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Narrative-transportation storylines in luxury brand advertising: Motivating consumer engagement[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This research advances the theory and practice of luxury brand advertising effectiveness by decoding brand–consumer engagement grounded in narrative transportation. An online semi-structured qualitative questionnaire incorporates a modified thematic apperception testing projective technique and is administered in three target countries for luxury brands: France, Korea and Australia. Respondents were exposed at random to global ads from one of four brands: Hermès, Chanel, Louis Vuitton and Gucci. Narratives produced are analyzed with thematic and text analysis. The research contributes to luxury brand advertising research by identifying a route to persuasion based on the level of implicit narrative transportation engendered by the brand's advertising. While respondents express cultural differences in the way they script their experiences, an implicit route to engagement is equally effective across cultures.

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1. Introduction

European countries like France, Italy, and the UK are the birthplace of many high-profile luxury brands: country of origin is etched deeply into the DNA of fashion brands like Hermès, Louis Vuitton and Chanel (France), Gucci (Italy), Burberry (England), Swiss watch brands, and German and Italian luxury car brands. Luxury brands seek to manage their equity in emerging luxury markets by building on their European heritage and legitimacy (Dion & Arnould, 2011). Luxury brands of European origin account for approximately two-thirds of the total global luxury goods market (European Cultural and Creative Industries Alliance, 2014) and lead the world's fashion industry by creating trends. Yet the growth in luxury brand sales worldwide is no longer driven solely by Europe. In 2012 Greater China, including Hong Kong, became the major driver of luxury brand sales growth and the world's number two luxury market after the United States (Bain and Company, 2012).

The globalization of luxury brands makes it more important for marketing management to understand customer perceptions of, and experiences with, their brands. Yet, while research exists on the components

of luxury brands, and on purchaser values and motivation (Catry, 2003; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004), insights are needed into the socially and culturally constructed “why” and “how” of luxury brand engagement. Cross-cultural studies of luxury brands focus primarily on the comparison of attitudes and motivations to buy luxury brands in a Western cultural context (Dubois & Laurent, 1996; Dubois & Paternault, 1997; Wang & Waller, 2006; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998).

Luxury brands engage consumers through the force of enchantment or charisma. Charisma may be orchestrated by the creative director at flagship stores and boutiques (Dion & Arnould, 2011) and by storytelling in advertising (Megehee & Woodside, 2010). Luxury brand advertising often employs as its message strategy a rich imagery portraying the lifestyle, values and attitudes of people who live a life associated with the world of luxury. Researchers show how consumers engage with advertising by being transported into a story world as a result of becoming involved with advertising imagery (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2011).

Research on luxury brand advertising is limited to examining grotesque or surreal images (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2011), the narrative transportation engendered by such images (Freire, 2014) and the perception and experience of aesthetic values (Venkatesh, Joy, Sherry, & Deschenes, 2010). This study goes further and explores, in a cross-cultural context, how the implicit meaning of luxury brands, while socially and culturally constructed, is conveyed through narrative transportation and engagement with luxury brand advertising. The paper here, thereby, makes an important contribution to luxury brand research by uncovering narratives for luxury brands in different countries as a route to engagement with brands.

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This research addresses three research questions: RQ₁: How are consumers from different countries transported into advertising images as a route to engagement with luxury brands? RQ₂: To what extent does cultural distance increase (or decrease) empathy with the characters, the extent of narrative transportation and hence, advertising engagement? RQ₃: What differences are there between brands in the ways their advertising engages with luxury consumers?

2. Literature review

2.1. Advertising and engagement

A perspective on engagement has relevance for the consumer–brand, advertising communications orientation of this study (Higgins & Scholar, 2009). Higgins and Scholar (2009, p. 100) propose that strength of engagement contributes to value intensity which is “a motivational force of attraction to or repulsion from something”. If the goal pursuit activity is embedded in highly motivating, implicit (narrative) messaging, the advertising message may be more effective in generating value intensity.

The concept of engagement is a current focus in the advertising research literature (Calder & Malthouse, 2008; Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009; Lloyd & Woodside, 2013; Wang, 2006; Wang & Waller, 2006). Calder and Malthouse (2008) identify two forms of engagement. Firstly, engagement occurs with the advertising medium: the journalistic or entertainment content of a medium which provides a context for the advertisement and which may affect reactions to it. Secondly, engagement occurs with the advertised brand.

In addition, engagement comes from experiencing, for example, media content and media context (Calder et al., 2009). Calder et al. (2009) identify two types of engagement with respect to online media: personal (stimulation and inspiration; social facilitation; temporal; self-esteem and civic mindedness; intrinsic enjoyment) and social-interactive (utilitarian; participation and sociating; community). Phillips and McQuarrie (2011) provide five modes of engagement with fashion advertising, each of which serves as a distinct route to persuasion: to act, identify, feel, transport, or immerse.

In contrast to liking, a hedonic experience, engagement is a motivational experience (Ewing, 2009). Engagement is a source of experience that: “involves the experience of a motivational force to make something happen...or not happen...” (Higgins, 2006, p. 441). Calder and Malthouse (2008) see engagement as a sense of involvement, of being connected to something. Engagement is different from involvement in that involvement refers to an individual's interest in a product category or brand; engagement refers to individual's commitment and connection to an active relationship with various marketing offers such as advertising and brands (Abdul-Ghani, Hyde, & Marshall, 2011). Thus, this paper uses the following working definition of engagement: a participant's emotionally motivating experience of interaction with a brand and with its advertising.

2.2. The power of narratives and of narrative transportation

“Transportation” is an experience with great relevance to engagement (Baek & Morimoto, 2012; Green & Brock, 2000). Transportation is “a convergent process, where all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narrative” (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 701). The authors define “narrative” as the consumption of a story through which a consumer does not just read the story but also makes it readable in the first place. Consumers interpret brand stories through ads and other communication media and transform them into a memorable experience. Narrative transportation occurs, therefore, when the consumer is absorbed into the narrative, becomes part of the story and lives the story from the inside (Green & Brock, 2000).

Narrative transportation, in addition to being an alternative route to persuasion, may have long-term consequences with respect to changes

in attitudes and intentions. Narrative transportation is different from the traditional dual-process models of persuasion in that attitude changes and persuasion occur through affective responses, fewer negative thoughts, and through realism of experience rather than logical evaluations of arguments (Escalas & Stern, 2003; Green & Brock, 2000). Narrative has an important role in judgment and product evaluation (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Shank & Abelson, 1995). Consumers evaluate products and services more favorably when advertising describes product features and attributes in a narrative form versus reason-why copy. Also, consumers transported into a story are less resistant to persuasion: they display less-critical thoughts (Green & Brock, 2000).

Recent research (Van Laer, de Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014) provides further insights into the phenomenon of narrative transportation whereby a recipient may enter a world evoked by a story. Van Laer et al. (2014) provide a model that includes antecedents and consequences of narrative transportation and which indicates the role of narrative in the process of persuasion. Narrative transportation can “cause affective and cognitive responses, beliefs, and attitude and intentional changes” (Van Laer et al., 2014, p. 800). As covered in the following discussion, the role of archetypal enactment by the storyteller and the story-receiver is a further consideration of the authors' extended transportation imagery model (Lloyd & Woodside, 2013).

2.3. Essential components of luxury brands

An understanding of the nature of engagement and of narrative transportation of luxury brands requires consideration of their essential components. Research on luxury brands focuses on identifying product attributes that may constitute luxury (de Barnier, Rodina, & Valette-Florence, 2006). While the luxury concept has been studied by many researchers, there is no consensus regarding what luxury brands constitute. Belk (1988), for example, considers luxury goods as something expensive, yet pleasurable to possess, and usually something hard to obtain, and bringing esteem to the owner. Nuevo and Quelch (1998) define luxury goods from an economic perspective as “those whose ratio of functionality to price is low, while the ratio of intangible and situational utility to price is high” (p. 61).

While there is lack of agreement about what constitutes a luxury brand (Miller & Mills, 2012), researchers agree that luxury is associated with important intangible attributes and benefits. While luxury is associated with tangible attributes like price, physical qualities, and craftsmanship (Nia & Zaichkowsky, 2000) luxury incorporates intangible and symbolic attributes such as cultural and artistic heritage (Dion & Arnould, 2011), authenticity and uniqueness (Turunen & Laaksonen, 2011), exclusivity and creativity (Phau & Prendergast, 2000), identity, association, and personality, and aesthetic experience (Venkatesh et al., 2010).

Vigneron and Johnson (1999, 2004) incorporate intangible benefits from luxury brands and develop an integrative framework of the luxury concept and a Luxury Brand Index (BLI). The BLI model includes multiple dimensions of conspicuousness, uniqueness, quality, extended self, and hedonism. Luxury consumption is regarded as broader than the concept of status consumption (Goldsmith & Clark, 2012; Goldsmith, Flynn, & Daekwan, 2010; O'Cass & Siahtiri, 2013; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004) or of conspicuous consumption, which are applied often to luxury products (O'Cass, 2004; O'Cass & McEwen, 2004; O'Cass & Siahtiri, 2013). Conspicuous consumption is the signaling of status to others through luxury goods consumption (Veblen, 2009). Status consumption (Kilshheimer, 1993) is a motivational process whereby consumers seek to improve their social standing through the consumption of brands that confer and symbolize status both for the individual and for her significant others. A luxury brand may possess more than a social value. A luxury brand has an individual value grounded in self-identity, its use may enhance a consumer's self-identity or extend a sense of self (Hennigs, Wiedmann, & Klarmann, 2012). Luxury brands have a hedonic value related to sensorial pleasure, to aesthetic beauty and to emotional

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