Emotional ambivalence in luxury Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication: when turning ethical generates both support and mistrust

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Abstract:

Luxury brands face two difficulties nowadays: a perceived incompatibility of their universe with the CSR world, and a rising trend of scepticism among clients regarding the brand's ethical claims. This situation leads the brands to doubt if they have an interest to promote their efforts or not. The purpose of this research is to understand how individuals mentally represent the role of an inspirational figure in ethical luxury communication, supposed to work as an indirect demonstration of the brand's ethical roots. Through a projective qualitative method, the participants have projected themselves in two experiences: a scenario with the presence of impacts of the ethical commitment onto the luxury brand's final products (e.g., the use of recycled materials) and the absence of impacts (e.g., supporting a charitable cause). A common tendency of scepticism regarding the ethical pledge and a situation of emotional ambivalence are observed across the two groups.

1. Introduction

Which product could have received better publicity in the 1960s than the fragrance Chanel No. 5 when Marilyn Monroe confessed she wore only a few drops of it to sleep at night? The sensuality and beauty of the actress were hence transferred to the item, and bound to it until nowadays. It is now more than common to observe a commercial collaboration between a brand and an influential figure (Knoll & Matthes, 2017) in order to benefit from the symbolic attributes of the spokesperson (Ambroise, Pantin-Sohier, Valette-Florence, and Albert, 2014). The luxury sector is no exception (Hanania, Musnik, and Gaillochet, 2019). However, in the case of luxury industry, the impacts of inspirational figures have only been studied in contexts where the brand's reputation is steady (e.g., Carrillat, O'Rourke, and Plourde, 2019; Song & Kim, 2020; Veg-Sala, 2014). What could be its impact when it is questioned, as for instance in cases of woke or green washing suspicions?

Recently, Cuomo and colleagues (2019) proposed that the use of a third part to communicate the brand's ethical roots could be a successful strategy since it is realised through indirect proofs. Professionals also ask for deeper investigations to better understand the role of influential figures in ethical luxury promotional strategies (e.g., Bendell & Kleanthous, 2007).

This study tries to fill this gap by investigating the effects of a spokesperson to communicate the ethical efforts of the luxury brand. Moreover, a core distinction will be addressed regarding the nature of the commitment: a scenario where the final product could be changed (e.g., integrating recycled materials to the supply chain) compared to a condition whereby the ethical efforts would leave the final item unchanged (e.g., supporting a charitable cause). As the Millennial consumers are expected to represent 45% of the market in 2025 (Bain & Company, 2019), this work aims to focus on this generation in order to provide insights to managers regarding this new challenging profile of consumers.

2. Literature Review

The numerous scandals and critics around the lack of sustainability of the luxury industry have conducted the brands to provide many efforts to demonstrate evidence of ethical concerns to maintain their reputation (Kapferer, 2016). Regarding the consumers' responses to these efforts, the literature find divergent results: while some will support the brand (Semaan, Ashill, and Williams, 2019), others perceive an incompatibility between luxury and sustainability (Dekhili & Achabou, 2016: Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2020), even if these same clients remain paradoxically quite conscious that the sector needs to demonstrate more

ethical concerns, particularly for the Millennial generation (Kapferer, 2016). This difficulty to clearly determine how customers will consider the brand CSR demonstrations is problematic since it can suggest that the brand should remain silent about these efforts, at the risk of making everyone perceive that it is not providing any (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2020).

Meanwhile, a dangerous trend seems to develop on the consumer side: mistrust regarding the brands' ethical allegations (Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2015). This scepticism is the consequence of a difficulty to define the corporation move as a true disinterested ethical commitment or as a hidden interest of profitability, as for instance strategies of green or woke washing (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, and Kemper, 2020). In this climate of mistrust, the possibility to verify the trustworthiness of the brand's commitment is an important determinant for consumers to perceive the brand as authentic (Van Rekom, Go, and Calter, 2014). The public support of a third credible voice could hence be an interesting way to provide evidence of the brand honesty through this external verification.

3. Methodology

The methodology used for this research is the recently developed Album On-Line (AOL) projective technique, based on a selection of online images to translate the thoughts and feelings of the respondents deriving from a mental experience (Vernette, 2007).

The participants have been split between a scenario of presence and absence of impacts of the CSR commitment. The first one described a situation where the cause supported by the spokesperson would impact the final item (e.g., integrating a recycled material in the supply chain). As observed through the literature, clients might reject some environmental practices such as the recycling because they fear a loss in the quality of the luxury product (Dekhili & Achabou, 2016). We found it interesting to observe in this condition if an inspirational figure could be able to cancel this perception of quality loss. The second group focused on causes that would not directly impact the production of the brand, for instance a spokesperson promoting a donation to a Non Governmental Organization to support a charitable cause, as observed through managerial examples (i.e., the ethical demonstration will not impact the final product).

The study follows a 3 steps methodology. The first one is dedicated to the collection of individual albums. For the two scenarios (i.e., absence and presence of impacts), the participants collected a set of online images that represented the best the way they imagined their experiences and have had to explain their choices. The second step focused on the construction of the collective album by choosing the images among the ones previously

collected by the participants. The researchers then extracted from the verbatim a word which globally represents the semantic world used by the respondents to describe the image and the associated experience. Respondents had to rate the degree of consistency between this word and its image on a 6-point Likert-type scale. Finally, an individual differences scaling (INDSCAL) analysis then allowed us to get a joint space representing all the distances between the items depending on their rating by each respondent, while also accounting for each individual space (Kessous & Valette-Florence, 2017).

Individuals of both genders have been recruited online and in a French context, all of them aged from 21 to 35 years old to fit into the Millennial generation (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2020). They must also have consumed at least one luxurious product in the last 12 months. After recruiting and selecting the participants, 5 have been assigned to the presence of impacts condition and 7 were exposed to the absence of impacts scenario.

4. Results

The mappings of the 2 groups are provided in Figure 1. The denomination of the mapping axes is then based on the images and associated words that surround each axis. Similarly, on a judgemental basis, words have been clustered and labelled in terms of shared meaning. All in all, the INDSCAL analyses proved to be of high quality with 81.73 % and 89.68 % of total explained variance respectively for the presence and absence of impact conditions (left and right graphs respectively in Figure 1).

4. 1 Positive reception of the brand's ethical message

In both scenarios, respondents formulate their satisfaction to observe the brand turning more ethical. Indeed, in the presence of impact condition, the respondents express their ethical expectations: the luxury brands have the mission to be more responsive to be supported (i.e., *support* cluster). Through a *commitment* linked and aligned to the values of luxury such as tradition or art through bioinspiration (Kaperer, 2016), the brands can demonstrate their ethical concerns and can be supported as a consequence. Regarding the absence of impact scenario, four clusters can suggest that individuals accept the association between the cause, the brand and the inspirational figure: *pluralism*, *benevolence*, *evolution*, and *humanism*. This suggestion can show that the self-transcendence value, usually absent from luxury purchase since it rather embeds self-accomplishment (Torelli, Monga, & Kaikati, 2012), can nonetheless be proposed to the luxury client through the causes supported by the brand. In other words, it seems that luxury brands could provide to their clients both self-
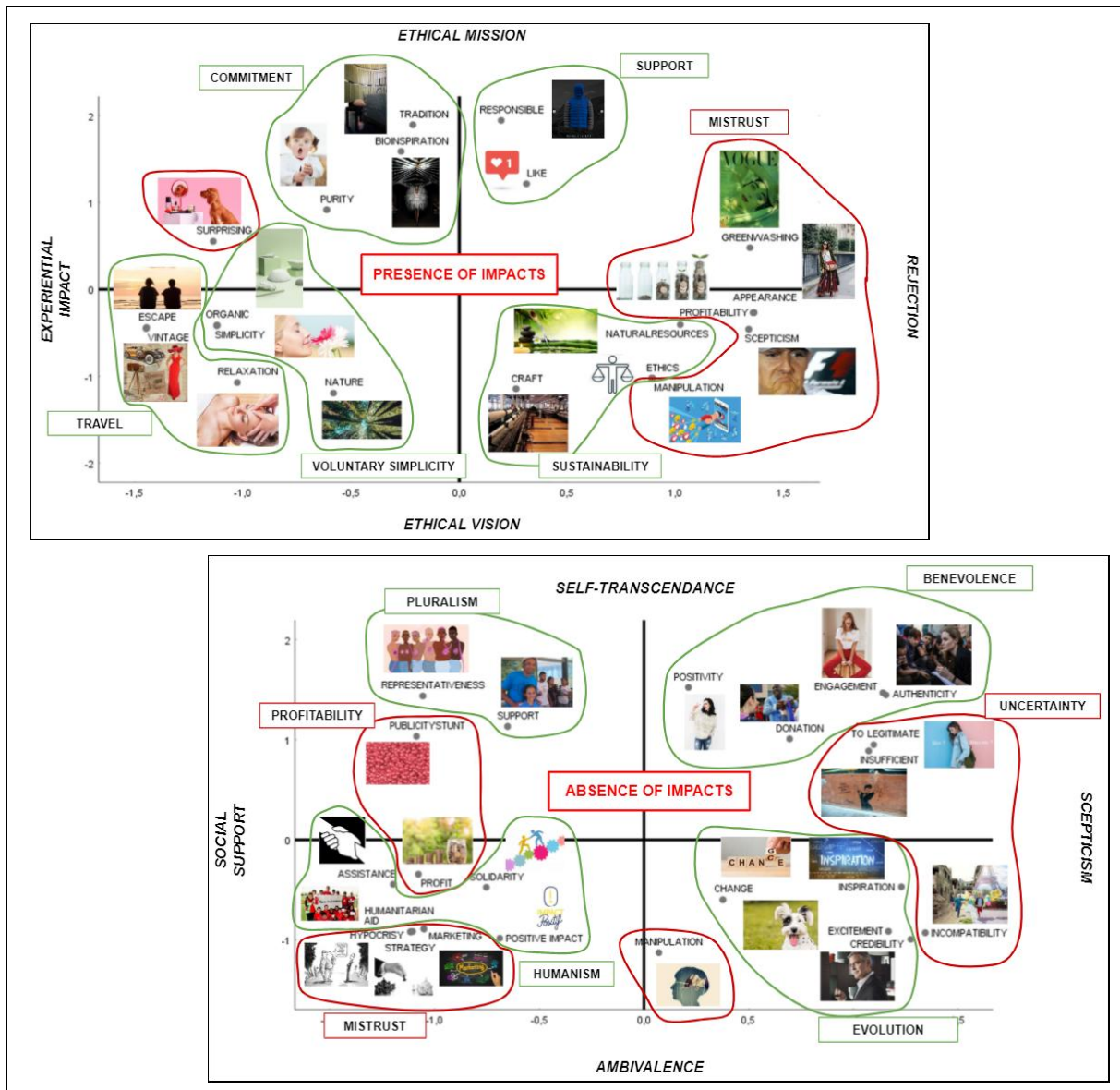
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Figure 1. Mapping for the presence and absence of impacts conditions

accomplishment values through the direct act of purchase, as well as values of self-transcendence via the indirect support to an important cause. Through these four clusters, the respondents also gave some clues on what an inspirational figure (more precisely here, a celebrity) should look like: credible, established, notorious, and respectable (e.g., credibility, humanitarian actions), engaged in a long term relationship with the brand (e.g., excitement), and must be passionate and committed to the cause, as are the clients (e.g., positivity).

4. 2 Negative reception of the brand's ethical message

On the other hand, the respondents also express their mistrust regarding the brand's message. Indeed, within the presence of impact group, the *mistrust* cluster demonstrates that

the luxury brands are not safeguarded from the well-known green scepticism developed by clients as a result of too many abuses from the businesses (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, and Kemper, 2020), and resulting in the clients' incapacity to precisely know if the brand is ethical or not (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). Respondents argued that luxury brands can show evidence of green washing or manipulation attempts for instance in order to feed their own interest of profitability. It seems also that the ethical demonstration of the luxury brands seems to be more perceived as a trendy movement than as a genuine disinterested support. Similar results have been highlighted in the absence of impact condition: 4 clusters have shown that the respondents can have difficulties to assess the trustworthiness of the brand. The cluster *uncertainty* demonstrates that doubts can arise in front of such association. Firstly, respondents are sceptical about the real usefulness of such commitment or regarding the magnitude of its impact (e.g., insufficient), in line with feelings of fatalism (i.e., it is too late to save the word) already observed by Dekhili and Achabou (2016). Secondly, respondents question the true nature of the collaboration and fear potential woke washing practices (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, and Kemper, 2020): they denounce the benefit salience of the message by identifying the support rather as a marketing strategy (mistrust, manipulation) for more visibility or profit (profitability) than a real interest for the charitable cause.

5. Discussion

This qualitative exploration suggests two noteworthy results: the existence of ambivalent feelings and the emergence of scepticism regarding the luxury brand's message. Indeed, in both groups, the respondents did not hide their fear of being eventually misled by the brand's allegations. Scepticism is a situation arising from the difficulty for the consumers to ensure if the brand tries to satisfy its own interests or if it truly supports the cause, without any commercial ulterior motives (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). This suspicion creates a dual-valence emotional state (i.e., emotional ambivalence) whereby individuals enjoy the brand's commitment and mistrust it at the same time. This emotional ambivalence has already been observed in green consumption (Chang, 2011) and emerges in situations where individuals are attached to the brand which shows evidence of ethical misconduct (Schmalz & Orth, 2012). Likewise, an interesting distinction can be built depending on which type of inspirational individual the respondents have imagined. Indeed, if the celebrities were rather accepted, the influencers suffered from more critics and generated higher levels of doubts regarding the brand's trustworthiness. The influencers are generally collaborating with the brand for a short period of time (Huhn, 2020) and cannot consequently fully demonstrate their credibility

regarding their interests for an important ethical cause. Credibility is however a crucial determinant of success in endorsement strategies (Ohanian, 1990). Similarly, the respondents also suggest that the influential figure must be "well-established" (e.g., George Clooney), notorious and respectable, and able to represent the face of the brand. These findings aligned to the meaning of transfer model and the match-up hypothesis between the cause and the brand (Ellen, Mohr, & Webb, 2000). These results hence propose that such impactful and meaningful association can play an important role in reducing feelings of distrust regarding the brand's message, as well as the associated emotional ambivalence.

An important implication of this work is more broadly that luxury brands can inspire mistrust, a value far from the beauty, prestige or dream notions usually attributed to this sector (Kapferer, 2016). Resulting in emotional ambivalence, individuals can have difficulties to find the right balance between their attachment to the brand (Schmalz & Orth, 2012) and their scepticism regarding their ethical message, hence suggesting that the perceived incompatibility between luxury and ethics can result in suspicions regarding the ethical pledge of the brands. However, the literature has already proposed that communicating about the ethical roots of the luxury brands can participate to increase the visibility of the "ethical luxury" mental category (Davies, Lee, and Ahonkhai, 2012; Kapferer & Michaut-Denizau, 2020). Similarly, Leonidou and Skarmeas (2015) demonstrated that scepticism emerges from new situations, as for instance when a brand suddenly demonstrates ethical interest whereas it was silent before. With time and proof of goodwill, suspicion decreases and CSR incentives are rewarded. This notion of long term strategy has been furthermore underlined by the respondents when describing the spokesperson through the excitement to observe how the association brand-cause-spokesperson will evolve in time. In other words, a short term strategy conducted with a doubtful endorser (e.g., an influencer) can increase suspicion and damage the consumer brand relationship as well as the brand reputation. More positive and encouraging results can emerge with a celebrity. As already established in the literature, the notion of congruence between the cause, the brand and the influential figure is determinant to persuade consumers of the credibility of the brand (e.g., Ellen, Mohr, & Webb, 2000).

6. Limitations and Needs for Future Research

Some limitations of this work open avenues for future researches. First, this exploration has been conducted in a French context. Knowing the increasing impact of the luxury sector in Eastern cultures (Hanania, Musnik, and Gaillochet, 2019; Kapferer, 2016), this investigation should be extended to these luxury Millennials consumers. Secondly, since

luxury is subjective to individuals (Athwal, Wells, Carrigan, and Henninger, 2019), we did not provide any definition of what is a luxury brand, and decided to let the respondents choose the brand they defined as luxurious. However, the literature proposes that different levels of luxury perceptions exist in consumers' minds (De Barnier, Falcy, and Valette-Florence, 2012). A third work could hence investigate the potential differences in the mental representations of what is an inspirational figure in the world of a brand proposing rare products (i.e., a griffe) and another one, closer to the masstige tendency (e.g., a prestigious and more accessible brand). Similarly, the spokesperson in the present work was proposed as "an influential individual (celebrity, muse, influencer...)". Regarding the divergent results depending on what the respondent have imagined (i.e., influencer or celebrity), further work could help to better draw the differences in the consumers perceptions of an influencer and a celebrity in luxury communication. Finally, a quantitative investigation should confirm the present findings. As a result, managerial recommendations could be provided to the luxury sector, as for instance the situations whereby the use of an inspirational figure would bring optimum benefits in the promotion of the brand's ethical roots.

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