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Luxury watch possession and dispossession from father to son: A poisoned gift?

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the feelings linked to the transmission of luxury watches from father to son. Based on three studies, an iterative content analysis of individual discourses investigates the three stages of the gift-giving process (Sherry, 1983). Study 1 investigates the gestation stage through the discourse of 15 fathers who offered their luxury watch to their son. Study 2 examines the prestation stage via the “Album On Line” technique on 48 owners. Study 3 explores the reformulation stage through the discourse of 15 sons who received the luxury watch from their father. Results show that the deeper we dig into the stages, the more mixed feelings respondents feel. The first stage is characterized by positive feelings linked to freedom, accomplishment, tradition or legacy. In the second stage, negative feelings linked to family finitude, contempt or resistance, add on to positive feelings. The last stage triggers comparison logic and social pressure and leads to mixed feelings both positive and negative among the sons. Assimilation and contrast effects are identified as high stakes in the individuation-separation process. A fourth stage is suggested: the appropriation stage.

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1. Introduction

Many luxury brands resort to male transgenerational links in their communication campaigns. The “transmission” trend is increasingly reaching pattern status among luxury watchmakers and it meets distinct marketing strategies. Conjuring up father/son filiations may be used for segmentation purposes. One pioneer in the field, IWC Schaffhausen, was able to enlarge its client target by producing a double set of aviator watches in 2008, one made of platinum for the father and a steel-made one for the son. Other watch manufacturers such as Baume & Mercier play on father/son transmission codes to investigate the world of celebrations and capture the symbolical gifts market. Finally, luxury watch brands can use the “promised-for-transmission” theme to evoke their patrimonial dimension and the timelessness of their products. For instance, since 1996 Patek Philippe’s “Generation” campaign uses real father/son black-and-white portraits and aims at reaching a form of eternity via its slogan “*You never actually own a Patek Philippe. You merely look after it for the next generation.*”

Although luxury brands put transmission at the core of their communication policies, little marketing research has focused on the theme. Two research axes have been explored: the transmission of valuables as practiced within the family and the transmission of intangible

“luxury” capital to non-family members. The former axis focuses on family construction processes through objects and shared experience. Folkman-Curasi, Price, and Arnould (2004) show that objects “imbue” with the history of their possessors. Once transmitted, these “contaminated” objects (Argo, Dahl, & Morales, 2006) become iconic representations of the givers. Besides, Bradford (2009) analyzes the rituals which maintain the significance of intergenerational gifts within the family. The second axis of research deals with the transmission of “luxury” intangible capital likely to transform the existence of both giver and receiver (Llamas & Thomsen, 2016). This capital is transmitted outside the family circle and may be economic (time, money), social (professional network) or cultural (knowledge), and it is akin to a luxury philanthropic action. Previous research has studied the transmission of inalienable assets, but it has never considered luxury brands.

This research deals with the transmission of luxury watches from fathers to sons. The focus on this type of transmission is backed by two reasons. The first stems from the educational dimension inherent in the father/son genealogical relationships. Fathers teach their children self-control by renouncing the immediate satisfaction of their desires (Dallaire, 2006). Thus, receiving a luxury watch may be perceived by the son as a “reward” which goes beyond the paternal function. The second is that the father is seen as a symbol of “physical and psychological protection” by the sons and as the warrant of legitimate lineage (Dallaire, 2006).

Starting from a multi-method qualitative approach, three successive studies were carried out to understand the psychological mechanisms in the transmission of luxury objects from father to son. While father-

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giving may be perceived as a gesture expressing generosity, the way it is experienced by each of the parties may be questioned. We examine how luxury gift-giving can influence both giver and recipient's identities and the subsequent behaviors. Therefore, the research question is: what is the contribution of luxury gift-giving to the identity construction process? To tackle this question, we focus on Sherry's work (1983) as his anthropological model, gives a comprehensive understanding of gift-giving behavior as a process. Furthermore, our results propose a fourth stage, called the "appropriation stage".

The first study focuses on the "gestation stage", which is the "behavior antecedent to the gift exchange" (Sherry, 1983) and it proposes, *via* a semiotic analysis, to identify the invariant features of meaning which structure the relationships between fathers and their luxury watches. The second study analyzes the "prestation stage", which relates to "the specific components of the exchange process" and it investigates, *via* the projective technique "Album On Line", the affective representations of the transmission process. Finally, the third study focuses on the "reformulation stage", when "attention is focused on the disposition of the gift, which is subject to consumption, display, storage, exchange or reject" and it deals, *via* an iterative content analysis, with the positive and negative consequences of receiving a luxury object.

Two reasons back our choice of luxury watchmaking as a domain of application. First, the luxury market is booming and global turnover is expected to rise beyond the €250 billion threshold in 2015.¹ The watchmaking-jewelry sector ("hard luxury", 23%) ranks third for sales, behind accessories (27%) and fashion (26%). Second, luxury watchmaking carries strong symbolical meaning: watches are items that belong in the adult male's kit and it is traditionally transmitted from father to son.

Studying the transmission of luxury brand items from father to son, by focusing on the sons' reactions, is of major managerial interest. Indeed, although watchmakers are thriving, one may wonder if junior targets are a likely bonanza. A recent article published in *The Financial Times*² explains that the luxury watch market is struggling when it comes to finding new and younger customers because the younger generation is increasingly attracted by innovating watches, such as Apple's "smartwatches". Elmar Mock, one of the Swatch co-inventors says: "In the next ten years, smartwatches could affect up to 30% of the traditional watch industry". So it is worth questioning the marketing relevance of the transmission theme: it is widely used in watchmakers' campaigns, but is it an effective communication axis to attract new customers? The players in the sector need to clarify which is the best masculine transgenerational positioning to renew and rejuvenate their client base.

The paper is structured into six sections. First, the theoretical framework introduces the concepts of luxury and luxury brands, generativity and gift-giving and the role of possessions in the identity construction process (§0.2). Then, we present the three studies which detail the psychological mechanisms in the transmission of luxury items from father to son (§0.3, §4, §5). Finally, the paper discusses the results and exposes future research avenues (§0.6).

2. Literature review

2.1. Luxury and luxury brands: conceptual and symbolical approaches

The diversity of research on luxury in human and social sciences reveals that it is a tricky concept to grab. Sociology emphasizes the expression of social status *via* the consumption of luxury brands (Bourdieu, 1979). Psychology focuses on the determining factors in the consumption of luxury goods and draws a line between external factors such as people's judgment (Groth & McDaniel, 1993) and internal emotion-generated factors (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Economics examines the applicable price-fixing mechanism which depends on the object's

utility value (product/service quality, esthetic value, know-how...) and its exclusiveness (product image). Lastly, marketing tries to define the specificities of luxury brands (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004), the consumption behaviors they induce (ostentatious consumption, Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014; prestige-seeking consumers, Vigneron & Johnson, 2004) and the resulting management issues (counterfeiting, Randhawa, Calantone, & Voorhees, 2015; price-display effects, Parguel, Delécolle, & Valette-Florence, 2016; meaning linked to co-creating value, Tynan, McKechnie, & Chhuon, 2010).

All these different research ventures highlight the subjective dimension of the "luxury brand" concept and they approach it *via* consumer perception (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Luxury brands feature five perceived characteristics detailed by Vigneron and Johnson (2004) in the Brand Luxury Index: superior quality/performance, rarity, social status, hedonism and identity connections. They are the building blocks of identity construction processes and they relate to time and history in specific ways. Bastien and Kapferer (2012) underline the enduring quality of luxury brands as they gain in value and remain time proof. Their added value is linked to their heritage, their historical roots and to the founding myths of their origins. Opting for luxury watches as a field of application, Bergadaà (2005) notes that their buyers are motivated by a duty of remembrance (notion of legacy) and by a longing for immortality (notion of timelessness). Thus, they tend to extend oneself in time after death, a process also known as "generativity".

2.2. Generativity and gift-giving

In psychosociology, generativity refers to the concerns of individuals for future generations and it is expressed *via* the transmission of patrimony to their descendants (Erikson, 1959). The notion is linked to the awareness of their own finitude and it evolves as they grow old (Urien & Kilbourne, 2011). Following Erikson (1959), Kotre (1984) distinguishes between "communal generativity" and "agentic generativity." "Communal generativity" is conveyed through a willingness to act for the well-being of future generations in an altruistic way. Elements transmitted are mainly intangible and deal with values or consumption practices, they stem from the motivation to be useful (Lacroix & Jolibert, 2015). "Agentic generativity" envisages other people's well-being from a selfish viewpoint and contributes to a narcissistic self-promotion. Elements transmitted are mostly tangible and involve a transfer of ownership, they stem from the motivation of symbolic immortality (Lacroix & Jolibert, 2015). In both cases, giver and recipient don't play an exclusive part, influences are reciprocal.

Mauss (1924) analyzes gift-giving as a prototypical contract allowing behavior optimization. It implies reciprocity: must give, receive and reciprocate. Gifts create a kind of dependency which allows permanent re-creation of social bonds. The relationship's weight is symbolized by the value of the gift and the changing nature of the relationship is represented in a change in the gift's value (Mauss, 1924). Refusal to give, receive or give in return implies a rupture in social relationships. Furthermore, the recipient must give in return as much as he received, not to remain in an inferior position toward the donor. Giving in return is deferred over time to not reduce the gift to a simple barter. Hence gift exchange is understood in a longitudinal perspective, as proposed by Sherry (1983). His model involves three steps: gestation, prestation, and reformulation. (1) The gestation stage includes all behavior prior to the gift exchange. It refers to the period during which "gift" is moved turned from the conceptual to the material field. It includes a prelude to creating and strengthening social bonds. (2) The prestation stage deals with a specific component of the exchange process. Both donor and recipient pay attention to the moment, place and mode of transaction. Here, the donor is affected by the recipient's response. It is twofold: first, the recipient decrypts the instrumental and emotional content of the gift; then, he answers the donor, conferring judgment. (3) The reformulation stage focuses on the disposition of the gift. The gift becomes a vehicle by which the social bond "donor/recipient" is

¹ "Luxury Goods Worldwide Market Study" report (May 16, 2013, Bain & Company).

² Shoter J. and Bradshaw T. (2014), Apple watch threatens face-off with Swiss, *The Financial Times*, 1–2 November.

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