Unsustainable Luxury and Negative Word-Of-Mouth: the Role of Shame and Consumers’ Cultural Orientation

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This research shows that messages describing unsustainable versus sustainable luxury products elicit anticipated shame, which, in turn, leads to negative word-of-mouth about that product’s manufacturer. Our results demonstrate that shame induced by messages featuring unsustainable luxury manufacturing practices increases (decreases) negative word-of-mouth for consumers with a collectivistic (individualistic) cultural orientation.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Sustainability is often treated as an unimportant driver of luxury consumption (Davies et al. 2012), if not simply deleterious to their perceptions about the quality of luxury items (Achabou and Dekhili 2013). Although most studies have focused on the link between luxury and positive emotions such as pride, prior research neglected to explore the association between luxury and negative emotions. To supplement this growing literature, first, we investigate how negative emotions—shame in particular—affect unsustainable luxury consumption. We propose that messages highlighting the unsustainable (vs. sustainable) nature of luxury products may trigger a sense of shame in consumers, which will then affect their subsequent behavioral intentions, in particular their intention to share negative word-of-mouth (hereafter, NWOM). We also study the moderating role of culture (Hofstede et al. 2010) by focusing on individualism (the tendency to seek personal rewards) versus collectivism (the tendency to prize collective wellbeing). These orientations are relevant to sustainability research, inasmuch as sustainability is linked to people’s concern about making a positive (or at least non-negative) contribution to the well-being of society.

In this research, we specifically examine NWOM as a type of pro-social behavior that follows consumers’ exposure to messages emphasizing the unsustainable (versus sustainable) nature of luxury goods. Because shame leads individuals to engage in coping behaviors aimed at restoring their self-worth (Duhachek et al. 2012), we expect, first of all, that ashamed consumers would strive to restore a positive view of themselves by engaging in NWOM. Existing research shows indeed that people engage in WOM behavior to re-establish a positive self-image in social contexts (De Angelis et al. 2012). Second, we consider consumers’ cultural orientation as a moderator of the effect of unsustainable-luxury driven shame on NWOM and predict that shame will increase (decrease) the tendency to share NWOM about a company selling an unsustainable luxury product when consumers have a collectivistic (individualistic) cultural orientation. We expect indeed that individualistic consumers will be more concerned with preserving their social image than others’ welfare.

METHOD AND FINDINGS

We tested our predictions with 104 consumers (M_age = 35, SD_age = 11.77; 50% females) who participated in a 2 (type of message: sustainable product vs. unsustainable luxury product) x 2 (cultural orientation: collectivistic vs. individualistic) between-subject experiment. We manipulated cultural orientation through participants’ nationality—American vs. Russian—following Hofstede’s classification of U.S. and Russia in terms of the individualism versus collectivism. Thus, we administered the questionnaire to a random sample of U.S. (M_age = 35, SD = 9.75, 64% males) and Russian consumers (M_age = 34, SD = 13.51; 36% males), who were both extracted from national consumer panels and invited to fill in an electronic questionnaire that assigned them to one of the two experimental conditions.

The questionnaire instructed participants in the sustainable product condition to imagine they were about to purchase a luxury car able to reduce pollutants drastically and thus to contribute to environmental protection. In contrast, participants in the unsustainable product condition read a message about a luxury car producing more emissions than similar cars and thus contributing to environmental pollution. Then, participants answered seven items drawn from Lindsay-Hartz (1984) that measured their sense of (anticipated) shame (e.g. “I feel a sense of blame,” α = .88) and three items that assessed their willingness to share NWOM about the company selling the car (e.g. “I will say negative things about this company to other people”; α = .95), all measured on 7-point scales (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree), and provided socio-demographic data.

Participants assigned to the unsustainable scenario (coded as +1) felt a more intense feeling of shame (M = 3.60, SD = 1.68) than those assigned to the sustainable scenario (coded as -1; M = 2.66, SD = 1.32, F(1, 102) = 10.08, p < .05). We regressed willingness to share NWOM on sustainability, shame, and participants’ cultural orientation (coded as +1 for Russian consumers and -1 for American consumers), and the interaction between shame and cultural orientation. This analysis returned a significant index of moderated mediation (b = .49, 95% CI: .15, 1.02), indicating that cultural orientation moderates the effect of shame on willingness to share NWOM. In particular, type of message had a significant and positive effect on anticipated shame (b = .47, p < .001). Controlling for type of message and cultural orientation, we found that shame had a significant negative effect on NWOM intentions (b = -.37, p < .05); controlling for type of message and shame, cultural orientation had a significant negative effect on NWOM intentions (b = -.42, p < .001). The analysis revealed a positive and significant effect of the interaction between shame and cultural orientation (b = 1.05, p < .001) on NWOM intentions. The effect of type of message on willingness to share NWOM was negative for American consumers (b = -.17, 95% CI: -.43, -.01) and positive for Russian consumers (b = .32, 95% CI: .10, .61), thus showing that collectivistic consumers expressed increased NWOM intentions in response to their feelings of anticipated shame. Meanwhile, NWOM intentions decreased among individualistic consumers.

Our study contributes to the research on luxury and sustainability which still lacks an examination of how negative emotions aroused by unsustainable luxury products can shape consumers’ responses. By assessing how shame affects WOM intentions, this research also extends the literature on the emotional antecedents of WOM intentions. Moreover, our research investigates the previously unexplored role of consumers’ cultural orientation in the relationship between luxury and sustainability. Operationally, our results suggest that managers could deliver messages that emphasize the differences between their firm’s sustainable products and their competitors’ less-sustainable ones, thus fostering negative buzz around competitors’ products. Not-for-profit organizations may use our results to design and diffuse messages aimed at warning consumers against deleterious unsustainable products especially in collectivistic cultures. Finally, for luxury managers interested to introduce their products in international markets, our research points to the need to consider the cultural aspects when designing their communication actions.
REFERENCES


