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IL MARKETING DI
SUCCESSO

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PROCEEDINGS

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Luxury and sustainability: The role of corporate social responsibility

Abstract

The present research investigates whether and under what conditions consumers react to different kinds of luxury companies' CSR initiatives. Using the Carroll's four dimensions model of CSR, we argue and demonstrated that luxury companies' internal (versus external) CSR initiatives increase willingness to buy luxury products for customers who buy luxury mainly for individual style and not for status.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, luxury brand, luxury consumption, internalized vs. externalized luxury, willingness to buy

INTRODUCTION

Most companies are today highly committed toward sustainability (e.g., Gershoff and Frels, 2015; Luo and Du, 2015). Luxury brands are no exception, thus they are increasingly trying to enhance and improve their Corporate Social Responsibility (hereafter CSR) (Janssen et al., 2014), which can be defined as the continuous effort and commitment made by a company in order to behave ethically and contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of the involved community (Maignan and Ferrell, 2001). Examples of luxury companies focusing on CSR are several. To mention some, Tiffany started certifying its diamonds as "conflict free", Chanel incorporated "earthy materials" in its 2016 collection, and Bulgari has recently funded restoration of Rome's Spanish Steps. These examples show that luxury brands are nowadays interested not only in promoting their prestige and status, but also in promoting altruistic and moral values.

Despite this evidence, however, little is known about the effectiveness of CSR activities in the luxury industry, and in particular about how such initiatives might influence consumer behavior. Some studies even suggest that CSR is not a key factor in determining luxury consumption (e.g., Davies et al., 2012; Griskevicius et al., 2010), whereas other studies underline a potential positive role of CSR in developing luxury consumption (e.g., Kapferer, 2010; Janssen et al., 2014). Our study aims at shedding new light on the role of CSR in luxury by proposing that different dimensions of CSR might have different effect on luxury consumers' perceptions and behaviors.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Increasing attention to issues concerning the environment, workers, customers and society is pushing companies to behave ethically (e.g., Gershoff and Frels 2015). Luxury is one industry in which the pressures to devote more attention to these social

issues has grown steadily over the last decade (Davies et al. 2012; Janssen et al. 2014). As a result, many luxury firms are using CSR as a focal component of their marketing strategies. However, literature concerning the role of CSR activities in luxury industry seems to be contrasting. According to some streams of research (e.g., Achabou and Dekhili 2013; Griskevicius et al. 2010), luxury and CSR are seen as incompatible concepts by a number of consumers. Indeed, luxury is generally related to hedonism, excess, and ostentation (Cristini et al. 2017; De Barnier et al. 2012), while CSR is generally based on sobriety, moderation and ethics (Lochard and Murat 2011).

On the other hand, there is emerging evidence of compatibility between luxury and CSR activities (e.g., Janssen et al. 2014), fundamentally because “both focus on rarity and beauty” (Kapferer, 2010, p. 41). On the basis of those insights, therefore, CSR activities may potentially play a positive role also in luxury industry. However, this issue has received very limited empirical investigation. As a consequence, the present research aims to empirically test whether and under what conditions consumers might react positively to CSR initiatives undertaken by luxury companies.

According to the Carroll’s perspective (1979, 1991), CSR is a multidimensional construct made up of four dimensions: economic (i.e., companies are expected to produce and sell products at a profit), legal (i.e., companies are expected to comply with the requirements imposed by the legal system at play), ethical (i.e., companies are expected to endorse principles of fairness and justice in their activities) and philanthropic (i.e., companies are expected to engage in voluntary actions which qualify them as “good corporate citizens”). We look at such four dimensions in greater detail, arguing that while initiatives concerning legal and philanthropic dimensions are easily visible to and noticeable by consumers, initiatives concerning economic and legal dimensions are not immediately visible to and noticeable by consumers. Building on such a visibility-based distinction, we identify two categories of CSR dimensions: the “internal” dimensions category (which encompasses economic and ethical dimensions) and the “external” dimensions category (which encompasses legal and philanthropic dimensions) (Pino et al., 2016). Considering this visibility-based distinction, the objective of the present research is to identify which CSR dimension category (internal vs. external) is more effective in driving consumers’ willingness to buy (hereafter, WTB) luxury products.

As regards luxury consumption, we build on the distinction between externalized and internalized consumption (e.g., Amatulli and Guido 2012). Consumers with an externalized luxury consumption approach are mostly driven by impersonal motivations such as the desire to get the approval of others, while those with an internalized approach are mostly driven by personal motivations such as the desire to experience pleasing feelings and emotions. Thus, whereas externalized luxury consumption refers to consumers’ desire to communicate status and prestige to others, internalized luxury consumption refers to consumers’ desire to satisfy their personal taste and style. In other words, consumers who mainly have an externalized luxury approach place greater importance on the “visibility” component of luxury

goods than those who mainly have an internalized luxury approach (Nueno and Quelch, 1998).

Based on this reasoning, we expect that the effectiveness of internal versus external CSR initiatives in driving consumers' WTB luxury products will depend on the personal benefits that the consumer derives from those initiatives (Bhattacharya et al. 2009). More specifically, our prediction is that luxury brands' actions related to internal CSR dimensions, such those in the realm of economic and ethical dimensions, may be particularly appealing to those consumers who buy luxury products mainly to satisfy their personal taste and style; in contrast, consumers with an externalized approach to luxury will value those benefits to a lesser degree. Formally:

H₁: Compared to external CSR initiatives, internal CSR initiatives undertaken by a luxury brand are more likely to lead to a higher consumers' WTB products from that brand, but only for consumers with internalized luxury consumption orientation.

We tested our hypothesis through one experimental study, which we present here as follows.

EMPIRICAL STUDY

We used a single factor (internal vs. external CSR) between-subjects design. One hundred sixty-two M-Turk workers (97 females; Mage = 40.76, SD = 13.01) took part in the experiment.

Participants were firstly asked to indicate their luxury consumption orientation, through a question asking them the reason why they would buy a luxury product on a seven-point scale (1 = "Mainly for internal motivation, related to my individual style and my taste"; 7 = "Mainly for an external motivation, related to my economic and social status"). Then, each participant was randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions (internal vs. external CSR). In the internal CSR condition participants read a description of a fictitious luxury brand that recently developed ethical (i.e., working benefits to their employees) and economic (i.e., presence of a software aiming at reducing internal producing costs) CSR activities. In the external CSR condition participants read a description of the same fictitious luxury that recently developed philanthropic (i.e., donation for a pediatric hospital) and legal (i.e., attainment of a certification attesting traceability of raw materials) CSR activities. Finally, we measured WTB the fictitious luxury brand using a three-item, seven-point scale (e.g., "the probability that I will buy is high", 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .92$).

In order to test our hypothesis we dummy-coded the CSR variable (0 = internal CSR condition, 1 = external CSR condition). Consistent with *H₁*, we employed Model 1 included in PROCESS SPSS Macro (Hayes, 2013), which is aimed at testing moderations models. The measure of luxury consumption orientation served as the moderator in the relationship between the CSR dimensions and WTB. The results showed a significant and negative main effect of CSR dimensions on

WTB ($b = -.92$; $p = .03$) and a non-significant main effect of luxury consumption orientation on WTB ($b = .01$; $p = .99$). Of greater importance, the interaction between CSR dimensions and consumers' luxury consumption orientation was significant ($b = .17$; $p = .03$). Further, since the moderator was a continuous variable, such a significant interaction effect was explored via the Johnson-Neyman "floodlight" approach. Results revealed that the magnitude of the negative effect of CSR dimension on WTB turned out to be significant only for luxury consumption orientation levels equal to 1.00 ($b_{JN} = -.66$, $SE = .31\%$ confidence interval: -1.28 ; $-.033$).

Overall, consistent with H_1 , these results suggest that luxury consumption motivation acts a catalyst of the effect of CSR dimensions on WTB, as the magnitude of the effectiveness of communicating ethical and economic initiatives, compared to communicating legal and philanthropic initiatives, in terms of WTB is higher the higher consumers' tendency to buy luxury products for internal motivation.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this research offers some relevant contributions to the advancement of current knowledge about luxury and CSR. First and foremost, against the backdrop of a great deal of studies documenting the incompatibility between luxury and sustainability issues, our study is one of the very first attempts to empirically test whether and in what conditions CSR initiatives undertaken by luxury companies might encounter consumers' favor. Second, our research tries to connect CSR dimensions with luxury goods' perceptions offering a rethinking of the four dimensions of the Carroll's CSR model (i.e., the distinction between external and internal dimensions) that is particularly suitable to the study of luxury goods as it implies that luxury brands' initiatives belonging to internal CSR dimensions are likely to encounter higher consumers' favor with internalized consumption than initiatives belonging to external CSR dimensions. From a managerial perspective, our results suggest that when implementing their CSR actions, luxury companies should consider them in light of their visibility to consumers. In particular, managers should be aware that for those customers that have a lower conspicuous consumption orientation and that, therefore, buy luxury products mainly because of their quality, internal CSR activities are able to elicit more favorable reactions than external CSR activities.

However additional studies are needed in order to identify the underlying mechanism explaining the relationship between internal CSR activities and the willingness to buy luxury products. Additionally, further research could focus on external CSR activities in influencing willingness to buy luxury brands.

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