Exploring the Specificities of Online Luxury Brand Communities: an Ingratiation Theory Perspective

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“You’ve got great taste”: An Ingratiation Theory Perspective on the Specificities of Online Luxury Brand Communities

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ABSTRACT

This study draws from ingratiation theory to investigate the specificity of online luxury brand communities, using an observational ethnography. We analyze and discuss the diverging strategies held by low and high power community members, and the role played by flattery in maintaining and gaining status in the community.

INTRODUCTION: THE GROWING USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY LUXURY BRANDS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ONLINE LUXURY BRAND COMMUNITIES

The 2009 global financial crisis and the growth of Asian and Middle Eastern markets have forced luxury brands to adapt to reach new types of customers and increasingly rely on digital platforms and social media to enhance customer relationships and brand image (Erdogmus and Çiçek 2012; Kim and Ko 2012). Although most luxury brands initially adopted a careful approach with their online presence—for example, the Italian luxury brand Prada only set up its website in 2007—most brands have since developed a strong online presence. As of February 2015, brands such as Louis Vuitton and Burberry have more than 18,000,000 ‘likes’ on their official Facebook page. Chanel is the most “pinterested” brand on the eponymous social network.

Luxury consumption was traditionally associated with an exclusive in-store experience (Lindquist 1974), but in the past decade, luxury brands have begun engaging in a two-way dialogue with customers, offering them opportunities to write reviews of collections or products, “like” Facebook pages and campaigns, and interact with other luxury consumers online (Kim and Ko 2012; Kretz and Voyer 2013). In addition, luxury consumers have also initiated online communities dedicated to the consumption of luxury goods.

However, the growing use of digital platforms, online communities, and social media among luxury companies and their customers arguably contradicts the essence of luxury consumption, which consists of a drive for the exclusiveness and prestige typically associated with owning such goods, as well as the feeling of belonging to a certain elite (Grossman and Shapiro 1981; Phau and Predergast 2000). The current study explores the specificity of these new types of brand communities by investigating the meaning of being part of an online luxury brand community in the fashion industry and the strategies consumers engaged in such communities use.

LITERATURE REVIEW: BRAND COMMUNITIES, LUXURY CONSUMPTION, AND INGRATIATION THEORY

Brand communities are “specialized, non-geographically bound communities, based on a structured set of social relationships among users of a brand” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, 412). They allow consumers to feel emotionally connected and to accomplish collective goals (Zaglia 2013). They have their own norms (Schmott 2012), use storytelling (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), and can develop a common language (Casaló, Flavían, and Guinaliu 2008). Brand communities allow social group cohesion and transparency between forum members (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). Members’ status on online communities is determined according to a series of implicit rules, with members who post a higher number of messages typically enjoying higher status (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001).

Luxury consumption is often related to status and power. From classical scholars such as Veblen (1899) and Bourdieu (1984) to more recent work on the evolutionary aspects of luxury consumption (Han, Nunes and Drèze 2010), luxury consumption has been deemed a highly communicative act, which can be used to send signals about status, wealth, social class, and, thus, social and economic power. Power and status can be obtained through conspicuous consumption, such as public displays and acquisitions of luxury products, which enhances one’s social status (Amatulli and Gudio 2012; Kastanakis and Balabanis 2012).

The specific nature of luxury consumption is likely to play a role in the behaviors and motivations of members of luxury brand communities for two reasons. First, members’ interactions in online brand communities are typically highly structured and hierarchical (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001) and can be further reinforced by the status dimension of luxury consumption. Second, the exclusive nature of luxury consumption means that some consumers can use online communities to develop a feeling of belonging to the luxury world, without having to buy expensive items, and thereby still enhance their self-esteem and perceived power at a lower financial cost (Belk 2013; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001).

The association of luxury consumption with power and status is also likely to affect the nature and types of relationships developed in these communities. Consumers are likely to employ specific strategies when engaging and interacting with other members, especially when interacting with members displaying a higher status in the community. According to Berry (1994), individuals often modify their behaviors—and use exaggerated compliments—when interacting with someone displaying expensive luxury items.

Jones’s (1964) ingratiation theory thus seems applicable to frame and understand relationships in online luxury brand communities. Ingratiation refers to an act of flattery, typically given by a low-power person to a high-power one, to gain social acceptance and approval (Wortman and Linsenmeier 1977). According to Jones, low-power people tend to engage in ingratiation strategies to gain consideration from high-power people. Jones distinguishes among four types of ingratiation strategies. The first strategy, called “complimentary other-enhancement,” consists of an act of flattery in which a low-power person exaggerates and tries to explicitly adulate a target high-power person by emphasizing his or her qualities. For this strategy to work, Jones suggests that the tactic must be considered a natural way of complimenting the target person. The second strategy, “conformity in opinion, judgment, and behavior,” refers to the act of trying to appear as if one shares the same opinions, values, and beliefs of the target person. A low-power person tries to do so by seeming as similar to the high-power person (Jones 1964) and, therefore, equally likable (Byrne 1971). The third strategy, “self-presentation,” involves enhancing one’s own qualities to inflate perceived importance and attractiveness. Finally, the fourth strategy is based on “rendering favors”; by giving favors to high-power people, low-power people can increase their chances of receiving favors in return and thus become more attractive to high-power people.

Bohra and Pandey (1984) further refined Jones’s theory and added a fifth strategy, referred to as “self-deprecation.” In this strat-
egy, a low-power person presents him- or herself as being less attractive to induce pity from the high-power person. An increase in the use of ingratiation can be triggered by previous rejections from a target person (Romero-Canyas et al. 2010). Furthermore, people with low self-esteem are more likely to use ingratiation (Wu, Li, and Johnson 2011). Finally, Inesi, Lee, and Rios (2014) show that powerful people can be self-objectified by subordinates, through the use of ingratiation tactics.

**METHODOLOGY: AN OBSERVATIONAL NETNOGRAPHY**

We conducted netnography research on PurseForum.com using an observational procedure (Kozinets 2002, 2006). PurseForum.com is a members-only thread forum dedicated to luxury brands. We chose the brand Hermès because it was one of the most active brands discussed by members on PurseForum.com (31,532 threads and 2,043,023 posts, representing 10% of the total number of threads and posts). Hermès is ranked as one of the most valuable luxury brands (Forbes 2014) and the second-best luxury brand worldwide according to BrandZ (2014).

We extracted the data set from five threads on PurseForum.com, representing 935 posts, originally posted between 2009 and 2014. Threads were purposely selected according to their length—longer threads indicated more active conversations over a longer period, therefore providing richer data. We chose the final coded threads on the basis of (1) recently created threads, in which members were active in the last few days during the observation process, and (2) frequency and regularity, in that we selected posts when members interacted daily with one another, which thus would entail a more thorough online active conversation. We processed threads and posts with NVivo 10, using thematic analysis as the method of data analysis (Kozinets 2006). We defined categories ex ante (Braun and Clarke 2006) to investigate ingratiation strategies, as defined by Jones (1964) and Bohra and Pandey (1984).

**RESULTS: THE DIVERGING STRATEGIES OF HIGH-VERSUS LOW-POWER COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN ONLINE LUXURY BRAND COMMUNITIES**

We first identified high- and low-power members on the basis of members’ histories in the community. Criteria used to identify high-power members were the number of months or years members had been registered for and their total number of posts. We classified members as high power if they met three criteria: they (1) had been forum members for more than a year, (2) had posted more than 500 posts, and (3) displayed an important collection of luxury items in their posts. High-power members had all received the label of “established member” on the forum. By contrast, low-power members were less active or had only recently joined the forum. Table 1 summarizes the results.

In the forum, high-power members retain and enhance their status by (1) displaying ownership of an extensive and growing luxury item collection and (2) being considered a reference person for fashion advice by low-power members. Low-power members mainly endorse the role of advice seekers by, for example, occasionally addressing high-power members to understand which item they should purchase:

I’m going to buy a new bag soon and I really love the Verona PM and the Alma PM in Vernis. If you could only have one of them, which one would you choose, any why? :) Thanks in advance. – TheAnni

Low-power members do not talk about or display a large collection of luxury items. They are also usually not, compared with high-power members, “thread masters.” The main ingratiation tactic low-power members use tends to be what Jones (1964) refers to as a complimentary other-enhancement strategy. This tactic seemed especially common in the early stages of relationship development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member type</th>
<th>Member characteristics</th>
<th>Power/status markers on the forum</th>
<th>Strategies used to enhance power/status in the community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High-power members</td>
<td>Forum members for more than a year Post more than 500 posts Display an important collection of luxury items in their posts Receive the label of “established member” on the forum</td>
<td>Discussing and displaying a growing luxury item collection Being considered a reference person for fashion advice by low-power members Becoming thread masters</td>
<td>Artificially creating a scarcity of replies, when replying to low-power member posts, so that replies and acknowledgments become tokens given to low-power members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-power members</td>
<td>Less active or have only recently joined the forum Posts contribute less to the general threads Tend to mainly reply to high-power members’ posts</td>
<td>Endorsing the role of advice seeker Implicitly competing with other low-power members to gain recognition of high-power members</td>
<td>Complimentary other-enhancement strategy: a tactic especially common in the early stages of relationship development between high- and low-power members. Expressing admiration for high-power members’ collections, using flattery, sometimes in an exaggerated manner. Using self-depreciation, sometimes accompanying flattery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 1**

A TYPOLOGY OF HIGH-VERSUS LOW-POWER MEMBERS ON LUXURY BRAND COMMUNITIES
between high- and low-power members. The following compliment illustrates the way a low-power member typically expresses his or her admiration of a high-power member’s collection:

WOW!!! That is an absolutely amazing collection, I’m impressed. You’ve got great taste, and style. (And I’ve always thought that your avatar was very chic too.) – Designvixen

Most posts using this type of ingratiation strategy followed a similar complimenting structure, alternating expressions of admiration (e.g., “I’m impressed”), exaggeration (e.g., “an absolutely amazing collection”), and flattery (e.g., “You’ve got great taste, and style”) (see Table 1). Flattery was sometimes accompanied by a second ingratiation tactic—self-deprecation (Bohra and Pandey 1984)—which we occasionally identified in our analysis. For example, SkipToMyLou, a low-power member, posted, “I wish I had parents like yours,” pointing out a potential difference in social background and the lack of financial support received from his or her parents in comparison with the high-power member.

The tone adopted by low-power members seems mostly genuine, which reinforces the effect of compliments on high-power members. This also suggests that a lack of knowledge about or connection with high-power members outside the forum, low-power members tend to develop a sincere admiration for high-power members. Developing strong connections with high-power members seems more important for many low-power members than connecting with the brand. Our analysis also revealed an implicit competition among low-power members who regularly post on the forum, not only to flatter high-power members but also to reestablish their existence on the forum.

In most situations, high-power members acknowledge admiration gestures from low-power members by replying to each compliment, usually thanking members with short, concise, and generic “thank-you” posts. The following reply, written by a high-power member, illustrates a typical response to a series of compliments received:

Erinrose, canadianstudies, doreenjoy, chemelay, Sewon - Thank you! – Glamourdoll

High-power members seem to use such short responses to (re) emphasize their status. Whereas low-power members use wordy complimenting posts on the forum to attract the attention of high-power members, high-power members artificially create scarcity of replies so that their replies and acknowledgments become tokens given to low-power members.

The use of a complimentary other-enhancement ingratiation strategy on the forum can lead to the development of offline friendships between community members. On certain occasions, high-power members who seemed genuinely flattered invited low-power members to enjoy some shopping activities together, as illustrated in the following dialogue:

AH!! I saw your signature with the group photo and was SO EXCITED! I have exams right now, so I haven’t been around... (P.s. Just saw your blog ... you are SO pretty!) – Basicandorganic

You are always so kind to me with your sweet compliments! maybe we can meet up and go shopping together when I’m in Toronto! Good luck on all your exams~ – Glamourdoll

As high-power members develop a more personal relationship with low-power members on the forum, the discussion often goes beyond luxury consumption, resulting in a more personal, informal dialogue. Low-power members who established a more personal relationship with high-power members often began asking more personal questions, mostly unrelated to bag acquisitions or the luxury world per se (e.g., personal sociodemographic questions):

Sorry for askin but how old are u now? – Bhadra Bhadra – thank you! I turned 18 last month. :) – Glamourdoll

Another sign of this proximity between some low- and high-power members comes from low-power members referring to high-power members by their real names, rather than their pseudonyms. Such familiarity and proximity contributes to flattening the hierarchy between the low- and high-power members.

**DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSION**

Online brand communities have been discussed extensively in marketing literature during the past 15 years (Casaló et al. 2008; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Schmitt 2012; Zaglia 2013). The current study contributes to the literature on brand communities in two ways. First, by exploring a newer type of online community, dedicated to the consumption of luxury goods. Unlike traditional brand communities, which offer consumers an opportunity to share and interact with other members on favorite and financially accessible brands, online luxury brand communities give members a stronger feeling of belongingness, as community membership opens doors to an inaccessible world for many. Second, by drawing from ingratiation theory to understand the behaviors of members in these communities.

Our results suggest that the specific nature of luxury consumption affects the nature of relationships and strategies used to build a network in the community. Online luxury communities appear even more hierarchical than traditional communities of consumption, and this hierarchy results in the use of diverging strategies between low- and high-power members to gain or maintain power within the community. In line with previous research on the structure and hierarchies of online communities, (e.g. Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), high-power members regularly post messages and have acquired over time a certain notoriety on the forum. They present themselves as wealthy or coming from wealthy families (e.g., glamourdoll, who claims her parents pay for her luxury designer bag collection) and share with the rest of the community their bag acquisitions. Low-power members are much less active on the forum and appear more dependent on high-status members, whom they regularly try to flatter with compliments. Low-power members use two main types of ingratiation strategies to increase their status within the community: complimentary other-enhancement (Jones 1964) and, occasionally, self-depreciation (Bohra and Pandey 1984). They actively try to gain recognition and acceptance (Belk 2013) through regular posting, to maintain their hierarchical position (Burt 2000).

Low-power members on online luxury forums seem to display what Belk (1988) refers to as the need to feel belongingness with other, “extravagant” people—that is, those who are active, prominent members in the luxury world. By using their avatars, low-power members can become someone else and develop an extended self that connects with the world of luxury (Belk 2013). Members also use explicit pseudonyms such as “glamourdoll” and “bagevy” to leave their “real” self and embody their “ideal” self (Belk 2013): a person who owns luxury designer bags and belongs to the prestigious, exclusive world inhabited by similar elites (Solomon 2002).

Overall, high-power members’ motivations for joining online luxury consumption communities appear to be the display of exten-
sive collections, symbolizing their power and attracting ingratiation. Conversely, low-power members exhibit a drive to flatter high-power members, to increase their perceived status. Consumers portray themselves as purse and bag “lovers,” interested in the product itself rather than creating a relationship with the brand through its social media services. This issue potentially raises questions about the way companies should use social media in the context of luxury consumption, as well as the evolution of the digitalization of online luxury brand communities.

This study has two main limitations. First, the community studied, PurseForum.com, is a niche community, focusing on a narrow topic: small and medium-sized luxury leather goods. Second, the scope of the research was limited to one luxury brand: Hermès. Although the brand is an iconic and sought-after luxury brand, the nature of fashion is such that certain brands can attract specific profiles of customers, sharing different psychological traits (e.g., extroverts vs. introverts). Further research should therefore explore similar communities focusing on other brands and product categories. Additional research could also investigate the role of the “quiet” or “loud” nature of a luxury brand (see Han et al. 2010) on the type of ingratiation strategies people use. For example, discussions around loud luxury brands, which have a higher vertical signaling power, could lead to increased competition among low-power members. The nature of the product category discussed, as well as members’ gender or cultural origins, could also affect consumers’ strategies in the community. For example, the decision to share information about a prominent and conspicuous luxury item (e.g., a designer bag), compared with sharing a more discreet piece of clothing (e.g., a jumper), could be related to the need to divulge one’s “trophies” (e.g., Han et al. 2010; Veblen 1899). In other words, such behaviors could pertain to an implicit loud branding strategy in an attempt to become part of an online luxury brand community (Swaminathan, Stilley, and Ahluwalia 2009). Finally, research could further investigate the motivations of high-power community members, possibility using offline interviews, to understand how the online character they develop relates to their real self in the offline world (Kretz and Voyer 2013).

REFERENCES


