



Access to the luxury brand myth in pop-up stores: A netnographic and semiotic analysis



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ABSTRACT

Using semiotic analysis and a netnographic approach, this study examines the motivations of luxury buyers toward pop-up stores in France. It reveals their motivations in relation to this new kind of retailing in the luxury sector, and the advantages of new technologies for meeting the growing demands of a clientele eager for new purchase experiences. We show that pop-up luxury stores add new features to the traditional luxury sector: informality, friendliness, ludicity and accessibility in the context of shared emotions. The key results from this study reveal that the commercial activities of pop-up stores complement those of their luxury parent Houses, in that they contribute emotionality and playfulness, while at the same time nourishing the brand's mythical aspect.

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1. Introduction

Pop-up stores remain open only for a brief period and get their name by analogy with the pop-up windows that appear on computer screens when working on the Internet. The length of time these stores are open can range from a few days up to a year. Originating in London in 1999 with Levi's and Swatch, the pop-up concept creates an event, attracts the interest of the media and arouses the curiosity of consumers. In several European cities, as well as in Asia and the Americas, this new type of retail store is flourishing and numerous luxury brands are opening them, for instance, Chanel and Hermes in Paris, London, Berlin, Madrid, New York and Tokyo. Often seen as an event-centered form of brand communication, since it is extensively reported in the press and on blogs, this new form of retail turns out to be very effective in terms of sales and product rotation of luxury goods. The locations chosen for these stores are surprising, because they are often not far from the brand's parent House.² For example, in Paris, Guerlain opened a pop-up luxury store near its shop on the

Champs-Élysées, and Hermes opened one opposite its regular store on the rue de Sèvres. Pop-up stores can also be mobile, as with the London Fashion Bus, a constantly touring showroom that presents the creations of over forty designers.

We can thus raise the question as to what motivates purchasers and what underlies this fascination with luxury brand pop-up stores. The purpose of this study is to shed light on consumers' motivations and their buying behavior with regard to these new pop-up luxury stores, in particular through the lens of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). We conducted an in-depth qualitative study and followed a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2002, 2009), analyzing by means of the socio-semiotic method the comments made by some of the customers of these pop-up luxury stores.

Our research examines the motivations, perceptions, feelings and purchasing behavior of women who buy luxury goods in pop-up stores and compares them with those of the customers of the parent Houses, thus highlighting:

- *axiological differences and resemblances*: established through axiology (from the Greek *axios* = “worthy”) or the theory of moral values, often presented in the form of opposed terms, such as will (rational value) and sensitivity (emotional value),
- *ontological differences and resemblances*: determined by ontology (from the Greek *ontos* = “living being”), the part of metaphysics that deals with being as such, regardless of its specific determinations.

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² Following the terminology used by the *Comité Colbert* that assemble “75 French luxury Houses and 13 cultural institutions associated to represent French Art de Vivre” (*Comité Colbert, Annual Report, 2012*).

Finally, we discuss on the relevance and viability of such an analysis, and the validity of our conclusions.

2. Literature review

Research has shown the importance of esthetic and artistic experiences in brand-related retailing (Backstrom and Johansson, 2006; Dion and Arnould, 2011; Chevalier and Gutsatz, 2012), but regarding more particularly the specificity of pop-up stores, there are very few studies (Burgess, 2012; Kim et al., 2010) and these do not account for the success of these luxury brands.

2.1. In-store experience

Point-of-sale managers have understood the value of experiential marketing, which includes sensory and entertainment experiences as sources of satisfaction for the consumer (Pantano and Naccarato, 2010; Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006). In this respect, shopping in pop-up stores is a new type of consumption lying within the realm of emotional (Williamson, 2002) and hedonic experience open to the consumer (Babin et al., 1994; Carù and Cova, 2007; Roederer, 2012). Moreover, stores that provide pleasant or ludic experiences see an increase in business (Kim et al., 2002; Kozinets et al., 2004; Backstrom and Johansson, 2006).

This innovative experiential marketing strategy has aroused great interest on the part of North American consumers, who are sensitive to innovation and are passionate about shopping (Kim et al., 2010). With this in mind, pop-up store retailers make use of advanced technological tools such as tablets and smartphones, thereby producing a very positive impact on customer satisfaction (Pantano et al., 2013).

The ephemeral consumer experience seems to be absent from the marketing literature, though some studies have variously examined the temporal orientation of the consumer (Usunier and Valette-Florence, 2007), the pressure exerted on consumer by fragmented time (Bergadaà, 2007) and the effect of such fragmentation on the processing of information by the consumer (Frisou and Yildiz, 2011).

2.2. The luxury goods customer

The luxury sector has a long history (Castarede, 2006, 2008), rich in evolving features (Fionda and Moore, 2009; Bastien and Kapferer, 2008; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Lipovetsky and Roux, 2003; Dubois et al., 2001), resulting in its internationalization (Zhang and Kim, 2013; Moore et al., 2010).

Having long been the preserve of an elite (Castarede, 2008; Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2011), luxury now has a broader clientele (Castarede 2006; Lipovetsky and Roux, 2003; Heilbrunn, 1999) and, in Western societies, one that is more oriented toward experience rather than purely conspicuous consumption (Lipovetsky and Serroy, 2013; Sicard, 2005; Lipovetsky and Roux, 2003). The strong growth in the luxury sector reflects the consumer's search for emotional benefits (Truong and McColl, 2011; Hagtvedt and Patrick, 2009).

2.3. Shopping in pop-up stores

Traditionally, luxury brands have always staged their products so as to bring out their mythical and sacred aspect (Dion, 2007; Chevalier and Gutsatz, 2012). They have to ensure the accessibility of their products, while maintaining the image and charisma of the artistic director and aestheticized ideas of the designer if they are to secure the success of this magical *mise en scène* (Dion and Arnould, 2011). However, such abundance of estheticism can

generate an atmosphere of reverence and even of fear towards the brand (Dion and Arnould, 2011).

Luxury parent Houses and pop-up stores are practicing a new kind of marketing mix combining relational, sensory and experiential marketing, so as to meet the growing demands of consumers. Studies on consumer behavior in general (Carù and Cova, 2007; Backstrom and Johansson, 2006; Graillot, 2003; Ladwein, 1999) reveal the presence of two components: the *cognitive (rational) dimension*, since before buying consumers need to learn about the product, and the *subjective (emotional) dimension*, arising from the accumulation of shopping experiences.

The hedonic aspect of consumption that enables the purchaser to have fun (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Babin et al., 1994) is potentially applicable to luxury. The consumer is not only in search of authenticity (Cova and Cova, 2002b), but also new sensations and experiences (Boutaud 2007; Ladwein, 2002). Even though consumers oscillate between reason and emotion (Chaudhuri, 2002), today's society may encourage disproportionate and extravagant consumption (Hetzel, 2002) trying to "sell [consumers] the experience of another self" (Dampérat et al., 2002). The advertising of luxury stores is essentially emotional and endeavors to steer consumers towards multi-sensitive and multi-sensory, intense and unforgettable experiences (Anido Freire, 2010b). Unfortunately, there are few studies on the choice of luxury distribution channels (Sanguanpiyan and Jasper, 2010) that we can mobilize to better understand the development of pop-up luxury stores.

3. Methodology

Because of the emotional charge entailed in purchasing luxury products and because of the perspicacity of the semiotic significance of luxury advertising, often based on the technique of the implicit, the unsaid, innuendo and suggestion (Anido Freire, 2010a), we decided to study the discourse of women purchasers within the polysemy of luxury attributes (Section 4.3). This discourse is particularly significant in Internet exchanges between women consumers. Internet forums and pop-up stores have in common immediacy, topicality and ephemerality. In addition, most French luxury brands have a website offering some of their products for sale, and 90% of web comments about luxury brands come from Internet users (Sicard, 2010). These reasons lead us to choose netnography methods to analyze the behavior of women consumers of luxury products from pop-up stores.

3.1. Netnographic study

We conducted a netnographic study (Kozinets, 2002, 2009) on the basis of 53 comments by female Internet users about shopping at pop-up luxury stores posted between July 2012 and December 2012 on five of the most popular women's forums. We chose to focus on women because they form the majority of luxury purchasers and are also the most influential on luxury purchases by couples (Kaefer et al., 2012).

Over a three-month period we collected two thirds of total Internet users' answers and only one third in the second phase of our study. The Internet users' comments were supplemented with interviews to clarify their responses. The second phase examined biographical information and experiences with pop-up luxury stores and aimed to validate the ethnographic approach (Thompson et al., 1989; Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Wolcott, 1995).

The neologism netnography results from the combination of two words: Internet and Ethnography. Ethnography is concerned with collecting in situ anthropological, linguistic, cultural and social data for a given population, as well as engaging in its descriptive and analytical study. Netnography is a qualitative method for studying

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