

Children's Luxury Brands: An Identity Construction Tool for Young Mothers?

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Abstract: Many luxury brands are now targeting children. The children's luxury clothing sector is growing strongly and children's fashion apparel trade shows have been held in a number of European cities. What can account for consumers' keen interest in children's luxury clothing brands? Using a qualitative netnographic approach, this study identifies the motivations for, as well as the obstacles to purchasing luxury children's clothing. The findings underscore the importance of specific motivations, which might help mothers to build their identity.

Key words: children, luxury, brands, identity, motivations.

Introduction

Luxury brands are increasingly targeting children, especially with children's clothing. Although Christian Dior introduced a children's offering in 1967, other brands have only done so more recently, including Armani, Dior, Burberry, Escada, Kenzo, Marc Jacobs, Jean Paul Gaultier, and Sonia Rykiel. At the same time, concept stores have opened, such as Notsobig, Bonman, and Kidsgallery, and in January 2014 Pitti Bimbo, a specialist trade fair in infant and children's fashion, was held in Florence.

This sector primarily targets infants (up to age 2) and children (from age 2 to 12). It is also noteworthy that the economic recession seems not to have affected this sector, with dynamic demand from consumers in France, in Europe and in Asia. Thus it may be asked what accounts for this vogue for children's luxury brands. The aim of the present study is to understand parents' motivations, and more specifically mothers', and thus to enable brands to familiarize themselves with these new purchasers.

The paper presents the findings of this investigation in three sections. In the first section, we look at work in the social sciences and in management studies to understand the consumption of luxury products by parents and mothers for their children. This literature review indicates the need for an exploratory stage, which we then conducted, both through qualitative interviews and by means of a netnographic study, and present in the second section of the paper. In the third section, we discuss the results of our research.

1. Literature Review

While there are many studies on consumers of luxury goods, there are very few focusing on children – despite the economic importance of this sector; and even less on mothers' motivations to engage in such behaviors. The objective of this literature review is to highlight these gaps.

For example, Bastien and Kapferer (2008) or Vigneron and Johnson (2004), or Kapferer (1998) have conducted researches on luxury brands, but which fail to address the "children" segment of the market. On the other hand, research pertaining to children has developed in marketing due to the very considerable impact they have on family purchasing decisions. Indeed children are influential as consumers (MacNeal, 1992). But they are themselves influenced by different social agents that will determine their relationship to

brands in general and to luxury products in particular. In the view of some authors (for example, Moore and Moschis, 1981), there are three types of socialization agents, each generating a particular form of influence on the socialization of children such as family, peers, and the media. More specifically, the 'mother to daughter' literature in Europe or in the United States insists on the importance of the family influence (and on the key role played by mothers) in children's consumption behaviors. Mothers remain the first source of influence (Dano, Roux & Tissier - Desbordes, 2005; Martin & Bush, 2000). In the United States, intergenerational (IG) researches have shown that IG effects are potentially important depending on the product category under consideration or the market characteristics. Works conducted on mother-daughter dyads show that IG effects continue to play a role when the child becomes an adult (Moore, Willkie and Lutz 2002). Buying or consuming IG brands symbolizes loyalty and parental affiliation. Recent studies have shown that transmission within mother-daughter dyads reflects the family experience (Ladwin, Gratton and Sevin, 2009).

Another line of research provides explanations for parents' motivations to transmit specific consumption behaviors as an expression of their identity. Psychologists have shown that human beings are structured through interaction with the cultural system they belong to. Erikson (1951, 1968 and 1982) considers the different stages of the construction of identity, from the stage of the baby through to the end of life. Regarding the consumer, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) show that different cultural forces influence the purchase of products and brands which allow them to express the variability and complexity of their identities. Recent research has highlighted that fact that women buy cosmetics and fashion products for their strong identity aspect (Marion, 2003, Oswald, 2009, Silhouette Descolart and de Lassus, 2014).

Given the fact that literature is still scarce when it comes to luxury brands for children, it is therefore appropriate to examine, from a theoretical standpoint, the specific motivations for young mothers to purchase these brands for their children.

2. Methodology of the Research

Because of the exploratory nature of this research, it was necessary to opt for a qualitative methodology. Two data collection methods were implemented. First, 23 in-depth qualitative interviews with women in shops or in "corners" of department stores were conducted. We focused on mothers of children, aged 29 to 43, all mothers of girls up to age seven, equally proportioned between professionally active women and housewives and balanced in terms of age distribution. Interviewees were questioned after being contacted when leaving a luxury shop.

In a second step, we added a netnographic analysis stage, during 8 weeks. We collected qualitative material in the form of comments posted on forums, in response to questions about luxury clothing. We adopted a position of participant observation, taking part of these forums and asking a number of questions. This exploratory phase was important for finding out about the various constraints and motivations of buyers and prospective buyers, a distinction that is more difficult to ascertain in stores.

These in situ observations on forums complement the factors analyzed in the interviews.

We conducted a classic thematic analysis and took into account the frequency of occurrence of each theme to sharpen the descriptive character of the analysis. We followed these various steps for the first twelve interviews and then went back to the field for verification and iteration. The discourse of the interviews in this exploratory phase were fully transcribed, then subjected to a content analysis, which highlighted a number of recurring themes and sub-themes.

3. Results

Results are organized to highlight the different types of motivations expressed by mothers for buying luxury brands for their children. Such shopping is characterized by two dimensions, aesthetic and hedonic, in the

same way as shopping for adults. The attitudes are, in part, similar to those of individuals buying luxury brands for themselves: the aesthetic dimension is important, in line with work showing that luxury equals beauty (Kapferer 1998).

"I play around a bit with the clothes, try out new looks"

"Transforming her into a fashion victim, that slays me..."

On the other hand, research shows that there are also motivations specific to shopping for children such as, but not limited to:

- The pleasure of giving: mothers want to give their children what is best, and with this in mind, they are very happy to buy them luxury items.

"Nothing is too good for my daughter, she's our princess, we dreamed about her for ages, and now she's here, it's my pleasure"

- Motherhood celebration:

"Being a mother is a real joy, and brands allow me to celebrate it"; "It's by buying wonderful things that I begin to play my role as a mother"

"Being a mother is very new for me, and I show my baby that I'm giving her the best, with Burberry's."

"I want to be a caring mother and at the same time fashionable and buying Baby Dior seems logical to me."

- Distinctiveness: Luxury brand clothing enables one to have a distinctive garment compared to other clothes. The mothers' discourse refers to the motivation of conspicuous consumption, where a brand is purchased in order to assert or express their social position.

"In any case we don't try and dress them in Roberto Cavalli or Alexander McQueen, what we want is baby Dior, with Dior quality, and the Dior image."

- Transmission of social rules: The analysis shows that mothers want to pass on to their daughters "codes of beauty", which they have acquired in their life in society, and a grasp of which they believe is necessary.

"I want to provide her with knowledge of these brands, of that world, as quickly as possible, it's good..."

A further motivation concerns the mother's own childhood and "inner life". The child is projected into an upward ideal, an ideal of a better life.

"When I was her age, my mother dressed me in clothes she made herself."

"In my childhood, I was not at all spoiled, so now, since I can spoil her, I do so."

- Identity construction of young mothers: It appears from the analysis of the interviewees' discourse as also from responses in the forums, that this type of purchase allows these young women to come to terms with being mothers, or even defines their identity. For some of the respondents, buying luxury products enables them to develop without fear of being dowdy.

"Now being a mother is sexy, it's nothing like it was before, and fine brands help, one can be even sexier with one's wish little girl."

Luxury clothes shopping reflects the desire of some mothers to transmit values to their daughter, and to pass on to her aspects of their own identity. But at other times, there may be identity positions with regard to the child, revealed in the discourse. For some women, it is an idealization process: the purchase of luxury clothes allows them to project a perfect child, who is not simply an ordinary infant.

"She will live better than me, she's already better than me"

"I've been in the shop at the same time as Carla Bruni, we buy the same things"

For others it is also a search for appropriation: the little girl is seen as a “mini replica” of her mother, and purchases support this perception.

4. Discussion

The conclusions of this exploratory study are that young mothers build their new maternal identity and their projected relationship with their child through purchases of children’s luxury goods. These findings are consistent with those pertaining to adults, but shed light on an unexplored area, namely motivation with regard to children’s luxury products and the dynamics of mothers’ identity-building strategies.

In addition, our results complement work on the transmission of luxury goods, and further elucidate previous work on intergenerational dynamics. Indeed, they show that the purchase of luxury items for children depends on the desire mothers have for transmission and socialization with regard to their children. Our research also emphasizes the mother’s identity strategies for positioning herself in relation to her child and the dynamics this may give rise to in terms of attitudes towards the child, variously involving identification, idealization, transmission and creation.

From a managerial standpoint, this research is instructive in a various ways. Managers of luxury brands would be advised to analyze both their marketing strategies and their communication objectives, in the light of mothers’ motivations. In addition, it seems important to establish links with those mothers who buy luxury items for their children, with a view to building a long-term relationship based on trust. Managers can nurture this relationship through messages about the beauty of the parent-child bond. Doing so may provide useful information for enhancing brand loyalty, and may enable managers to develop a long-term relationship between a brand and a family. A third managerial contribution concerns recommendations for communication, particularly communication on blogs, forums and other social networks. It would be in the interest of luxury fashion houses to foreground on their official page a section on parents and children’s fashion, or even to introduce an interactive discussion space regarding luxury for children. There may be a number of messages on blogs linking these purchases to a growing awareness of beauty and of learning about socialization and values in society, for children.

Conclusion

The present study is an exploratory approach and offers at least three contributions to the understanding of consumption behavior in relation to luxury products for children. First, it seems important to emphasize that the feeling of achievement and the desire for the best for their children might imply a changed role for socialization agents. Indeed, it appears that purchasing luxury brands for their children is a new form of socialization for mothers who want to teach important aspects of life in society to their children. These results echo the findings pertaining to literacy regarding luxury brands for consumers in emerging markets who have not had such knowledge transmitted to them (Bengtsson and Fuat Firat 2006; Oswald 2009).

Finally, the results present the various logics available to mothers with regard to their children, and show that the logic of transmission is not the only one involved in the purchase of luxury goods. The analysis reveals the mother’s identity strategies to position herself in relation to the child and the dynamics that these strategies can generate in terms of her motivations regarding the child – identification, idealization, transmission, creation.

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