have a dual strategy; some Gucci handbags are sober and in plain colors (e.g., black), without any brand logo showing, but other bags prominently display the brand logo or monogram and use notable colors such as white, red, and green (see Fig. 4 in Han et al., 2010).

The brand conspicuousness strategy represents a critical choice that reflects luxury brands' attempts to appeal to different types of luxury consumers (Han et al., 2010; Kapferer, 2010). A brand conspicuousness strategy offers a brand cue that consumers can use to express different aspects of their selves (Aaker, 1997; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Sirgy, 1982) and reflect their signaling intentions (Han et al., 2010). Consumers with a high need for status prefer conspicuously branded goods to signal their distinction from mass consumers; consumers with a low need for status instead prefer inconspicuously branded products to signal similarity with peers. Wilcox, Kim, and Sen (2009) also emphasize that luxury products that rely on inconspicuous branding are less apt to fulfill consumers' self-expression and self-presentation goals than are conspicuously branded ones.

When a luxury brand communicates about its CSR activities, relative brand conspicuousness also might affect consumers' CSR beliefs, or the extent to which consumers regard the brand as socially responsible (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2007). Considering the connections between brand prominence and status signaling (Han et al., 2010), a conspicuous branding strategy likely increases the salience of the notions of wealth and status associated with luxury more than does an inconspicuous branding strategy. The salience of these concepts in turn may trigger a more pronounced sense of contradiction between CSR-associated self-transcendence values and luxury-associated self-enhancement values. When confronting conspicuous luxury brands that communicate some CSR engagement, consumers' perceptions of the incompatibility between luxury and CSR may thus grow stronger, such that their CSR beliefs will be less favorable for conspicuous than for inconspicuous responsible luxury brands.

**H1.** Relative brand conspicuousness influences consumers' CSR beliefs about responsible luxury brands, such that their CSR beliefs are less favorable for conspicuous (vs. inconspicuous) responsible luxury brands.

Even though several factors may influence consumer responses to CSR, including content-specific (e.g., congruence between CSR issues and the brand's core business), brand-specific (e.g., reputation), and consumer-specific (e.g., personal support for the CSR issue) elements (Bhattacharya, Sen, & Korschun, 2011; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), a broad consensus in previous CSR research indicates that consumers' CSR beliefs positively affect their brand evaluations (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Du et al., 2007; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004; Wagner, Lutz, & Weitz, 2009). For example, Lichtenstein et al. (2004) find that consumers with more positive CSR beliefs about a grocery store tend to buy more products from that store, and Wagner et al. (2009) uncover a positive relationship between CSR beliefs and consumers' attitudes toward a company. Thus, the more consumers perceive a luxury brand as socially responsible—in part due to the branding strategy the brand adopts—the more positive their general attitudes toward this brand should be.

**H2.** CSR beliefs mediate the effect of brand conspicuousness on consumers' attitudes toward the responsible luxury brand.

### 2.2. Effects of consumers' self-identity and perceived self-congruity with the brand

Previous research acknowledges that CSR rarely is the most important criterion that consumers use to make purchase decisions (Luchs, Naylor, Irwin, & Raghunathan, 2010; Öberseder, Schlegelmilch, & Gruber, 2011). Davies, Lee, and Ahonkhai (2012) reveal that consumers' propensity to consider CSR is even lower for luxury purchases than for non-luxury goods. That is, CSR beliefs likely mediate the effect of brand conspicuousness on consumers' attitudes toward a responsible luxury brand, but those beliefs are unlikely to be the sole mediator of the effect.

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