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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jretconser

An experimental study to investigate the impact of image interactivity on the perception of luxury in an online shopping context



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 June 2016

Received in revised form

12 August 2016

Accepted 26 August 2016

Keywords:

Virtual shopping experience

Image interactivity

Telepresence

Luxury perception

Luxury brands

ABSTRACT

The current study investigates whether image interactivity can positively influence luxury perceptions in a virtual shopping environment, by offering shoppers a feeling of telepresence. 185 respondents were referred to either an image interactive or non-interactive virtual luxury store and completed an online questionnaire afterwards to measure their luxury perception. The results of this study show that image interactivity leads to higher perceptions of exclusivity, quality, hedonism and extended self due to a higher perceived telepresence. This study offers some guidelines for luxury brands to retain their luxury perception high in a virtual shopping environment.

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1. Introduction

The Internet has become an indispensable part of the current corporate world. Consequently, online shopping became inseparable from today's society. When shopping online, consumers expect a website with the most optimal package of advantages, values and experiences. Companies do their utmost to satisfy those high expectations (Mankodiya et al., 2013). Products sold on the internet are only one click away from the consumer and available regardless of time and space (Okonkwo, 2009). Although hesitant, the luxury industry also slowly embraced the online world. Because of the supplementary profits (Geerts, 2013) and the general trend towards convenience (Hennigs et al., 2015), it became desirable and even unavoidable for luxury houses to exhibit their brands online. Nowadays, the online presence of luxury brands is crucial in all phases of the consumers decision making process, including need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives and the actual purchase (Chen and Chang, 2003; Häubl and Trifts, 2000; Holmes et al., 2013). The online environments in which these brands are present vary from social network sites, online informational websites or actual webstores (Hennigs et al., 2012; Kim and Ko, 2012). These trends seem to be in favour of the online sales of luxury goods, knowing a strong year-on-year growth of approximately 30% and have even grown twelvefold in

the past 11 years (D'Arpizio et al., 2014; The luxury and cosmetics financial factbook, 2015). Due to this rapid growing pace, the question is no longer 'whether' but 'how' to sell online as a luxury brand. The online shopping of luxury goods as well as non-luxury goods, have previously raised some concerns, for example, regarding the lack of touch or trained staff (Kluge and Fassnacht, 2015; Pappas, 2016). An additional worry that specifically accounts for the online sale of luxury goods is the incompatibility of the exclusive luxury aura and the ubiquitous character of the internet (Kim et al., 2015). As luxury perceptions about product quality and uniqueness have shown to affect outcomes such as buying behaviour (Hennigs et al., 2015), it is a key challenge for luxury brands to reassure their values online.

The aim of the current study is therefore to investigate how luxury retailers can optimise their online presence and preserve their highly valued prestige. According to Kim et al. (2015), web atmospherics such as product descriptions and images, are determining factors for the effectiveness of online retailing. Previous studies provide an initial glimpse at how the interactive character of websites affect the growing wish to surf and shop online, the attitude towards the online retailer and the return to a website (Fiore and Jin, 2003; Li et al., 2001; Wu, 1999). Li et al. (2001) found that interactivity features enhance the value of the product information, which results into higher levels of consumer engagement. In relation to luxury brands, Altarteer et al. (2013) found that clear, photorealistic and fully interactive 3D models of luxury goods lead to an enriched user experience and higher levels of trust. Okonkwo (2005) argues that feelings of progression,

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action and interaction can be evoked by motion and are frequently linked to the physical touching of the product. This is a crucial finding since it implies that the loss of sensory experience when shopping online can be partially compensated by the use of motion and interactivity. The current study will build on the before mentioned researches by investigating whether online image interactivity affects the actual luxury perception of consumers. Accordingly, this experimental study aims to find out whether image interactivity can compensate the lack of certain visual and tactile experiences online and add value to the luxury brand.

Depending on the degree of interactivity, the quality and quantity of the simulated sensory experience may be affected, which can subsequently induce a feeling of 'telepresence' (Fiore et al., 2005b). This concept can be defined as a "feeling as if he or she is with a physical product or perception of no difference between a physical and a virtual product" (Li et al., 2001, p. 22). Research by Kim et al. (2007) revealed that a strong degree of telepresence can influence product attitudes. The current study will investigate how image interactivity affects luxury perceptions while online shopping and whether a feeling of telepresence could play a mediating role. To answer these questions a thorough review of the existing academic literature will be presented, and based thereon, an experimental research will be designed and conducted. The results will be presented, and to conclude the managerial implications will be discussed.

2. Theoretical framework and hypothesis development

2.1. Luxury perception and its sub dimensions

The desire to buy and the actual consumption of luxury brands stems from several dimensions of perceived values and consumer perceptions (Hennigs et al., 2015; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Wiedmann et al., 2007, 2009). The luxuriousness of a product can be seen as a combination of several sub dimensions. To measure the luxury perception of consumers, previous research provided theoretical frameworks to divide the value evoked by luxury products into different sub dimensions: the financial, functional, individual and social value (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999, 2004; Wiedmann et al., 2007). These dimensions seek to explain the consumption behaviour of luxury products. **Conspicuousness** refers to the fact that consumers consider the opinions of reference groups when publicly consuming luxury products (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). The **Uniqueness** dimension is based on the assumption that perceptions of exclusivity and rareness intensify the desire for a product or brand. **The quality** dimension argues that people expect luxury brands to deliver superior product quality in comparison with non-luxury brands (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). **The hedonic value** comprises of the expected emotional reactions as sensory pleasure, aesthetic beauty and excitement that is experienced by the consumer, while consuming luxury. **The extended self** relates to the personal orientation of the consumer whereby (s)he uses the luxury goods to develop or support his/her own identity (Wiedmann et al., 2007).

Initially, one may expect that the democratization of the online world contradicts with products that are defined by the above mentioned characteristics. However, due to the continuous growth of the luxury sector, an evolution towards mass marketing practices and online sales is observed (Chandon et al., 2016). Therefore, more than ever, it is important for luxury brands to retain the perceived luxury value of their brand high, while achieving high returns. Particularly when shopping online, consumers cannot feel, touch and experience the luxurious store environment, which is an important asset for luxury retailers (Joy et al., 2014). Therefore we aim to investigate how the luxury brand can be presented most

successfully online, while retaining a high luxury perception.

2.2. Appealing to the senses in online luxury retail

The conceptualisation of a virtual experience originated because the progress in computer technology led to an online world wherein the multisensory experience has gained an increasingly important role (Li et al., 2001). In the bricks and mortar store, consumers get information about the shape, texture and perceived function of a product by examining it with their senses (Li et al., 2002). In a luxury shop, all senses are aroused by a strictly calibrated atmosphere of animation, movement, audio elements and so on (Joy et al., 2014; Martineau, 1958). Okonkwo (2010) refers to such harmonious situations with the term 'luxemosphere'.

As the shopping atmosphere is seen as the key element to a successful sale, more and more online retailers also aim to offer the optimal package of advantages, values and experiences for the consumer (Mankodiya et al., 2013). This especially accounts for luxury brands, who's success highly relies on the calibrated atmosphere of the stores and the related sensory experiences, also referred to as the 'webmospherics' (Okonkwo, 2010). The latter is an elaborated online marketing concept that aims to recreate the magnificent universe of a luxury brand within the virtual world.

When shopping for products, many decisions are made based on the *tactile experience*. Consumers try to form an image about the weight of the product and how it would feel to use the product by touching it (Soars, 2009). The sense of touch has thus an important share in the decision-making process. However, this sense is difficult to be transformed within the virtual environment. Nevertheless, Okonkwo (2010) argues that it is possible to psychologically create the sense of touch by the integration of certain elements. Through motion, for instance, a feeling of progression, action and interaction is provoked. These elements help the consumer to forget the presence of the computer monitor and these feelings are often linked to the physical touch and feel of the product. When we cannot actually touch a product, at least we need to expect how it would feel if you would have the possibility. Some retailers try to visualise a product as accurately as possible so we can more or less get an idea of how it would be like if we would feel the product with our own hands (Okonkwo, 2010).

2.3. Online image interactivity as a compensation for sensory loss

Interactivity on a website includes better communication, the possibility to adapt displayed information, image manipulation and entertainment for the consumer (Fiore et al., 2005b). It provides more complete sensory and experiential information and enjoyable entertainment (Fiore and Jin, 2003). More specifically, image interactivity offers an innovative way to present products, emphasizing their attributes and simulating a real product experience within the virtual world (Kim et al., 2007). It enables the consumer to manipulate the characteristics of a product, the background, the context and the viewing direction or distance (Fiore and Jin, 2003). Examples of image-interactive technologies that are used by online retailers include zoom-in functions, mix-and-match functions, colour swapping and 3D technologies (Kim et al., 2007).

The level of interactivity depends on the technology used. A two dimensional pictorial image of a product that can be clicked to enlarge, offers only a low level of interactivity to the user. Yet this is the most common form of image interactivity employed by online retailers (Fiore et al., 2005b). A mix-and-match function, whereby a user can look at and combine different garments, offers a higher degree of interactivity.

Empirical evidence emphasizes the importance of image interactivity in favour of consumer attitudes and behaviour

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