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I love you ... but not unconditionally. Perceptions about luxury fashion brands

Abstract

The Generation Y (1978-2000) live in a constant change and are always interacting among them and the brands that they love. The current study aims to contribute to better understand the perceptions that Y's have about Corporate Social Responsibility in fashion luxury brands. Therefore, 31 in-depth interviews were conducted with a group of people belonging to Generation Y. The findings reveal that Y's are concerned about transparent procedures and helping business and society to improve as a consequence of their sustainable and responsible attitudes. The environmental issues and labour practices are the most cited, commented and recommended factors of corporate social responsibility (CSR) proposed by participants. The article provides a framework presenting the seven core factors to incorporate CSR.

Keywords: Generation Y, corporate social responsibility, luxury fashion brands

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, luxury fashion brands employ around one million people in Europe and despite the recession during 2010 and 2011, the European market has grown 9% from 2010 to 2011 and 5% from 2011 to 2012 (D'Arpizio, 2012). In 2010/2015, it is expected that luxury sales both in

developed and emerging markets will achieve earnings, although the growth for the developed countries will continue to be lower than the growth for the emerging markets (Roberts, 2011a).

Luxury brands have a wide product offer: fashion clothing and accessories, beauty luxury brands, automobiles, wines, jewellery, tourism, hotels, private banking, among others (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2008). This research is specifically focused on the fashion luxury brands. Fashion luxury industry and luxury brand can be perceived as a mix between the attributes of the product, as well as some extra psychological factors, which are perceived as benefits by the consumer (like added value, esteem and prestige). All these attributes allow a certain group of people to feel they belong to a selective or exclusive society group, who is able to buy these expensive goods (Mansharamani & Khanna, 2013). When it comes to luxury brands or luxury products, its price will often be decided by aspects such as their uniqueness, time spent in their production, their exclusivity among others (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009a).

The goal of this study is explore suggestions made by millennial generation about how fashion luxury brands can be more socially responsible (CRS). The paper is organized as follows: first, a literature review about the most important issues concerning fashion luxury brands and CRS; second, the description of methodology and the presentation of findings; third, the conclusions and implications.

BACKGROUND

Luxury fashion brands

In literature the definition of luxury brand is not consensual. According to Mansharamani and Khanna (2013), a luxury brand is a mix between the attributes of the product with some extra added psychological factors, which are perceived as benefits by the consumer as it happens with added value, esteem and prestige. It is also associated with a sense of high status, which makes people to have the sense of belonging to a selective or exclusive society group, who is able to afford these expensive goods. Another definition claims that: "*Luxury is a culture, which means you have to understand it to be able to practice it with flair and spontaneity*" (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009b, p. 313).

Economists usually make a distinction, by comparing the product price with its functional benefits (Kapferer, 2010) with three categories. The first one is related to fashion brands that moves masses (e.g., Zara or H&M- Hennes & Mauritz AB). The second category is related to premium brands.

Although directed to the mass market, these brands aspire to be luxury or prestige brands (e.g., Polo, Ralph Lauren or Tommy Hilfiger). The last category is related with luxury brands (e.g., Cartier, Gucci or Chanel). They represent the highest levels of craftsmanship and the loyalty of unconditional customers which is not affected by seasonal trends (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009a).

Corporate social responsibility

According to Kozlowski, Bardecki and Searcy, (2012, p. 20), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) can be defined as *"A concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis"*. This means that companies should try to implement a process that integrates social, environmental, ethical human rights and consumer concerns into their business operations and core strategy in close collaboration with their stakeholders (European Commission, 2011).

To the International Organization for Standardization (ISO 26000), founded in 1947, social responsibility should ensure that the products selling by a company are safe, reliable and have good quality (ISO 26000, 2013a). In this process, people must be at the beginning, the core and in the end of Social Responsibility approaches, meaning that any organization must create better persons, superior companies and, therefore, a better world (ISO 26000, 2011). These standardizations help companies to be more efficient and effective in their business.

The definition of ISO 26000 refers to environment, society and also the stakeholders, such as the European Commission definition. But, in this concept there are some other relevant ideas that should be added to clarify the meaning of social responsibility. Some of these topics include: transparency, international norms and behaviours, sustainable development, health and societies' welfare (ISO 26000, 2013b).

If companies decide to implement these practices, they may achieve several benefits: (i) more competitive advantages; (ii) better brand reputation in society; (iii) more ability to attract and retain stakeholders, customers, as well as investors, donors, sponsors and the financial community; (iv) keep the employees committed to their job; (v) keep good relationships with companies, governments, media, suppliers, peers, customers and the community in which they operate (ISO 26000, 2010).

ISO 26000 has proposed seven core practices for the correct implementation of CSR which are: (i) organizational or corporate governance; (ii) consumer issues; (iii) fair operating practices; (iv)

environment protection; (v) labour practices; (vi) human rights, and (vii) community involvement and development (Romero, 2010).

Another important concern is the relationship between social responsibility and the financial performance of organizations. In a previous research presented by Loureiro, Dias-Sardinha and Reijnders (2012), they concluded that the positive impact is mainly demonstrated when the cost goes down and when the productivity increases in the organizations. However, customer satisfaction at the moment of deciding between a product that is responsible for the society or one which is not, it is another positive factor for the financial situation of the company (Loureiro et al., 2012). Finally, consumer satisfaction increases the perceived value, meaning the client's perception about quality, price and benefits of a product comparing with competitors (Loureiro et al., 2012).

Recently, some important fashion brands felt the importance of performing some philanthropic activities in order to relieve the damages they may have caused to the environment or society. Unfortunately, in most cases this situation is not necessarily going to last long and therefore it is not going to generate a significant change (Knop, 2013). According to Roberts (2011b), if a fashion luxury brand wants to be successful in the near future, it will need to use some different tools and one of the most important one mentioned is the corporate social responsibility (CSR).

According to Bendell and Kleanthous (2013), as luxury fashion brands have become more accessible, the idea of exclusivity is harder to achieve. So, it is necessary to give consumers an added value in order to find this exclusivity feeling through the use of exceptional environmental and social performance which should be understood as part of the brand value. This will also give to consumer the feeling that brand is aware of some sustainable practices, giving back to all their stakeholders especially to their clients, a feeling of belonging and loyalty of the brand. Luxury brands may suffer from the gap between rich and poor countries (Waller & Hingorani, 2013). Generating well-being is the goal that every luxury fashion brand should aspire for societies. Some of these companies see this approach as a way of retribution to them (Bendell & Kleanthous, 2013). Luxury fashion brands are high influencers about their consumers' behaviour and needs, and in that way they have the flexibility to make clients change their choices about design, distribution and duration of the product. As this is an opportunity for brands, they also have the responsibility to balance this, and promote among their clients a sustainable consumption (Bendell & Kleanthous, 2013).

Nevertheless, fashion luxury brands have been criticized because of being extravagant, overpriced, wasteful and also because they exploit workers and suppliers especially from the third world countries (Waller & Hingorani, 2013). Moore (2011) found that some luxury fashion brands use sweatshop or *maquila* to pay less to the labour, while producing and earning more. The ethical cost of doing this has been very high to developing countries which are the ones that are doing the hard work. Several luxury fashion companies have their production settled in low income or developing countries because labour is cheaper and they can pay minimum salaries, while the CEO and managers are being paid big salaries. Besides, most of the times some of these workers deal with unsafe and insanity conditions and have to work long hours. Some of the previous luxury fashion brands often evade taxes which is not ethically correct and affects the economic performance of these countries (Moore, 2011).

Generation Y

Millennial or Generation Y enjoy technology, entertainment and exciting things. They want experiential activities and they like to be challenged, have fun and have flexibility at the same time (Junginger, 2008). Even so, they are able to sacrifice personal pleasure for the greater common good (Zemke, Raines & Filipczak, 2000), meaning that they are concerned about the world in which they live. According to McDermott (2013), this generation is prepared to fight against these problems since they grew up learning how to fight for a better world and being aware of some principles that are already being applied by them, like CSR.

As most of the millennial generation is now becoming young adults or adults, some companies are being managed or influenced by them and consequently these companies are more interested in being socially responsible. These young dreamers are expected to create a new era of responsible growth that protects the planet and benefits everyone because they are non-conformists (McDermott, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

The current study is exploratory in its nature because it intends to investigate the behaviour of a certain group of people, as well as their motivations that moves that behaviour (what, how and why) (Rafasampetro, 2008). Thus, a direct technique is employed in order to give enough spontaneity to the participants to ensure that they answer the questions without being influenced

by the interviewer (Kvale, 1996). In this vein, in-depth interviews with 31 generation Y participants were conducted in non-structured conversations where the interviewers could freely ask questions. With this kind of interview it is easier to find out about the main motivations, feelings, attitudes and beliefs of the respondents about all the analysed topics (Quiroz, 2011).

Regarding the sample, some experts suggest that sometimes one interview is enough, while other experts and researchers mention that a good option is to interview a population until saturation which can be achieved when no new or relevant information emerges (Given & Saumure, 2008). The methodology employed in this study was previously tested by Baker and Edwards (2012). Therefore, this study was conducted with a sample of 31 interviews. All selected participants were from Europe. In order to assure that the interview was conducted to the proper segment, the first requested information was related to demographic data, such as age, country, education, gender and occupation.

The average age of participants is 25 years (range from 20 to 31), which is aligned with the millennial generation (approximately from 13 to 33 years old; we did not approach people under 18 years). Thereby, 65% of the interviewees are female and 68% are students, while 32% are already working. Regarding education, 19% have a bachelor degree, while the remains 81% have a master degree. Participants are from: Portugal (42%), Italia (10%), France (21%) and Belgium (27%).

Each interview began by explaining the purpose of the research and the request to record, following planned questions, according to Gubrium and Holstein (2001) and Johnson (2001). The average time for each interview was 60 minutes. Specific questions asked were: Would you be more willing to buy a luxury fashion brand that is doing CSR or such won't be a critical aspect in your decision to buy a luxury brand? Why? Do you have some ideas of how a luxury fashion brand can be a better contributor for the environment, the society (and even economically be more sustainable) and the world? Before putting these questions each participant was aware of the meaning of CSR. Regarding data treatment, we started with an impressionistic reading of transcriptions and identification of recurrent main reasons to buy the brand that incorporate CSR practices and suggestions to incorporate CSR practices. The second level of interpretation involved cross-person analysis in order to discover patterns across individuals that could help structure an understanding of the elements behind the core subjects of CSR.

RESULTS

CSR as a critical factor

Majority of interviewees (61%) expressed that they will be more willing to buy products of luxury fashion brands concerned with CSR, 13% didn't know and 26% said that CSR will be a critical factor when they have two brands with similar features. Some of the main reasons that people gave are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Reasons to buy the brand that incorporate CSR practices

Willingness to buy the brand that employs CSR practices	%
"Yes because I feel like I am doing something good and the company too, for someone else". "I would support that because I care about CSR".	35.3%
"Yes, if they are really similar, if they are related with the same lifestyle, if they have equal positioning and exactly the same reputation, I would choose the one that is doing CSR" - "...If the products are the same, price, etc. If everything is the same and I know one is doing CSR and one isn't, then sure I guess I would go for the CSR brand" and "More willing to buy the one using CSR tools since for the same price range it is more socially friendly" then, they will be more willing to choose the product from the brand doing CSR.	29.4%
CSR is now a responsibility of every person and company in the world.	17.6%
I will be more willing. "However, the price is still the main aspect to be considered".	11.8%
"For sure, I will buy the one using CSR. At least they're doing something different".	5.9%

Source: authors' elaboration

Core factors to incorporate CSR practices

Table 2 shows the seven core factors according to the interviewees' suggestions about how to incorporate CSR practices in luxury brands.

Table 2 Core factors to incorporate CSR practices

Suggestions	Percentage
1. Environmental practices	29.8%
"Not using animal fur or skin, giving part of the profits back to the community, using the media attention to promote good causes"	
"... Don't let things go to waste, etc, using 'environmentally friendly' garments perhaps".	
"Engage in some environmental campaigns or pay more attention to the chemicals used that should follow the social responsibility approaches".	
"Using sustainable materials". "Using recyclable materials"	
"...To the environment a good idea could be avoid using products involving the animal suffering like fur, or involving the destruction of trees and forests".	
"...They can emphasize on energy, water saving in production..."	
"Sustainable production, Environmentally friendly machine, product, packaging process..."	

2. Labour Practices	23.4%
<i>"Pay fair salaries, Have good working conditions, Support financially important causes (consider using financial support for social causes)".</i>	
<i>"I think that compensating workers and producers in a fair way could be a good step for these companies to engage with social responsibility".</i>	
<i>"I think that fashion luxury brands can make a big difference when comes to the materials they use, as well as what kind of workforce they use. They can have their collections that would be produced by people in affected areas, they can direct the fashion trends..."</i>	
<i>"... Giving more job opportunities".</i>	
<i>"...A company that can prove not to be using cheap labour will always draw more attention to the public and so influence their buying criteria".</i>	
<i>"Not using 3rd world countries to produce their products".</i>	
<i>"...workers' rights fully respected, equity ... women and disadvantage people..."</i>	
3. Donatives	19.1%
<i>"...donate some % of the product price to an NGO (non-profit organization)"</i>	
<i>"As they have more money they could invest more in charities, or for example sponsoring some humanitarian events, not only fancy ones like tennis tournaments etc".</i>	
<i>"I think that the idea of giving a small percentage of the sales profits to a charity institution would be important to contribute for the society..."</i>	
4. Community Involvement	12.8%
<i>"Brand should use their notoriety and money to improve society through true engagement. Be an ACTIVE partner of a special cause. They should essentially use their influence and their budget to make the difference especially regarding awareness (of what?)".</i>	
<i>"I think the best way this types of brands can help is by using national factories (instead of low cost labour in developing countries) and giving money to institutions".</i>	
<i>"Evovement for people in trouble".</i>	
<i>"Involvement of local producers and creation of educational programs for those communities so that they know how to produce quality goods efficiently".</i>	
<i>"Luxury brands are generally opening more and more the borders...giving more job opportunities. Also there are different brands launching new young artists..."</i>	
<i>"...Instead of donating money or creating charity funds, I believe it is more important to get involved with the people needing the help by for instance looking in how you could get them employed and educated".</i>	
5. Consumer Issues	6.4%
<i>"The people that can afford this kind of products is a minority... if we compare it with the total population. It wouldn't have to matter if most of the population are not their customers but they should try to make a connection and build a relationship with people that can't afford them, CSR would be a very good tool to become closer..."</i>	
<i>"Especially brand from fashion products that are longer living (such as bags) could look in the production of the product for responsible production. They can emphasize on energy and water savings in production, good employee treatment, as well as social campaigns to make social issues popular in the world - e.g. a cool brand such as Louis Vuitton - promoting an important social issue - maybe that will inspire people start thinking about it and act responsible".</i>	
<i>"...Advertising that has a social role".</i>	
6. Fair Operating Practices	4.3%

<i>"I believe that each company have to look into their core business and research for opportunities in the CSR field that are tightly related to their business i.e. fashion luxury brand that invests on fair trading of textiles, or in training programs for people to be reintegrated into the society through fashion".</i>	
<i>"Have a good production chain".</i>	
7. Organizational Governance	2.1%
<i>"Sustainable production, Environmentally friendly machines and equipment, product, packaging process, workers' rights fully respected, equity women and disadvantage people, not corruption on the administration panel, transparency on the company finance, etc".</i>	

Source: authors' elaboration

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings, and having in consideration that we conducted an exploratory research, two main points emerge from this research: first, the conceptualization of luxury fashion brands and second, the CSR is suggested to be a critical factor and even environmental and labour practices as the main suggestions of CSR implementation.

First, regarding luxury fashion brands conceptualization, the definition about luxury brands pointed out by Mansharamani and Khanna (2013) may be related with the motivations that were mentioned by the interviewees. Ranking from the most important to the less important one, the respondents mentioned that high level of quality, exclusivity, uniqueness and status, design, personal satisfaction, aesthetic, elegance, desired lifestyle, tradition of the company, value or investment of the products and consistency of sizes are the 10 most important motivations for buying luxury fashion products.

Although the suggestions made by the participants were coincident to the core factors, the order of importance comparing the one provided by ISO 26000 from the most relevant to the less relevant, was not the same collected from the results of the study. The environmental issues and labour practices are the most cited, commented and recommended by participants. Millennial people are a generation with no barriers, they know how to use new technologies and how to be influencers, although they are also easy to influence if companies know how to use the tools. They are commonly influenced by opinion leaders and by the word spread through social media and by diverse technological communicational tools. Y's are concerned about the world, they know what they want, they like to enjoy their time and use it as they want, with flexibility. They are adolescents or young adults and some of them are starting to have important positions in the companies and are able to influence the companies with their new ideas.

The perceptions of the Millennial about the influence of CSR in the luxury fashion brands is related to how the brands communicate their actions and although CSR is sometimes used as a marketing tool, luxury brands shouldn't do it with the purpose of selling, because it is one of the anti-laws for luxury fashion brands, that is, "*The role of advertising is not to sell...it is just to make young people dream about them*" (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009a). Therefore, according to our findings, the interviewees ask for brands to communicate their actions more intensively and explain real facts about what they are doing concerning this practices. Y's want to feel involved in social issues and causes. Luxury fashion brands should use different approaches to communicate which younger audiences in order to engage them, without the need to sell their products. However, the goal for companies is always to boost their sales, so increasing revenues from CSR is not necessarily wrong.

Theoretical implications

Luxury fashion brands in Europe are not performing in the same way as they were doing in the end of 20th Century due to diverse factors. One of the most important aspects may be the economic crisis going on over the last years. Although, the market for luxury fashion brands has grown since 2010, the most of the growth is occurring in emerging countries and because Asian consumers have turned into important consumers to the European market (Roberts, 2011b).

According to the research findings, 55% of the sample say that corporate social responsibility, in fact, is a good motivator at the moment of deciding to purchase a specific product from a luxury fashion brand, because they enjoy to support social issues and causes and the main reason to do that is to foster a sustainable development. Although some of them answer that they won't change their minds and that it won't affect their shopping behaviour, some others answer that they don't care about corporate practices and that the price is a disincentive for them. Furthermore, 61% of the young respondents also mention the fact that if they have to choose between two brands they will be more willing to buy the one with CSR because they will feel good to help someone else and also because they think that *CSR is a responsibility of each person in the planet*.

This generation is well informed about the CSR practices and are very open to give some ideas of how luxury fashion brands can help to improve the world. The environmental issues are the most mentioned concerns, followed by labour practices and the last ones to be mentioned are about how

the governance of the companies should be managed and the human rights, being these last one the most important.

Managerial implications

There are some luxury fashion brands that are performing better than others concerning CSR practices. Being such an important issue for the consumers and potential consumers nowadays, these practices may be included as an important part of their business. In fact, CSR is a very important issue for these young consumers, when 61% of them mentioned that *they will be more willing to buy fashion luxury brands which are using CSR tools* to help to improve the companies and at the same time the society and the world.

Communication is one of the most important tools that luxury brands should use to be close to the Millennial and to let them know which are their actions concerning these practices. There are many ways to communicate, but the Millennial Generation is very focused on technological media, especially social networks, but also word-of-mouth and opinion leaders are very important for them. They are used to have interaction with the companies and with other consumers or potential consumers before deciding to buy a product, even after the purchase has been made. For this, they are using different channels and media. This is a generation which is used to fast changes, it is really demanding and well informed.

According to the answers given by the interviewees, it is possible to see that there is a good level of knowledge about the general ideas of these practices, but it is necessary to prioritize which should be first and which is the less relevant subject among all of them. This should be known not only by consumers or employees, but may also be transmitted to every stakeholders of the company, including all the people from society who is involved with the company's practices.

Fashion luxury brands which are open to these practices, have the option to publish an environmental report. As these practices are not mandatory, this report is also not, but if they want to transmit their actions about CSR in a proper way, this could be a good starting point in order to let people know and have the certainty about what luxury fashion brands are doing to improve the world and the society.

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