



When symbolism overtakes quality: Materialists consumers disregard product quality when faced with luxury brands



Catherine Audrin^{a,b,c,d,*}, Tobias Brosch^{b,c}, Julien Chanal^{a,b,d}, David Sander^{b,c}

^aMethodology and Data Analysis Research Group, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (FPSE), University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

^bDepartment of Psychology, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

^cSwiss Center for Affective Sciences, Geneva, Switzerland

^dDistance Learning University Switzerland, Sierre, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Consumers use extrinsic and intrinsic cues to set preferences and make purchase decisions. However, the extent to which luxury-related extrinsic cues determine consumer preferences and whether the relative weighting of extrinsic vs. intrinsic cues depends on consumers' values is still unclear. We investigated how luxury vs. non-luxury brands affect consumer preferences, and how this impact is moderated by consumers' materialistic values. Results from Experiment 1 showed that materialistic and non-materialistic participants similarly appreciated products with luxurious brands. However, compared with non-materialistic participants, materialistic participants devaluated products that were tagged as non-luxurious brands. In Experiment 2, we investigated how product quality interacts with brands and whether materialistic values moderated this interaction. Materialistic participants paid more attention to brand-related cues than to quality-related cues, whereas non-materialistic participants considered these cues similarly. Taken together, the results of these two studies suggest that materialism influences the way extrinsic (i.e., brand) and intrinsic (i.e., quality) information is combined during product evaluation. These results highlight the importance of materialism in consumer decision-making, especially in the context of luxury consumption.

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1. Introduction

Research on consumer preferences has revealed the importance of both intrinsic and extrinsic cues when evaluating the quality of a product (Bredahl, 2004). Intrinsic cues refer to any product attribute that is inherent to the evaluated product, such as the material used to make a ready-to-wear clothing product (Veale & Quester, 2009). In contrast, extrinsic cues refer to any piece of information about the product that is not directly part of the product itself (Zeithaml, 1988), such as its price or the label displayed on it (e.g., brand).

When evaluating products that are intrinsically identical, consumers prefer high-priced products (Plassmann, O'Doherty, Shiv, & Rangel, 2008). Another set of studies tested the effect of brand on consumers' preferences. Results showed that consumers' expectancies affected experienced pleasantness during the consumption of the product (Allison & Uhl, 1964;

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Geneva, Pont d'Arve 40, 1205 Geneva, Switzerland.

E-mail addresses: catherine.audrin@unige.ch (C. Audrin), tobias.brosch@unige.ch (T. Brosch), julien.chanal@unige.ch (J. Chanal), david.sander@unige.ch (D. Sander).

McClure et al., 2004). When participants drank Coke and Pepsi without knowing what they were drinking, experienced pleasantness was equal between drinks. However, when drinks were labelled with a brand (Coke or Pepsi), participants reported increased preferences toward Coke (McClure et al., 2004). This evidence reveals that consumers heavily rely on extrinsic cues (Kardes, Kim, & Lim, 2001; Kuusela, Spence, & Kanto, 1998; Veale & Quester, 2009).

Although the aforementioned studies focused on one cue at a time, products consist of multiple cues (Miyazaki, Grewal, & Goodstein, 2005), such as price and quality or brand and quality. When consumers face multiple congruent cues (e.g., high price and full warranty) displayed with a product, they consider these cues in an additive fashion and use them jointly for evaluating product quality (Anderson, 1981; Miyazaki et al., 2005). When cues are not congruent (e.g., high price and limited warranty), consumers try to reconcile them. The literature provides mixed evidence about how consumers reconcile such information. Some consumers consider non-congruent cues in an additive fashion. In this case, the resulting evaluation lies “somewhere between the contradictory poles of the two inconsistent subsets” (Slovic, 1966, p. 428). However, another consumer strategy for dealing with contradictory information is to put aside the non-congruent cue, thus keeping only one of the cues initially available as a way to evaluate the product (Slovic, 1966). Furthermore, when extrinsic pieces of information are non-congruent, consumers tend to disregard these cues, especially when intrinsic information is provided (Miyazaki et al., 2005). As stated by Loken (2006), in such situations, consumers get to process information selectively, leading to a biased method of evaluating the product.

The choice of information integration strategy is likely influenced by individuals' characteristics. For instance, Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava (2000) studied how brand commitment moderates the way information related to the products is processed. Results showed that low-commitment consumers gave high importance to negative pieces of information, whereas highly committed consumers perceived positive information as being more diagnostic. The authors concluded that personality characteristics had an impact on the way consumers integrated information (i.e., knowledge about the brand) in their decisions. Interestingly, in the aforementioned studies, the experimental manipulation strictly focused on extrinsic cues such as country of origin, price, or warranty. Moreover, while these results were found for insurance policies and specific items such as athletic shoes or television, no such studies have been conducted in the context of luxury consumption.

Thus, we wanted to fill this gap by evaluating how information on brand and product quality is integrated when people evaluate luxury products. Luxury consumption is associated with strong psychological benefits, which can be divided into two aspects: personal and interpersonal (Nia & Zaichkowsky, 2000; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Traditional research on luxury has mostly been focused on interpersonal benefits, showing that luxury is used conspicuously and provides owners with a way to display their wealth (Dubois & Duquesne, 1993; Veblen, 1899/2007). Other researchers revealed that consumers can buy luxury for themselves exclusively. In these studies, consumers reported that they considered luxury possessions to have personal meaning and importance for their identity construction (Bauer, Wilkie, Kim, & Bodenhausen, 2012) and self-esteem (Nia & Zaichkowsky, 2000). In this case, luxury consumption involves more personal interests (Dubois & Duquesne, 1993; Vickers & Renand, 2003). Therefore, in addition to the product itself, luxury conveys symbolic aspects that provide personal and interpersonal benefits to the consumer.

The extent to which these benefits will be decisive in consumption may depend on consumers' personal values. Materialism is a critical dimension of luxury consumers' values (e.g., Fournier & Richins, 1991). It is defined as the tendency to attribute significant importance to material possessions and renown (Kasser, 2003). Materialistic people, i.e., people who are high on materialism, are thus more likely to look for prestigious products reflecting a high social status (Fournier & Richins, 1991; Wang & Wallendorf, 2006). Specifically, materialism enhances interest in luxury brands (Gil, Kwon, Good, & Johnson, 2012) and a preference for luxury goods (Prendergast & Wong, 2003; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). Therefore, we predicted that materialism influences the way intrinsic (quality) and extrinsic (brand) information is integrated during product evaluation.

Herein, we report our investigation of how the quality and brand of a product affect the evaluation of ready-to-wear products. Testing the impact of luxury brands on consumers' preferences seems to be particularly appropriate because brands are what consumers refer to in the first place when thinking about luxury (Aiello et al., 2009; Bastien & Kapferer, 2012). Specifically, we investigated whether ready-to-wear products (i.e., bags, scarves, belts, and purses) presented with a luxury brand were better evaluated than products presented with a non-luxury brand (Experiment 1). We hypothesized that products of the same quality presented with a luxury brand would be preferred to products with non-luxury brands. Additionally, we tested the extent to which materialism modulates this impact and hypothesized that the impact of brands may be stronger for materialistic participants than for non-materialistic participants.

Moreover, as every product entails both intrinsic (i.e., quality) and extrinsic (i.e., brand) cues, we further investigated how manipulating these two cues (i.e., high vs. low quality and luxury vs. non-luxury brand) could affect preferences (Experiment 2). More specifically, we created congruent ([non-] luxury brands with [low-] high-quality products) and non-congruent situations ([non-] luxury brands with [high-] low-quality products). We further tested the importance of materialism in this context. We hypothesized that materialistic and non-materialistic participants would consider congruent and non-congruent situations differently. Specifically, we hypothesized that materialistic participants would disregard quality cues in non-congruent situations, as they assign higher importance to the brand.

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