Società Italiana Marketing

IL MARKETING DI SUCCESSO

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XIV^ SIM Conference

Bergamo, 26-27 ottobre 2017

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Sustainable Luxury and Word-of-Mouth:
The Effects of Shame and Individualism

Abstract
This research proposes that messages describing unsustainable versus sustainable luxury manufacturing methods elicit anticipated shame, which differentially impact consumers' negative word-of-mouth intentions depending on their individualistic versus collectivistic cultural orientation. An experimental study shows that messages about unsustainable luxury products trigger shame, which, in turn, increases (decreases) negative word-of-mouth for collectivistic (individualistic) consumers. Such results contribute to the literature on luxury and sustainability by shedding light on the role that negative emotions – shame, in particular – and consumers' cultural orientation have in sustainable luxury development.

1. Introduction

The present research aims to offer novel insights into the issue of luxury and sustainability. Specifically, we explore how consumers' behaviors are impacted by their emotional reactions to messages describing environmentally sustainable versus unsustainable luxury products. Recent studies have shown that luxury can be associated with positive emotions, such as pride (e.g., McFerran et al., 2014), as well as with negative emotions (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2016; Zampetakis, 2014). In this light, the present study analyzes consumers' tendency to engage in negative word-of-mouth (hereafter, NWOM) about the company in question after viewing a message describing unsustainable luxury products and eliciting shame. Moreover, we study the moderating role of cultural orientation, a factor that may significantly influence consumers' approach to luxury (Bian & Forsythe, 2012). We focus on one key dimension of Geert Hofstede's widely known cultural orientation model – that is, *individualism* versus *collectivism* (e.g., Hofstede et al., 2010). This dimension is particularly relevant to sustainability research, inasmuch as sustainability is linked to people's concern about making a positive (or at least non-negative) contribution to the well-being of society. This characteristic is typical of collectivistic cultures and differentiates them from individualistic cultures, which are mainly concerned about personal achievement and gains (e.g., Chu & Choi, 2011). Therefore, we predict that messages about unsustainable luxury products will activate shame which in turn will increase (decrease) collectivistic (individualistic) consumers' inclination to share NWOM. Indeed, building on past work about the psychological antecedents of WOM behavior (e.g., Berger, 2014), we expect that individualistic consumers will be particularly concerned with preserving their image in social contexts rather than preserving others' welfare.

2. Theory and hypotheses development

2.1 Luxury, sustainability and emotions

Luxury companies still face a major hurdle in terms of consumers perceiving luxury and sustainability as contrasting concepts (e.g., Achabou & Dekhli, 2013). Thus, we still lack knowledge about the underlying mechanisms that might drive consumers'

behavior toward sustainable luxury products. A very small stream of research has begun to explore the association between luxury and negative emotions – specifically, guilt. For instance, Zampetakis (2014) demonstrated that buying counterfeited luxury products may elicit a sense of guilt. More recently, Hagtvedt and Patrick (2016), showed that consumers prefer luxury companies that collaborate with charity due to a reduced sense of guilt. In order to supplement this growing literature, this paper advances the idea that messages highlighting the unsustainable (vs. sustainable) nature of luxury products are likely to trigger a sense of shame in consumers. Hence, our first hypothesis:

H1. Messages emphasizing the possibility of purchasing environmentally unsustainable versus sustainable luxury products are likely to elicit a sense of anticipated shame.

2.2 Shame and WOM
Shame leads individuals to engage in coping behaviors (Frijda, 1986) aimed at restoring their self-worth. Building on this idea, this paper proposes that ashamed consumers can restore a positive view of themselves by engaging in pro-social behavior. Importantly, shame is more likely to galvanize a form of coping behavior than guilt, as while guilty individuals generally act to regulate their behavior, ashamed individuals generally strive to regulate their emotional experience and restore a sense of self-worth (Duhachek et al., 2012). Specifically, we expect that WOM is particularly conducive to coping strategies aimed at helping individuals restore a positive view of themselves. To the best of our knowledge, however, past studies have not investigated the effect of shame on WOM, and NWOM in particular. Importantly, we expect that consumers' engagement in NWOM following messages about unsustainable luxury products may be moderated by consumers' cultural orientation.

2.3 Cultural orientations and WOM
Cultural dimensions typically play a central role in luxury consumption (e.g., Bian & Forsythe, 2012). Following the well-established model of cultural orientation proposed by Geert Hofstede (e.g., Hofstede, 2010) and used to describe national cultures, this research investigates the role of individualism versus collectivism as a moderator of the effect of unsustainable-luxury driven shame on NWOM. Indeed, such a cultural dimension refers to the extent to which a group of individuals is concerned about their personal interests versus the welfare of the community or the society they belong to. Specifically, collectivistic societies encourage social harmony, cooperation, and bonding among individuals, and focus on collective achievement, pro-social values, cohesiveness, and protection for others (Chu & Choi, 2011). Members of collectivistic societies such as the Russian, Chinese or Korean ones view themselves as part of a larger group and trust each other. This means that, in such societies, group welfare is more important than individual rewards and, as a consequence, individuals prize pro-social goals over personal ones, tend to share their resources, and are prone to be loyal to their peers and families (Gelfand et al., 2004).

Conversely, individualistic societies (for instance, individuals from countries such as the U.S., France or the U.K.) tend to rely on their skills and capabilities as well as to differentiate themselves from others. In such societies, individuals are largely independent, pursue their own interests and seek personal rewards and recognition (Shavitt & Cho, 2016). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H2. The anticipated feeling of shame will increase (decrease) the tendency to share NWOM about the company selling the unsustainable luxury product for consumers with a collectivistic (individualistic) cultural orientation.

3. Method

One hundred four consumers (M_{Age} = 35, SD_{Age} = 11.77; 50% females) participated in a 2 (type of message: about a sustainable luxury product vs. about an unsustainable luxury product) x 2 (cultural orientation: collectivistic vs. individualistic) between-subject experiment. We manipulated cultural orientation through participants' nationality (American vs. Russian), following Hofstede's classification of U.S. and Russia in terms of the individualism versus collectivism dimension. Thus, we administered an online questionnaire (in American English vs. Russian) to a random sample of U.S. consumers (M_{Age} = 35, SD = 9.75) and a random sample of Russian consumers (M_{Age} = 34, SD = 13.51), both of which were extracted from national consumer panels. The questionnaire assigned them to one of the two experimental conditions (i.e., sustainable vs. unsustainable luxury product).

The questionnaire featured three sections. The first section included a narrative scenario that instructed participants to imagine that they were about to purchase a luxury car. This car was described as a hybrid car in the sustainable product condition and as a non-hybrid car in the unsustainable product condition. In particular, participants in the sustainable product condition read a message about a luxury car able to reduce pollutants drastically and hence contribute to the natural environment's well-being. Meanwhile, participants in the unsustainable product condition read a message about a luxury car that produces more emission pollutants than other cars and that contribute to the pollution of the natural environment.

Next, participants reported their sense of (anticipated) shame through seven items (e.g., "I feel like I deserve criticism" see Lindsay-Hartz, 1984; α_{Shame} = .88) measured through seven-point scales (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree). Then, the questionnaire presented three items, again on seven-point scales (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree) assessing participants' willingness to share NWOM about the company selling the car described in the scenario (e.g., "I will discredit the company to other people;" 1 = completely disagree; 7 = completely agree; $\alpha_{NWOM\ intention}$ = .95). Finally, we collected socio-demographic data.

4. Results

Participants assigned to the unsustainable scenario felt a more intense feeling of shame than those assigned to the sustainable scenario (Shame$_{Unsustainable}$ = 3.60, SD = 1.68; Shame$_{Sustainable}$ = 2.66, SD = 1.32, $F(1, 102)$ = 10.08, $p < .05$), thus providing initial support for H1.Then, we regressed willingness to share NWOM on

sustainability (coded as +1 for the unsustainable condition and -1 for the sustainable condition), shame, participants' cultural orientation (coded as +1 for Russian respondents and -1 for American respondents) and the interaction between shame and cultural orientation. This analysis returned a significant index of moderated mediation ($b = .49$, 95% CI: .15, 1.02), indicating that cultural orientation moderates the effect of shame, which is in turn affected by type of message, on willingness to share NWOM. In particular, type of message had a significant and positive effect on anticipated shame ($b = .47$, $t(102) = 3.18$, $p = .00$), which confirms H1. By additionally controlling for type of message and cultural orientation, we found that anticipated shame had a significant negative effect on NWOM intentions ($b = -.37$, $t(102) = -2.66$, $p < .05$); meanwhile, controlling for type of message and shame, cultural orientation had a significant negative effect on NWOM intentions ($b = -4.23$, $t(99) = -6.10$, $p = .00$). More importantly, the analysis revealed a positive and significant effect of the interaction between shame and cultural orientation ($b = 1.05$, $t(102) = 5.27$, $p < .05$) on willingness to share NWOM.

By looking at the conditional indirect effects of shame on willingness to share NWOM, we found that type of message exerted an indirect yet significant effect on willingness to share NWOM through shame for both American and Russian consumers. However, the effect of type of message on willingness to share NWOM was negative for American consumers ($b = -.17$, 95% CI:. -.43, -.01) and positive for Russian consumers ($b = .32$, 95% CI:. .10, .61). In other words, collectivistic consumers expressed an increased willingness to share NWOM about the company making unsustainable luxury products in response to their feelings of anticipated shame. Meanwhile, the willingness to share NWOM decreased among consumers with an individualistic cultural orientation. Thus, such results support H2.

5. Discussion and implications

Our article offers some important contributions to different research streams. First, it contributes to the research on luxury and sustainability. Sustainable luxury still lacks an examination of how the emotions stimulated by sustainable versus unsustainable luxury products can shape consumer behavior. Our research helps to fill this gap by focusing on shame as an emotional consequence of messages describing such products. Second, our research investigates the previously unexplored role of consumers' cultural orientation in the relationship between luxury and sustainability. Third, our study contributes to research on luxury and emotions. In contrast with past work, which has focused on specific positive (e.g., pride) or negative (e.g., guilt) emotions (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2016), our research focused on the previously unexplored emotion of shame. Fourth, our study contributes to extant research on the emotional antecedents of WOM behavior by underlining how WOM might be affected by shame. Overall, our research provides novel insights into how negative emotions, and shame in particular, work in conjunction with cultural orientation to shape the relationship between luxury products, sustainability perceptions, and NWOM.

Based on our findings, managers could deliver messages that emphasize the differences between their firm's sustainable products and their competitors' less-

sustainable products. Doing so may stimulate negative buzz around competitors'
products while fostering a positive image of their own firm as a sustainable luxury
producer. Second, not-for-profit organizations may find our results particularly
insightful for designing and diffusing messages aimed at warning consumers against
deleterious or unethical products or behaviors, especially in collectivistic cultural
contexts. Third, for luxury managers interested in introducing their products and
brands in international markets, our research points to the need to consider the
cultural aspects of a given country when designing their market research strategy and
subsequent communication activities.

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