

Conspicuous conservation

Using semiotics to understand sustainable luxury

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This paper investigates the meaning of sustainable luxury among the wealthy, who are the primary target group of luxury brands. In doing so, it highlights the interest of using a combination of semiotics tools (Peirce's and Greimas' paradigms) to analyse consumers' discourses. Indeed, understanding the sign-value of a brand *in relation to* the natural environment and society is paramount to the development of CSR activities, in order to avoid, on one side, being perceived as greenwashing and, on the other, losing the brand meaning and authenticity. Findings indicate that the luxury clientele opposes 'ascribed luxury' (discreet and emphasising traditional manufacturing techniques) to 'achieved luxury' (conspicuous and marketed). The contribution of luxury brands to society welfare should be located on a continuum between sustainability in ethos and along the supply chain, and pure philanthropic actions, both being worthy in consumers' views, and both being expected from luxury brands to different degrees, depending on the brand ascribed or achieved status.

Introduction

Luxury is thus a key element in the drive to consume and the effect of this is to generate profits, and thereby, maintain capitalism, whilst simultaneously, from the Green Perspective, depleting the stock of sustainable resources.

(Berry 1994)

Sustainable development has become the challenge for all industries over the past decade, under the pressure of governments, NGOs and consumers. This new paradigm integrates the promotion of eco-friendly practices, such as the reduction of carbon emissions along the value chain, the economy of natural resources and the conservation of biodiversity, in addition to

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social and ethical considerations related to society's welfare. Sustainable development policies and actions aim to improve our ecological and social environment, and make it last over generations.

Lately, the luxury industry has been criticised heavily for its poor commitment to society's welfare, through reports such as WWF's *Deeper Luxury* (Bendell & Kleanthous 2007) and ECRA's *Style over Substance* (Moore 2011). Yet, sustainable development is presented as a top priority by luxury conglomerates (see PPR Home for the long Run at www.pprlive.com) and luxury confederations – for instance, the World Jewellery Confederation (Kendall 2010). Several luxury business summits have focused on issues related to sustainability (e.g. IHT Sustainable Luxury Conference 2009). Sustainability has emerged as a new business model for certain corporations, such as Stella McCartney, Noir, Katherine Hamnett and Edun. Other corporations integrate sustainability at different levels of their activities along the value chain (e.g. Tiffany, Porsche and LVMH environment charters). Finally, corporations engage in philanthropy; they promote a cause and contribute financially to it (Armani and Unicef, Louis Vuitton and the Climate Project). One of the reasons behind these actions is the pressure of several groups of consumers, who consider Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a determinant criterion in their purchase behaviours (Mohr *et al.* 2001). Consumers, women in particular, consider that being green, ethical and socially responsible is a major marker of high-end goods (Bevolo *et al.* 2009). In addition, luxury brands fear that not-for-profit organisations will harm their equity through violent attacks on their environmental and social misbehaviours, such as PETA with its 'Bloody Burberry' campaign or ForestEthics with 'Victoria's Dirty Secret' (Cervellon 2012). CSR, in 'doing good' (such as contributing to charities) and less visibly 'not doing harm' (all along the value chain), acts as a 'reputation insurance' in times of adverse events (Minor & Morgan 2011).

Yet, in the layman's view, 'sustainable luxury' is still considered an oxymoron. Luxury etymologically means excess (from the Latin *luxus*). Most definitions relate luxury to superfluity, waste and something 'not absolutely necessary', while sustainability is considered essential (Berry 1994). Berry (1994, p. 224), on behalf of Laveleye, asserts that 'Luxury is unjustifiable because it leads men to squander on useless superfluities what ought to be given to the poor.' In history, luxury has been evoked as weakening society, one of the causes of the destruction of the Roman Empire (Mortelmans 2005) or the French Revolution in 1789, illustrated with Marie-Antoinette's misattributed response to breadless peasants' plight: 'Let them eat cake.' On the contrary, sustainable consumption

promotes a frugal lifestyle, in order to build a strong society for generations to come. Yet, since the late-2000s financial crisis, consumers have been in search of new ways to indulge without guilt and demonstrate status without shame (Cervellon & Carey 2011; Davies *et al.* 2012). As stated in the *Independent* by journalist E. Dugan (2008), 'We used to spend our money showing people how much money we have got; now we are spending our money on supporting our moral concerns.' Consequently, a new form of conspicuous consumption, conspicuous conservation, is born. The paradox: 'going green to be seen'. Research has shown that activating status motives leads consumers to choose green options, particularly when shopping in public and when the green products are more expensive than the non-green alternatives (Griskevicius *et al.* 2010). The challenge for luxury brands is to engage in CSR activities without, on one side, losing brand authenticity (Grayson & Martinec 2004) and, on the other side, being perceived by consumers as greenwashing (Mohr *et al.* 2001).

This paper aims to provide guidance to corporations regarding these CSR strategic issues. It investigates the meaning of sustainable luxury among the wealthy, who are the primary target group of luxury brands. Research has shown that identification with a company (through attitude and affective commitment) influences responses to CSR activities (Perez 2009). For this reason, the research focuses specifically on the process by which high-status consumers decode high-status brands' relations to sustainable development and how brand meaning is transferred to the consumer (McCracken 1986). Luxury products are bought 'neither for a certain use-value, nor for their symbolic role in some interpersonal relationship but for their additional meaning in consumer society ... We therefore define luxury products as those products that have a sign-value on top of (or in substitution of) their functional and economical meaning' (Mortelmans 2005, p. 510). Consequently, semiotics (the study of signs) provides an interpretative model for the understanding of consumers' meaning on sustainable luxury.

First, this paper analyses, under Peirce's paradigm, how consumers infer meaning from the brand and its relation to the natural environment. To reduce the scope of the analysis and relate to a current issue in the luxury industry (the protection of endangered species) and a current cause ('save your logo', which raises funds from brands that have an animal visual), all luxury brands selected portray animals. Second, consumers' discourses on sustainable luxury are decoded. Greimas' square maps the semiotic dimensions of sustainable luxury across consumers' discourses. Lastly, the study investigates informants' interpretation of the saveyourlogo.

org campaign for three brands (Lacoste, Armani and Harley-Davidson). Based on these results, the paper discusses the sustainability models complementary to luxury brands as well as the role of the semiotics of consumer discourses in building CSR strategies.

Background

The role of the logo in communicating the luxury brand DNA

Many logos in the luxury industry were designed in the late 19th and early to mid-20th centuries, making a tribute to the European heraldic tradition (Carls 1989). For this reason, they portray shields (Porsche, Burberry, Lamborghini), crowns (Ritz-Carlton, Church's) and seals (Versace). The animal thematic originates from the same tradition. In the Middle Ages, it designated the family and rank of the bearer (Carls 1989). It could also be an indicator of cultural origin, certain animals such as the lion being more often present on coats of arms in southern Europe, while others such as the eagle were preponderant in Germanic Europe (Pastoureau 1984). Hence, the animal, together with the place and date (Burberry, London, established 1856), anchored the brand among the products favoured by the aristocratic class, much as Absolut Vodka claims to be 'the vodka of the royal Swedish family'.

Indeed, in the luxury industry, logos signal the status and/or connoisseurship of the bearer (Han *et al.* 2010). The prominence of the logo is an element that counts for consumers with a high need for status. In contrast, consumers with a low need for status favour discreet logos or silent brands. Loud logos communicate status and trendiness at a distance but might be perceived as showing off, conspicuous and superficial by consumers in search of understatement. For this reason, many luxury brands tone down their logo and communicate their roots with discretion (Han *et al.* 2010). The most expensive labels of Ralph Lauren (Purple and Black) do not carry the horse. Luxury connoisseurs – the group that Han and colleagues (2010) name Patricians – 'recognise Berluti shoes at a distance; when getting nearer they recognise Berluti wax,' declared a private membership cigar club manager to the researcher. The Patricians are in search of real quality, attention to detail, craftsmanship – all elements attached to the name and heritage of the brand (what the brand is) and not to its visual identifier (what the brand claims it is). Many brands with outstanding luxury and quality credentials do not communicate with a logo at all. For instance, Bottega Veneta has communicated since the

1970s through the tagline ‘When your own initials are enough’, without logos. In contrast, for those brands with conspicuous logos, the logo is a determinant criterion of choice and the most important communication tool. Lacoste is an example of a brand that cannot get rid of its logo, as the tagline of its campaign ‘Welcome back, Croc’ testifies.

The conspicuous role of those luxury logos makes them an important stake in the protection of the environment. Major pro-environmental organisations blame luxury fashion brands for the use of furs and leather in their collections (Bendell & Kleanthous 2007). Some of them go as far as to suggest that the representation of animals in logos is a form of exploitation and that, consequently, brands have a duty to the biodiversity of our planet. In turn, these organisations use these brand logos with a view to protecting animal species. For instance, PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) uses the Donna Karan New York logo distorted into Donna Karan Bunny Butcher, to denounce the use of rabbit furs in DKNY collections (PETA 2011). Other organisations use animal logos to get private investment. For instance, ‘Save your logo’ is an original French initiative from the *Fonds de Dotation pour la Biodiversité*, which creates events in order to gain private funding to promote the protection of biodiversity. The funds are invested in the protection of endangered species such as crocodiles, the unicorn rhinoceros, the African elephant, the royal eagle and certain dolphins. Partners include Lacoste (for the crocodile), the paper brand Okay (for the elephant) and the insurance company MAAF (for the dolphin). The brand Lacoste communicates heavily its action in favour of the protection of the crocodile through its logo and a print campaign that emphasises the fragility of the crocodile (FDB 2011).

Semiotics in the marketplace

Although one of the oldest paradigms in understanding meaning (Lawes 2002; Mick & Oswald 2006), the use of semiotics in consumer research remains limited. Yet Ogilvie and Mizerski (2011, p. 651) acknowledge the resurgence of semiotics in consumer research, as ‘a useful framework within which to examine issues related to symbolism and meaning’ in a consumption context. Their investigation into women’s consumption of cosmetics indicates that women’s experience and cultural influence shape their interpretation of the codes of beauty and their understanding of what society approves. It illustrates the useful role of semiotics in researching consumer phenomena.

Along with Ogilvie and Mizerski’s (2011) research, several scholars have

studied consumption phenomenon, within Peirce's (1931–58) framework. Following Peirce, a sign relation is triadic: the representamen (the sign) denotes an object (the subject matter of a sign) through an interpretant (mental representation of the relation between the representamen and the object). 'Namely, a sign is something, A, which brings something, B, its interpretant sign determined or created by it, into the same sort of correspondence with something, C, its object, as that in which itself stands to C' (Peirce 1902, NEM 4, pp. 20–21). Of the different sign–object relations, three are most widely illustrated in marketing research: the iconic, indexical and symbolic relations. The *icon* is a sign that denotes its object by virtue of resemblance (Abercrombie moose and a moose), the *index* by virtue of causal or spatio-temporal connection (smoke and fire), the symbol by virtue of cultural rules and conventions (rainbow and gay). Peirce's model has been used to assist in product design and interpret advertisements (for reviews see Mick *et al.* 2004; Mick & Oswald 2006). It has also been useful to understand the meaning potentiated by brand logos (Morgado 1993; Mick 1986). Morgado (1993), in particular, demonstrates that brand logos involving animals have iconic qualities (portraying the animal) but also, and more interestingly, indexical qualities (implying status) and symbolic qualities (embodied by cultural or mythical associations about the animal). Last, Peirce's framework was used to understand the meaning consumers attach to certain possessions (irreplaceable possessions, Grayson & Schulman 2000) or to authentic objects (Grayson & Martinec 2004).

In turn, the use of Greimas' semiotics framework has been pretty limited in the academic literature, although this framework has proved useful in mapping relations between concepts when analysing consumers' discourses (Floch 1988). Greimas' semiotics is a structural approach that does not focus on the signs but on 'the relations which inter-define them'. The semiotic square (Greimas & Rastier 1968), inspired by the Aristotelian Square of Opposition, maps these relationships between semiotic signs. Relations between signs might be of three types: contrary (male/female), contradictory (female/non-female) and complementary (male/non-female). Dano *et al.* (2003) investigated consumers' perception and attitudes regarding male cosmetics, and unravelled these oppositions between the codes male/female and cosmetics for self/for others. Kessous and Roux (2008) also use Greimas' framework to map consumers' meaning of nostalgia, along the opposing dimensions of 'continuity' versus 'discontinuity'. Floch (1988) employed Greimas' semiotics to identify the values consumers attach to the hypermarket and define its interior

space organisation. Greimas' framework has proven particularly useful in mapping consumers' perceptions, positioning products and building advertising strategies (Mick & Oswald 2006).

Method

In order to understand the meaning attached to sustainable luxury, a qualitative framework was chosen (McCracken 1986). Data were collected in the context of semi-structured focus groups, directed through specific questions, but allowing for the flexibility to adapt to group dynamics. Following grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967), no priori theoretical framework was imposed on the data. Two focus groups were organised with women clients of luxury brands, resident in wealthy European cities. A description of these women is provided in Table 1. The first group was composed of six wealthy to extremely wealthy women (high net worth individuals with over US\$1 million in liquid investable assets in the household, Beaverstock *et al.* 2010) living in the Principality of Monaco and Cap d'Ail neighbourhood. The second group was composed of eight women with upper income levels, living in Nice (mass affluent, US\$100K to \$1 million in liquid investable assets in the household, Beaverstock *et al.*

Table 1 List of informants

Pseudo	Age	Nationality	Occupation	Status car ¹	Status bag ²
Gaia	In her 60s	Italian	Retired	Jaguar	L.Vuitton
Grace	In her 40s	Lebanese	Housewife	Bentley	Celine
Helen	In her 40s	British	Housewife	Porsche	L.Vuitton
Clara	In her 50s	French	Housewife	BMW	Hermes
Marie	In her 60s	French	Ex-Model	—	Prada
Sofia	In her 40s	Italian	Housewife	Porsche	Fendi
Carole	In her 20s	French	Boutique Manager	Audi	Lancel
Alexia	In her 30s	French	Professor	Mini	Gucci
Pamela	In her 40s	French	Professor	Audi	L.Vuitton
Nathalie	In her 40s	French	Restaurant Manager	Audi	Longchamp
Sandrine	In her 20s	French	Housewife	BMW	Bottega Veneta
Anna	In her 60s	French	Retired	—	Hermes
Eve	In her 60s	French	Retired	Mercedes	Lancel
Karin	In her 40s	French	M. Doctor	Mercedes	Lancel

Notes

Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the informants

¹ The car driven by informants the day of the focus group

² The bag carried by informants the day of the focus group

2010). All women are clients of luxury boutiques, own one or several luxury bags, as well as (in the household) at least one luxury car. Snowball sampling was used: a friend would invite a friend, client of luxury brands and private banks. The focus groups were organised as ‘tea parties’ of about two hours. Women were invited to a tea salon with the purpose of discussing luxury brands. The focus groups were conducted in French, as it was the common language for everyone in both groups. Results in both groups being similar, findings are not presented based on comparisons between groups.

As starting point, the participants were proposed 24 logos of luxury brands, all representing animals, to reduce the scope of the analysis and relate to a current issue: the protection of animals and the participation of brands to the ‘save your logo’ fundraising. Logos had been selected based on a free-elicitation task among university students on the basis of a clear association between the animal and the brand. For this reason, logos with wings (Aston Martin and Bentley) that do not refer clearly to a specific bird, were not selected. Women were asked to organise brand logos into two groups based on the perceived similarity of the brands, without paying attention to the industry. When the participants reached a consensus, they had to justify their categorisation. Then, they had to redo the job, finding another element of similarity and dissimilarity between the brands. The exercise, presented as a game, allowed participants to voice freely their perceptions of the different brands. Second time around, the participants had to comment on the meaning of sustainable luxury and their expectations related to the sustainability of luxury brands. They had to illustrate their thoughts as much as possible using the 24 brands proposed by the researcher. Last, informants had to react to the participation of specific brands in the protection of animals through the ‘save your logo’ campaign. The brands selected (Lacoste, Armani, Harley-Davidson) portray animals that are included in the programme of the organisation (the crocodile and the eagle).

The data analysed through semiotics are presented in the following section. The structure of this section follows the structure of the group interviews. First, we explore consumers’ decoding of the different brands based on their visual markers through Peirce’s semiotic framework. Second, we unravel the meaning of sustainable luxury, and identify the relationship between luxury and different forms of sustainability under Greimas’ paradigm. Finally, we identify the boundaries within which luxury brands should communicate their sustainable actions, in order to avoid being perceived as greenwashing.

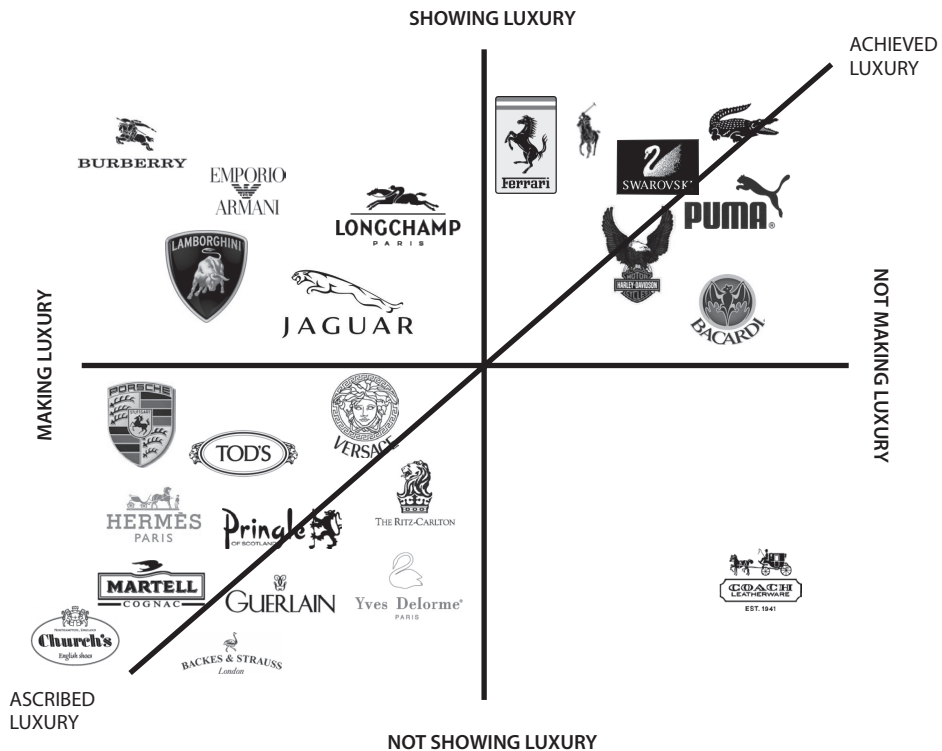
Findings

Meaning encoded by brand logos and decoded by consumers

The first characteristic used to discriminate between brands was the visibility or discretion of the logo in both focus groups. In group 1 (Monaco), women grouped the logo along the dimension visible/discreet; in group 2 (Nice), along show-off/discreet. This dimension opposes brands that show luxury to brands that do not show luxury. Informants considered as 'showing luxury' those brands that would make an extensive use of the logo on their products or in communication. With no arguing, Polo Ralph Lauren and Lacoste were considered by informants as the most conspicuous, as the logo is the only element of differentiation used by the brand. 'Lacoste polos are purchased for the crocodile,' mentioned Helen. 'Wearing Polo is bad taste, the chavs enjoy the style because of the big logo. The bigger the logo, the better,' continued Grace. 'The [Ferrari] cars are soooo show off. But look at the logo. I did not remember the ugly yellow. Clearly you see the logo at a distance. The red cars also. So much in the face,' commented Sofia. Also about Ferrari, Clara added: 'Ferrari sells its logo on all kind of products, from lighters to perfumes. I wonder who wants to wear a perfume made by a brand of cars?' Burberry was also mentioned as a conspicuous brand, although informants discussed the efforts the brand had made during recent years to become more discreet in its use of the knight and the check. On the other side of the dimension 'not showing luxury', Church's was considered the epitome of discretion. It is considered a silent brand. As mentioned by Nathalie, 'I have the impression that the logo whispers.' One informant regretted that the Cartier panther would not be among the brands proposed by the researcher. Cartier's panther is anchored in French luxury imagery. Yet, there is no stylistic drawing of the panther on the logo. For this reason, the researcher had not included the Cartier logo. Grace mentioned: 'The panther is very present in my mind. I see its representation on my husband's cigar box. It is written Cartier nowhere on the box. But everyone knows.'

A second characteristic separating brands emerged through long discussions between informants around the idea of signalling old vs new wealth (focus group 1, Monaco) or signalling brands with heritage vs contemporary brands (focus group 2, Nice). Across groups, informants discussed old wealth/heritage as grouping brands that are 'really luxury' because they 'make luxury': they manufacture luxury products based on a heritage supposed ancestral. As one notices in Figure 1, brands are grouped by informants based on an indexical relation (Peirce 1931–58) between the

visual representation and the heraldic tradition of animals on coats of arms. The indexical value of the logo is interpreted through acknowledgement of the historical roots of the brand. The animal trademark is a mark of the clan, in the same way as knights wore embroidered signs over their armour to identify with their allies and dissociate themselves from their enemies. The animal emblem ascribes status to the brand and, by association, to the bearer. The ‘making luxury’ group encompasses European brands dating back to the 19th century or early to mid-20th century, with supposed history and nobility that passes from generation to generation. Logos were classified in this category when they were directly referring to the heraldic tradition (Ritz-Carlton crown, Porsche and Lamborghini shield, Burberry knight, Longchamp horse racing, Hermes horse-drawn carriage, Pringle and Tods lion blazon, Armani imperial eagle, Versace medusa seal) or when the drawing of the animal was simplified and stylistic (Guerlain bee, Delorme swan, Jaguar). Sandrine goes on: ‘Compare the Harley logo and the Armani, there is a sense of nobility in Armani due to the purity and the



Note: All logos are the property of their owners. They are used for purpose of illustration

Figure 1 Perpetual map of selected luxury brands

simplicity of the logo. Harley's logo is very realistic in all details ... Also, the puma [for Puma] is very realistic if you compare to Jaguar.' Within these groups, two distinct expressions of nobility emerge. First, a group of logos that points to 'the nobility of arms' based on the idea of conquest: it is the visible aspects of nobility. Burberry knight and Armani imperial and conquering eagle are emblematic of this group. These logos are visible and dynamic. Second, a group of logos that indexes the cultural aspects of the aristocracy – these logos are discreet and peaceful.

On the right of the map, the brands are not considered as 'making luxury'. This group of brands does not present the characteristics of 'true luxury' in informants' view. They are less exclusive and more mass produced. The quality of their products is questioned. Yet they try to affiliate with 'true luxury' in appearance. Ferrari is part of this group due to the overuse of the logo on merchandising items (T-shirts, lighters, etc.). This massive exploitation of the brand name on non-exclusive products makes the brand lose its 'luxury' character. These brands represent an achieved status acquired through commercial activities. Under Peirce's framework, logos are grouped based on virtue of the symbolic function of the animal. Symbols denote their objects by convention, logical or cultural rule. In this case, the animals were chosen for their symbolism and unique traits conveying strength and success. To accentuate the encoding of the animal symbolic traits, brands show animals in expression of their power. They portray symbolically animals that humans fear (the bat, the puma, the crocodile, the eagle), in reference to mystery and seductive darkness (Morgado 1993). Morgado (1993) suggests that the crocodile is a form of dragon. It would have magical power, as illustrated in Chinese culture by medical potions made out of dried alligators. The informants infer meaning from each logo based on the position and movement of the animal. The Lacoste crocodile means success as an outcome of ambitious motives. Its mouth is wide open. Gaia explains: 'When one is described as a crocodile, it means he will do anything to succeed, including eating your meal.' The puma jumps over the barriers erected in its way. Harley's eagle with its wings open is demonstrating strength. Sofia said, 'The eagle is after its prey. It is going to attack.' The Ferrari horse embodies performance and speed; in Ferrari's logo, it lashes out. Bacardi's night bird, the bat, is in a frightening position, wings open. Overall, these brands convey an image of status achieved through communication via the logo.

Figure 1 reflects the position of the different brands as perceived by consumers along these two dimensions. The nearer the logo is to the axes, the more the informants were hesitating between two categories. Three

groups of brands are constituted, based on their making luxury, making and showing luxury, and showing luxury. The brands 'not making' and 'not showing' luxury are not considered as luxury at all. Based on the map, a third dimension appears that separates brands' ascribed and achieved status, which we coin ascribed and achieved luxury. The terms 'ascribed status' and 'achieved status' refer to the nature of social systems. Foladare (1969, p. 53) defines 'ascribed status as assigned to individuals without reference to their innate differences or abilities, and achieved status as requiring special qualities and open to individual achievement. Thus, accident of birth determines an individual's ascribed statuses and performance or effort or volition determines his achieved statuses.'

Sustainable luxury: oxymoron or pleonasm?

In a second phase, informants were asked to comment on the meaning of sustainable luxury. First, they identified different areas in which they were expecting luxury brands to be sustainable. The different comments regarding sustainability could be coded along five themes (see Figure 2). First, reducing pollution of water and CO₂ emissions; second, protecting the soil, the species (vegetal and animal) and workers; the protection of consumers – for instance, not harming the physical and psychological health of clients (in reference to bulimia-anorexia, for instance) was also mentioned; third, economising resources and not wasting through recycling and reusing materials; fourth, being respectful of natural beauty and living species, including humans (for instance, informants mentioned that Ferrari and Harley engine noises were disrespectful of the nature and the people around; they also mentioned that the visibility of Ferrari flags and accessories in Monaco could be considered visual pollution; respect was also linked to the ethical treatment of workers and clients – for instance, not being discriminatory regarding age, body size or ethnical characteristics; fifth and finally, the notion of 'giving back' what ones take from nature and from society was discussed in terms of financial contribution to social and environmental causes – for instance, Gaia said, 'their wealthy clients give to charities; there is a charity event organised almost every month, if not every week [in Monaco]; I would find it indecent if corporations do not contribute first.'

Second, informants discussed their expectations regarding sustainability in relation to the brands proposed by the researcher. As a rule of thumb, informants mentioned that the more luxury the brand, the more sustainable it should be, logically. First, informants evoked the 'slow'

manufacturing process, which opposes fast processes in less sustainable sectors such as fast food or fast fashion. The luxury industry embodies craftsmanship and traditional modes of production, supposedly respectful of the environment. Carole mentioned: 'We discuss slow food not fast food. Products are not standardised; they are manufactured in small quantities and often customised.' A French informant, Eve, added: 'The production of fine wines, Champagne and Cognac uses processes reflecting century-old traditions. Grapes grow in harmony with the environment. They are picked by hand. The wine matures slowly in caves ... A Mouton Rothschild dating back to the Second World War is sustainable, don't you think?' When asked about the meaning she places on green wines, she declared, 'One finds on shelves the same branded wines with the AB/organic labels and without the label. It is a marketing trick. The terroir, the grapes are exactly the same. Fine wines cannot compromise to put Bio on their bottles. What works for Beaujolais does not work for Bourgogne.'

Luxury goods are also supposed to exploit natural resources that are rare and not necessarily renewable (certain materials like copper or animal skins). Consequently, informants imagine that luxury brands try to protect 'what secures money for the future' (in French, *leur gagne-pain*). Luxury is also associated with purity and perfection. One informant mentioned that pollution does not fit with the idea she had of an immaculate Delorme liner. Also, informants imagined that the use of cotton and silk is ecological. Karin's statements illustrate this opinion: 'These brands use natural materials. Silk, cotton, bamboo, linen, leather, gold. There is very little plastic involved. Even the packaging is not made out of plastic. They use wood, glass, crafted paper, which I suppose is recyclable. The plastic is the most polluting material.'

The relation of luxury brands to specific geographical areas is also important, for three reasons. First, informants mention that luxury goods are produced locally, which reduces the emission of CO₂ involved in the transportation of the goods. Anna said, 'Most bags you purchase on the market now are produced in China. To the exception of luxury bags. Chanel and Gucci are made in Italy where they find the best craftsmen in the world.' In addition, certain geographical origins fit better with the idea of sustainability. Helen declares: 'When I see all those Porsche Cayenne in a country of 2 kms² ... I wonder why my husband purchased one. Porsche is putting forward its policies in favour of the environment. Porsche cars, indeed, pollute less than Italian cars. Yet, I can't believe a four-wheel drive does not pollute at all.' Informants mention that the German car industry, with BMW and Porsche at the forefront, are engaged in programmes to

become sustainable. Germany conveys a country-of-origin effect that fits with environmental friendliness. In addition, the reputation of German cars in terms of engineering makes the proposition of sustainability credible. Last, status is conferred to all brands on the left of the perceptual map through anchoring in the heraldic notion of ‘clans’ who protect their ‘soil’ and their ‘subjects’. It confers sacredness to animals and natural elements present on the soil. A French informant, Nathalie, mentioned that Louis IX was depicted under a tree. Several informants also added that some kings and queens had a ‘cult’ of certain animals, such as the horse, which was often considered better than peasants. Also, peasants were working on the soil in exchange for the protection of their masters. For this reason, most luxury brands have a tribute to their ‘terroir’, or ‘roots’, and are supposed to be active players in the protection of the soil where they were born.

Luxury products are also supposed to have quality that lasts for generations, surviving the first owner. Anna mentioned, ‘I collect luxury branded bags and travel trunks. I have several Hermes bags 50 years old and a Louis Vuitton trunk from beginning of the 20th century, which probably travelled on the seven seas. These objects have passed the ages without much damage because the craftsmen aimed at perfection. They still do and they make us pay the price.’ Eve added: ‘Look at the advertisement for Patek Philip – quality watches are transmitted from generations to generations. I invest in quality products because I know my grand-daughter will wear them in 20 years.’ The idea of durability is a central tenet of the luxury industry. Products that have gone through age are more valued – for instance, the vintage market for clothes or the retro market for cars (Cervellon *et al.* 2012). Ralph Lauren sells vintage clothes in its flagship stores in Paris and London. Louis Vuitton repairs its bags, whatever the age. One informant, Marie, mentioned that ‘I spend the winter in a little island near Sicily. The salted air alters the clutches of my LV bags. I went in LV Monaco with four LV bags. They told me we repair any bag ... 100 euro per clutch ... at least two clutches to change per bag. It is expensive but the bags will last for another decade.’

The philanthropic activities of luxury brands are also evoked, particularly the participation of Armani in Unicef campaigns. Informants agree that those brands that benefit from incredible revenues thanks to the exploitation of natural resources and human artistry should ‘give back’, in whatever way possible. Carole said: ‘These brands [Lacoste and Abercrombie] are popular among a golden crowd of teenagers. They should promote a responsible behaviour among their clients. Not only deter them to buy

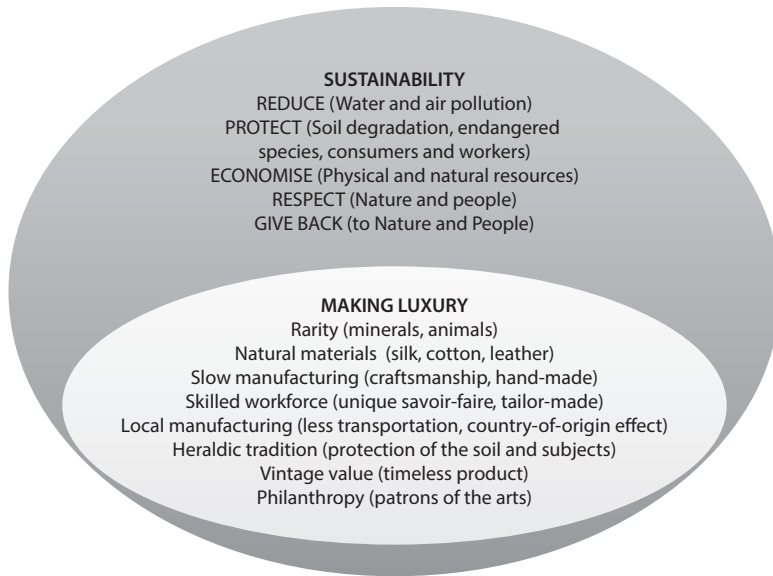


Figure 2 Decoding the consumer's meaning of sustainable luxury

counterfeits.' Yet, brands' contribution should be devoid of commercial purposes, otherwise there is a risk of consumer backlash. Julie commented: 'It should be out of genuine interests. When I see those brands which engage in causes just to sell more butter, I get mad. Luxury brands should not fall into this mediocrity.' The existence of a link between the brand and the cause is paramount. About Ferrari, Clara commented: 'Ferrari could not promote the protection of the environment in my opinion. Its image with the Grand Prix is too far from being environmental-friendly. Yet, for instance, why not participate in the Red campaign. Coca-Cola does.'

Across industries, women oppose traditional manufacturing techniques to modern marketing techniques. The principles of sustainability fit with the idea of informants' luxury for all brands, which are grounded in savoir-faire: craftsmanship for fashion, fine engineering for cars, and ancestral tradition for wine and alcohol. These brands are expected to have a sustainable supply chain by virtue of production in small quantities and through the use of traditional processes. On the contrary, brands that are 'marketed', such as Ferrari (through its line of accessories) or Beaujolais (through the Beaujolais Nouveau yearly event), and brands that are perceived as conspicuous either through the prominence of their logo (Lacoste) and/or certain attributes of their products (Harley-Davidson noise) do not naturally fit with the notion of sustainability: 'Ferrari

hybrid cars would be considered a good joke. The noise of the car is a source of pollution. Look at the drivers. They are interested in appearance and prestige, not in the welfare of the planet,' mentions Anna. Another informant, Nathalie, also mentions the noise of Harley-Davidson as a polluting attribute, yet one of the most important brand signals. Ferrari's and Harley's propositions would be altered if integrating ethical and sustainable credentials. They would lose their authenticity (Grayson & Martinec 2004). 'I do not think that Harley's angels are angels ... imagine a brand for wannabee bad boys which would claim green friendly. Certainly it would lose its appeal,' commented Clara. However, these brands are expected to contribute to social welfare through putting their financial and marketing power in social and environmental causes. The pitfall is to be perceived as greenwashing.

These elements are summarised through the use of Greimas' semiotic square (see Figure 3). The first opposition concerns the luxury brands that are anchored in savoir-faire and the heraldic tradition (MAKING; Ascribed luxury status) and those that are anchored in the marketing tradition (SHOWING; Achieved luxury status). This dimension is a continuum with brands that combine different levels of making and showing. MAKING is complementary to NOT SHOWING its sustainable actions. Informants

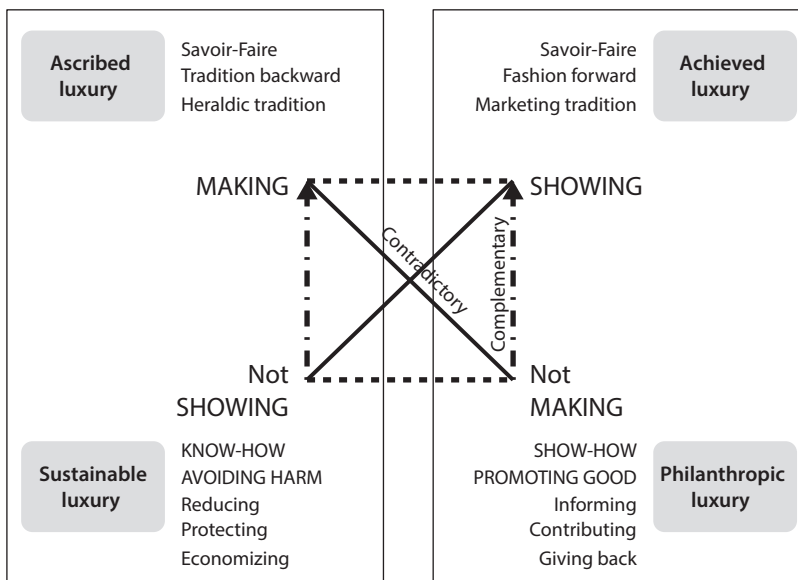


Figure 3 Greimas' semiotic square of sustainable luxury

expect these luxury brands to BE sustainable (Sustainable luxury) and not show that they are. SHOWING is complementary to NOT MAKING (Philanthropic luxury). Informants consider that these brands would alter their authenticity and credibility if 'making sustainable'. Informants expect these luxury brands would put their marketing power into the promotion of good causes and give back to nature and society. Yet, cause-related marketing might be perceived as greenwashing if the objective is perceived as not promoting a cause but as being exploitative of a cause for commercial purposes. In between being sustainable in mission and philanthropic in ethos, the combination of sustainable and philanthropic actions is a matter of degree, and has to fit with the brand ascribed or achieved status.

Save your logo: decoding a green campaign

In order to investigate more in depth the process of being perceived as greenwashing when promoting a cause, we investigated how the indexical and symbolic function of the logo could interfere with the message promoting the cause and induce greenwashing. For a start, the researcher explained the objective of the 'save your logo' campaign as described on the website of the organisation: 'A very large number of companies have chosen biodiversity symbols as logo or as part of their specific media campaigns. They use the image of an animal or plant, such as the Lacoste crocodile ... The objective of the "save your logo" campaign is simple: to involve these brands in the preservation of the species that have contributed so much to their success and propose to support actions of biodiversity conservation. Main species included in the program are the crocodile, the dolphin, the eagle, the rhinoceros and the elephant.'

Informants started commenting on Armani and Harley-Davidson's possible participation in the programme. The participation of Armani in the 'save your logo' campaign is not clearly understood. It is expected that Armani would contribute financially to the protection of the animals, the eagles in particular, but the link with the logo seems rather artificial and opportunistic. Anna said, 'The logo does not represent an endangered species. On the contrary, it is a representation of an imperial eagle, a conquering eagle.' In the opinion of informants across groups, Armani should engage in sustainable actions but should avoid communicating loudly on these. Karin said, 'We cannot blame a brand which invests money in favour of biodiversity. Yet, I would be disappointed if they communicate on their commitment to the cause and take advantage of the disappearing of eagles to sell more Armani.'

In contrast, Harley-Davidson and Lacoste's participation seems straightforward. The animal representations are realistic enough to induce a clear link between the brand and the cause. Concerning Harley's protection of the eagle, Eve commented: 'It does not hurt that they would use the image of the eagle to communicate its protection. It is just giving back to the eagle what they have benefited from the eagle.' Informants find very positive that these brands would contribute financially and also would communicate that they engage in the protection of these species. Sofia mentions, 'They are role models, especially among the youngest. Anytime I will see a Lacoste crocodile, it will remind me that it is an endangered species.' Informants declare that the commitment of these brands attracts the attention of consumers to good causes.

Yet, when exposed to Lacoste advertising promoting the protection of the crocodile through a visual of a baby crocodile, informants find the association between Lacoste and the cause inappropriate. Karin said, 'It seems like the logo is more in danger than the crocodile!' As illustrated in Figure 4, there is a clash between the symbolic meaning of the crocodile and the symbolic meaning of the campaign. The crocodile is supposed to transfer toughness, success, a killer mentality when the visual used in the 'save your logo' advertisement conveys fragility and loss of power. Consequently, participants interpret the campaign literally as the disappearance of the brand, which was unsuccessful in recovering its fashion appeal. 'It sounds like the brand prays [for] consumers to purchase

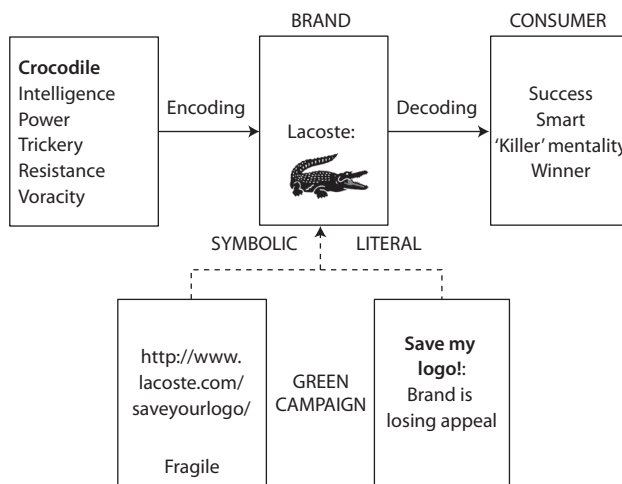


Figure 4 Decoding of the campaign 'Save your logo' with Lacoste

it. Luxury brands usually are associated with status and power. Lacoste in this ad communicates its fragility and its fears. In French we have an expression: one only lends money to the rich,' said Karin. Informants perceive the campaign as greenwashing. The reaction is unanimous: Lacoste continues to exploit the image of the crocodile for commercial purposes. Second time around, they read the tag 'espèce en voie de protection' (species being protected). Lacoste's participation in the cause becomes legitimate: Lacoste is in the role of protector of the animal, which fits with the logo's symbolic meaning, not in the role of the animal in need of protection.

Discussion

This study highlights the interest in using semiotics in order to build corporate and brand strategies (Floch 1988), particularly in relation to sustainability. Peirce's semiotic framework is popular among researchers; it has proved useful in understanding the meaning consumers attach to possessions (irreplaceable possessions, Grayson & Schulman 2000; authentic objects, Grayson & Martinec 2004) and the transfer of meaning between the constituted world, the products and ultimately the consumers (McCracken 1986; Mick & Oswald 2006). In this research, it highlights the indexical nature of luxury brands, the noble meaning attached to many luxury brands by the wealthy clientele. Reading consumers' discourses through Peirce's semiotics allowed the identification of two major groups of luxury brands: on one side, a group of discreet brands that emphasise craftsmanship and point to its noble roots; on the other, a group of conspicuous brands that build on their marketing skills. These two groups of brands map the wealthy clientele dichotomy in ascribed status (wealth of birth) versus achieved status (wealth of work), which often leads to different patterns of consumption, discreet for the former, conspicuous for the latter (Hirschman 1990). By analogy, we coined the terms 'Ascribed Luxury' and 'Achieved Luxury'. The first group is considered 'real luxury' by the wealthy clientele, brands that do *make luxury*, whereas the second group *shows luxury* without necessarily making it.

Greimas' framework offers an additional contribution to the reading of the data. Greimas' semiotics originates from the French semiotics tradition. Much of the academic research referring to Greimas is French (Floch 1988; Dano *et al.* 2003; Kessous & Roux 2008). Nonetheless, our research highlights the value of Greimas over Peirce when investigating the meaning consumers attach to *relationships* between constructs –

for instance, sustainability *and* luxury. Understanding how the brand is perceived by consumers *in relation to* the natural environment and society is paramount if corporations want to avoid being perceived as greenwashing. Our findings indicate that, when a brand has an ‘ascribed status’ and is perceived as ‘making luxury’ in terms of craftsmanship, rare materials and anchorage in its origins (local manufacturing, heraldic tradition of protection of soil), the complementary model is sustainable luxury, with integration of sustainable principles in the mission and along the supply chain. In contrast, when the brand has an ‘achieved status’ and is perceived as ‘showing luxury’ due to overuse of the logo and mass production, consumers expect that the brand will put its marketing skills to the service of good causes, and give back to nature and society. Interestingly, philanthropy is not considered by consumers in a negative way, as the absolute zero of sustainability (Bevolo *et al.* 2009). On the contrary, luxury brands’ contribution to society’s welfare is located on a continuum between sustainability in mission and ethos (Stella McCartney, Lush) and sustainability in financial investment and communication (Armani Red, Louis Vuitton Climate Project), both being worthy in consumers’ views and both being expected from luxury brands at different degrees (Bevolo *et al.* 2009).

Yet, sustainable and philanthropic programmes should not alter the authenticity of luxury brands. Ferrari being perceived as a polluter at different levels (noise pollution, visual pollution, smell pollution) is not considered credible in promoting causes linked to the environment. The brand DNA is built on sulphurous facets that, if altered, might impact the brand equity. Nonetheless, Ferrari is legitimate in using its ‘visible’ marketing asset (the red colour) to promote the Red campaign raising funds to fight AIDS (as Coca-Cola does), for instance. This research stresses the importance of understanding luxury brands in the social and natural environment when designing CSR programmes. In addition, consumers should not infer a commercial exploitation of the cause. The indexical and symbolic value of the brand influences the decoding of the brand messages. The example of Lacoste’s ‘save your logo’ advertisement highlights the importance of symbolic meaning embedded in a cause-related message. In the case of this advertisement, consumers infer from the visual that the Lacoste brand is fragile and should be protected, while the tagline ‘species being protected’ refers to the legitimate role of Lacoste in protecting the animal. Consequently, it is important for brands to understand both the meaning consumers attach to the signs (brands) and the relations between signs (brand–sustainability relationship) (Morgado 1993).

Luxury goods have a significance that goes beyond their functional or commercial value, encompassing emotional and symbolic facets (Hudders *et al.* 2012). Their symbolic and indexical value is shaped by the ‘culturally constituted world’ (McCracken 1986). As Ogilvie and Mizerski’s (2011) research illustrates, culture shapes our interpretation of both indexes and symbols. Our informants being European, and having achieved or ascribed status in society, the meaning they put on luxury brands on one side, and on sustainable luxury on the other, is based on their experiences within their own value systems. They refer to culturally anchored traditions and imagery. For this reason, it is necessary to replicate this research with consumers for whom meaning is derived from other cultural (American or Chinese) or subcultural (voluntary simplifiers, McDonald *et al.* 2006) influences. Nonetheless, it emphasises the importance of understanding brand meaning embedded in social and ecological contexts, prior to CSR programme design. In this instance, researchers might benefit from the use of a combination of semiotics tools.

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