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“THE ROLE OF BALANCE ON LUXURY AND SUSTAINABLE
CONSUMPTION CHOICES”

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ABSTRACT

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

Most people would regard shopping as a no-brainer and easy-to-do action. Accordingly, during the last decades, shopping has been considered to be a leisure time, during which people can escape from their day-to-day life commitments and obligations. Nevertheless, this habit is often characterized by active and dynamic circumstances but also by a myriad of external surrounding factors bombarding the potential consumer. During a shopping session, in fact, consumers may walk for several miles traversing parking lots, walkways and mall atriums and, once inside or even some meters before reaching the store, they are assailed by a multitude of external stimuli striking conscious and sub-conscious perceptions. As a result, while one wonders whether to buy the blue t-shirt with logo or the simple red one, it is possible that the consumer reasoning could take into account a different number of context-related sensory stimuli, which will consequently affect the judgement of the considered items and the final purchase.

A great majority of the broad number of stimuli that can affect the consumption choice is actually composed by physical and bodily sensations, which indirectly activate metaphorical associations on the consumers' minds. These associations can have an impact on the judgement of the product. Therefore, behavioral economics literature has largely dealt with the role of bodily sensations as potential factors of context effects, focusing particularly on sight, temperature, odors, and tactile sensations. In addition, lots of firms during the last years made large use of the activation of these bodily perceptions as strategical retailing and advertising tools. A typical and renowned example is given by the Abercrombie & Fitch in-store experience.

Nonetheless, with regard to the range of the physical bodily sensations, this dissertation will be centered on the context effects caused by the less explored and still under-exploited sense of *equilibrioception*, commonly known as *sense of balance* or *equilibrium*. Starting from the conceptual metaphor theory assumption that the sense of balance is unconsciously associated with the abstract concept of parity, we based the whole research on the following questions: how can balance influence people's assessments of sustainable products they observe in-store or in an advertising message? And how can these effects be eventually moderated by the type of product considered?

In order to disentangle these points we decided to structure the dissertation into two parts:

- *A first, theoretical part* (Chapter 2), resuming all the relevant academic resources about the three main constructs on which the research is grounded: sustainability, luxury and status signaling, context effects from bodily sensations.
- *A second, empirical part* (Chapter 3 and Chapter 4), illustrating the empirical methodologies followed in order to investigate the role of balance on sustainable and luxury consumption choice, the evidence resulting from the conducted experiment and its discussion considering managerial implications, sparks for future researches and limitations of our statistical model.

Specifically, we decided to put the emphasis on the constructs of sustainability, luxury and behavioral economics principles because we wanted to give the readers a solid and reliable theoretical background in order to guide them into the conceptual explanations of the empirical results.

The experimental section, in fact, would answer the research questions throughout the use of a survey manipulating the activation of the subjects' sense of balance and the perceived status signaling attribute of a product. Therefore, the statistical model obtained from the questionnaire's responses elaboration would demonstrate how the activation of balance concept can actually affect consumer choice and, in addition, it would provide evidence of how the effectiveness of the equilibrium sense, on a subject sustainable choice, can be directly moderated by the status signaling attribute featuring the product considered by the potential consumer.

Finally, in light of our results we would conclude the dissertation figuring out if and how the activation of the balance can represent a good opportunity for marketers to seize.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

In this chapter, we will go through the different conceptual topics that will be processed and manipulated during the experimental stage of the dissertation. Specifically, we will start with a definition of the sustainability phenomenon; Secondly, we will concentrate on the concept of luxury and the drivers featuring its consumption with particular focus on the status-signaling attribute. Thirdly, we will investigate the concept of sustainable luxury. Finally, we will deal with

the behavioral economics principles and their consequent effects on the main cognitive processes of decision-making. A particular focus will be given to the influence of bodily perceptions on consumer choice, with a specific concentration on the equilibrium and its effects

The Concept of Sustainability

We define the concept of sustainability as “*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs*” (Brundtland, 1987, p.43). In particular, always accordingly to Brundtland (1987), an effective sustainable development path can be feasible only through a specific focus on the following critical objectives: an economic growth revival; a change in the quality of growth; the satisfaction of the essential needs for jobs, food, energy, water, and sanitation; a sustainable level of population; the careful preservation of the resource base; a re-orientation of technology development; an effective merge between environment and economics in decision-making.

It is possible to notice that all the components cited are specifically linked to social and economic areas. Hence, it is not a case if during last years the impact of corporates' business on society has become more and more relevant and, as a result, firms increasingly needed to incorporate the concern about stakeholders within its strategic outlook in order not to lose its societal legitimacy. From this assumption derives the concept of CSR, explained as “*the notion of companies looking beyond profits to their role in society is generally termed corporate social responsibilities and it refers to a company linking itself with ethical values, transparency, employees' relations, compliance with legal requirements and overall respect for the communities in which they operate*” (McComb, 2002, p.5). Going more in depth, we can assume the existence of four different levels into which the social responsibility of business is structured (e.g. Carroll, 1979): economical, legal, ethical and philanthropic. Accordingly, during last years, CSR started focusing more and more on the ethical and discretionary sides while considering the economic and legal aspects merely as minimum operating conditions.

In spite of the increasing relevance of CSR, for Porter and Kramer (2011) the most effective sustainable approach to business is represented by an evolution of the CSR: the concept of shared value. The idea of shared value, in fact is about re-conceiving the intersection between society and corporate. In order to complete this fundamental step, it is necessary that corporates move beyond

the typical trade-offs on which the neo-classical economic thinking is actually grounded. Thus, the core intuition is that companies can and should create economic value by creating societal value. From a more practical point of view, this is possible through three different ways: reconceiving products and markets; redefining productivity in the value chain; creating supportive industry clusters (e.g. Porter and Kramer, 2011). The final challenge is to reach an improved concept of CSR with a deeper and more engaged approach to sustainability: *“The concept of Shared Value can be defined as policies and operating practices that enhance the competitiveness of a company while simultaneously advancing the economic and social conditions in the communities in which it operates. Shared value creation focuses on identifying and expanding the connections between societal and economic progress”* (Porter and Kramer, 2011, p.6).

The Luxury Concept and its Taxonomy

Starting from the assumption that it does not exist a singular and clear definition of the luxury concept, in this part, we try to circumscribe the notion starting from a basic understanding of what could be defined as luxury: *“Anything that is desirable and more than necessary and ordinary”* (Heine, 2011, p.30). Then, once determined this basic definition it is important to underline that such concept need to take into account the relative perception of the sub-concepts of necessary, ordinary and desirability. As a consequence, it is possible to split down the relativity of these concepts into five main typologies of relativity: regional, temporal, economic, cultural, situational, obtaining the following more complete definition: *““Anything that is desirable and which exceeds necessity and ordinariness. As a general rule, this is defined from a global perspective, for the present and for normal conditions. While the exclusivity of resources is evaluated by the entire society, the desirability of resources and the appearance of luxury are determined by the upper class.”* (Heine, 2011, p.34).

Then, focusing on the on the managerial understanding of the term, it is possible to put in light the six constitutive characteristics (with their related sub-categories, see Heine 2011) contributing to the definition of *luxury goods* that can be then summarized as: *“Products that have more than necessary and ordinary characteristics compared to other products of their category, which include their relatively high level of price, quality, aesthetics, rarity, extraordinariness and symbolic meaning”* (Heine, 2011, p.41). Therefore, in light of this, while we can notice that the term luxury relies on what we can call continuous characteristics (“more than necessary and

ordinary”), the six major features identified become dimensions ranging from a minimum level that could identify the cluster of necessary or non-luxury products to a maximum level that corresponds to the highest form of luxury for that category of goods considered.

Thanks to the definition of luxury products we can introduce the related notion of Luxury Brands. Accordingly, luxury brands need to offer luxury products, in fact, managing a product portfolio that does not include luxury products would mean the impossibility to achieve a luxury brand image. The rationale at the basis of the reasoning is that the brand is highly associated with its core product or core offer (Kapferer, 2008) and, as a result, the degree of luxuriousness of a brand is directly referred to the core product category with which this brand is linked. Hence, the constitutive characteristics we identified for luxury products obviously form part of the identity of luxury brands. For this reason it is possible to state that: “*Luxury Brands are regarded as images in the minds of consumers that comprises associations about a high level of price, quality, aesthetics, rarity, extraordinariness and a high degree of non-functional and symbolic associations*” (Heine, 2011, p.46).

The relationship between Luxury and Status Signaling

As we defined in the previous paragraph, one of the constitutive attributes for a luxury product (and consequently also for luxury brand) is what we called *symbolism*. In line with Kapferer (2001) we can affirm that the symbolic meaning of a product or a brand, usually refers to the range of human values and lifestyle. In fact, according to Kapferer and Bastien “*the DNA of luxury is symbolic desire to belong to a superior class*” (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009, p.314). Therefore, all luxury brands are expected to possess and convey a high level of symbolism and a consequent relevant *prestige* aura.

Nevertheless, to fully analyze and completely understand the effective relationship occurring between luxury consumption and social status it is useful to go through three main theoretical arguments: the notions of Conspicuous Consumption (Veblen, 1899) and Costly Signaling Theory; the theory of Consumption and Social Differentiation (Bourdieu, 1984); the Consumers Taxonomy Based on Wealth and Need for Status (Han et al., 2010).

The notion of *conspicuous consumption* can be explained as the preference for more expensive over cheaper yet functionally equivalent goods (e.g. Nelissen and Meijers, 20011) or simply, the

ability or possibility to spend above and beyond what is necessary (with a clear recall to the basic definition of luxury we identified at first). Meanwhile the Costly Signaling Theory (Miller, 2009, Saad, 2007) put in light the costs involved in producing a *signal* (in terms of energy, risk, time or money) guarantee its reliability and, consequently, the display of a status.

Bourdieu's work (1984) explains the phenomenon of consumption based on social differentiation. In particular, he focuses on the relationship between group identity or *lifestyles* and their peculiar strategies of consumption, from which, we can therefore affirm that upper class consumers, through the purchase of luxury, are often willing to create a distance between them and the practical world of simple necessities.

Finally, the work of Han et al. (2011) identifies four different classes of consumers (the Patricians, the Parvenus, the Poseurs and the Proletarians) describing their signaling motivations on the basis of their desire to associate with and/or dissociate their own and the other three groups.

To sum up, from the above exposed conceptual background, the relationship occurring between luxury consumption and social status signaling can be summarized by three main theoretical factors: the display of luxury possessions as a costly signal and as status enhancer; the need of social differentiation and desire for status and crucial force driving the luxury consumption; social segmentation and different motives at the basis of the social need-for-status justifying different levels of constitutive characteristics and symbolic value.

Sustainable Luxury

As we defined treating the sustainability topic, shared value is about policies and practices that allows firms to improve their competitiveness while advancing the social, environmental and economic conditions in the society in which they operate. Sustainable development and the sustainability topic are one of the most relevant prerogatives of almost all the planet, and consequently, also of the major corporate groups. Specifically, luxury, more than others, is a market characterized by an increasing attention towards sustainable product variables and, consequently, by business models increasingly grounded on sustainable supply chains (Hoffmann and Manière, 2012). In spite of this, the social histories of luxury and sustainability conceptually appear opposed, following the fact that the combination of this two elements could be ill-received by consumers. The main reason why of this opposition is that luxury concept recalls values and

ideas in line with hedonism, expense, rarity, affluence and superfluity. Conversely, sustainability is inherent to values that are linked to altruism, restraint, respect and moderation (Beckham and Benjamin, 2014). Then, during the past years various researches put in light different consumer attitudes towards a *sustainable luxury*. Specifically, this particular dichotomy between luxury and sustainability can be explained by Schwartz (1992) identifying four broad types of motivational human drivers: *Self-enhancement*; *Self-transcendence*; *Conservation*; *Openness*. In particular, the self-enhancement seems not possible that could coexists with self-transcendence. In technical terms, this incongruence can be described as follows: whereas CSR stresses-out the welfare of the community and the concern for the environment reflecting self-transcendence values, luxury is associate with values of conspicuousness, hedonism and success.

Notwithstanding that the two concepts are opposing, from a motivational point of view, different researchers tried to highlight a point of touch between the two concepts. Guercini and Ranfagni, (2013, p.80) state that: “*Rarity and durability join together luxury and sustainability, making them interconnected: luxury depends on sustainability and, at the same time, sustainability finds in luxury a potential ally... Sustainable business behaviours can act on existing brand identity, increasing its perceived quality and its exclusivity...*”

Then Kapferer, (2012) affirm that sustainable luxury brand should draw on rarity and durability combining the attention to environmental conservation and human craftsmanship work with the quality and the timelessness nature, which is part of the luxury concept

Finally, Janssen at al. (2014) give also an empirical evidence supporting this assumption. From their research in fact, we can infer that both rarity and durability of luxury products can influence consumers’ perceptions of the fit between luxury and sustainability.

As a result, the point of touch between these two opposing concepts is theoretically possible and far more effective if luxury brands are able to put the accent on the scarcity of the products and, above all, on the durability of the offering.

Bodily Sensations and Behavioral Economics

Consumers are daily involved on purchasing actions and for researchers it is clear that during these shopping moments, people are engaged in different physical activities and logical processes

influenced, directly or indirectly, by ambient elements. Hence, the behavioral economics theory shows that consumer choice is often influenced by the context and the eventual set of alternatives under consideration. In fact, the context effect is by definition: “...*any external factor, like the other choices on offer, that influence the choice*” (Cartwright, 2014, p.39).

Then, context effects exist and can be classified as direct cause deriving from human heuristics. The use of heuristics in the decisional process is the main cause that leads to the phenomenon called *choice arbitrariness*, where arbitrariness does not necessarily means random and it can be explained as the possibility that the choice could considerably differ depending on different external factors. As a result, based on the literature background evidence, it is possible to state out one of the basic relationships on which modern behavioral economics is actually grounded: all the psychological dynamics, putting in light discrepancies with the rational theory of choice, are direct consequences of human heuristics which are, in turn, the cause of what we previously defined as *context effects*.

Specifically, within the range of various context effects, it is possible to identify a subset called framing effects. “*Framing effects are where essentially equivalent descriptions of the same item lead to different choices*” (Cartwright, 2014, p.40).

This is to say that this phenomenon take place when people chose differently depending on the way the question is asked or framed. Nevertheless, to better understand the drivers of this particular type of context effects it is necessary to refer to some basic principles of IEM (Inclusion/Exclusion Model) theorized by Schwarz and Bless (2007).

A first assumption of IEM is that concepts or sensations (thus declarative or experiential information) activated by the context set can affect the assessment of target objects during two stages (e.g. Meyers-Levy et al, 2010): at a preliminary phase, during which the item is encoded and initially interpreted, and at a crucial judgement phase, when the formal assessment about the target is developed and rendered. More specifically, individuals who are asked to form a judgment about some items first need to retrieve some cognitive representation of it and to determine some standard of comparison to evaluate the item. However, both the representation of the target stimulus and the representation of the standard are, in part, context dependent, and, in fact, individuals do not retrieve all knowledge that may bear on the item, nor do they retrieve and use

all knowledge that may potentially be relevant to construct its alternative. This means that individual's temporary representation of the target item, as well as its standard of comparison, includes both information that is chronically accessible (context independent) as well as information that is only temporarily accessible related to contextual influences and cues (e.g. Schwarz and Bless, 1992). So, the way the information that comes to mind influences the judgment, depends on how it is categorized: if the context-related information is included in the temporary representation that individuals form of the target category we refer to an assimilation effects, if the information is not included we talk instead of contrast.

Context effects and IEM can be similarly activated by concepts or sensations (declarative or experiential information). For this reason, several prior research focused on sensations activation factors. In particular, for the purpose of our study it is crucial to recall Kim and Meyers-Levy works (2008 and 2010). According to Kim and Meyers-Levy (2008), when the an individual's mental representation of the target object is not so clear, the assessment is more favorable if the implications of the contextual data (bodily sensation) are relatively negative rather than positive. Meanwhile, starting from this logic, suggesting that the clarity of a person's mental representation of a target object can moderate the direction of the framing effects, in a further study, Meyers-Levy et al. (2010) tested the previous assumption using bodily sensation as activation factors of clarity and contextual data. The results of this research confirmed one of the initial axioms of Inclusion/Exclusion model by which not only declarative but also experiential information from the context set can affect the assessment of target objects.

This particular relationship occurring between bodily sensations and framing effects has been further examined by the study of Larson and Billeter (2013), specifically investigating on the physical *sense of equilibrium* in a choice context. In this case, the research puts in evidence that because of the association between balance and parity, consumers who experience a sensation of physical balance or imbalance during a choice, are more likely to perceive equality in product options offered. At the basis of Larson and Billeter work, we can recognize the notion of conceptual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson study, 1980) proposing that metaphors reflect deeply rooted associations within people's cognitive structures. In particular, conceptual metaphor paradigm suggests that "many abstract concepts are structured in the mind through metaphoric association with more concrete, and often physical, concepts". Other studies goes more in depth

into the implications of the metaphorical connection between the physical and the abstract concepts, looking at the effects of conceptual metaphors on judgement and, consequently, decision-making process. In this sense, a good example can be provided by Liljenquist, Zhong, and Galinsky (2010) testing the concept of morality, metaphorically paired with physical cleanliness concept proving that the fact to be exposed to clean scents should encourage moral behavior.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This part of the dissertation is devoted to the elucidation of the research drivers and methodologies. Then, the empirical study has been structured starting from two hypothesis:

H1a: *“The activation of balance sensations will lead the consumer towards the sustainable choice, if the product is a non-status signaling product”*.

H1b: *“The activation of balance sensations is not significant for the consumer in the choice of the sustainable version, if the considered product is status signaling”*.

In particular, we expect that the activation of the sense of balance will allow an implicit and unconscious recall to parity concept for consumer. Thus, in line with the indications of IEM, this framing effect would influence the consumer through a contrast effect. However, we also suppose this process not to be valid if the considered product is status signaling since the recalled concept of parity does not bear on dimension of judgement. Thus, the parity recall is essentially not considered or, subtracted from the data-base they used in forming the judgement.

To test the theoretical framework and the consequent formulated hypothesis we used a 2 (Equilibrium of the object: Balanced vs. Imbalanced) x 2 (Luxury: Status Signaling vs. Non Status Signaling) factorial between-subjects experimental design. We developed four different stimuli representing the combination of each of the two factors. The respondents were randomly assigned to only one of the four conditions: the product either was status (i.e. Champagne bottle) or non-status signaling (i.e. red wine bottle) and visually presented in balanced position (i.e. in perfect equilibrium, standing in the middle of a table) or imbalanced (i.e. in precarious equilibrium, on the edge of the table). Then, the respondents were asked to answer several questions measuring their physical and personal perceptions of the represented bottle. Afterwards, we investigated the

inclination towards a potential sustainable version of the previewed bottle. Finally, at the end of the survey, we added specific questions in order to get respondents' main socio-demographic data (gender, old, current job, level of instruction, actual mood).

In terms of measures, we firstly started with a manipulation of the constructs of equilibrium and status signaling through the use of items on seven-point Likert scales. Then, for the dependent variable (sustainable purchase) we proceed with a direct trade-off alternative choice set. Respondents were asked to choose between a more expensive but sustainable version and a less expensive standard version of the product. In addition, we included measures for the sharing and sponsoring motivation towards the sustainable version, always using a seven-point Likert scale. The sample of respondents were partly recruited among students and partly among the general population through posts run on Facebook groups and, on other social networks (Twitter and LinkedIn), through private message of invitation, targeting people not specifically involved in luxury or sustainable consumption. All respondents were invited to complete our online survey, and those who agreed were assigned randomly to one of the four experimental conditions.

One hundred twenty-eight Italian men and women, aged between 19 and 63 years, completed the online survey and from this starting sample we excluded twenty subjects that, responding the attention-check question, proved an unreliable level of focus on the survey. From a demographical point of view, we finally got a sample of one hundred and eight respondents composed by: 64 female and 44 male subjects of which, 49% students, 36% workers, 10% working students and a remaining 5% unemployed. Moreover, 56% of total respondents declared to be single, 28% in a relationship and the remaining 16% married. In addition, the level of instruction of respondents appeared generally high, with 98% of respondents holding at least the high school diploma (and specifically, 32% of subjects holding a Bachelor's degree, 23% a master degree and 7% a post-doctorate title of study). Finally, considering the mood of the respondents, 81% declared their mood from neutral to extremely positive, while the remaining 19% declared to be in a slightly negative emotive situation. (See Appendix B - Demographic Data Tables).

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS DISCUSSION

To test H1a and H1b, we employed the PROCESS SPSS macro developed by Hayes (2013), using a moderation model (Model 1) where the activation of balance was the independent variable (X),

status signaling of the product was the moderator (W), and intention to buy the sustainable alternative of the product was the dependent variable (Y).

The statistical processing of the questionnaire responses substantially put in light three main facts confirming the hypothesis we speculate above.

Firstly: the single effects of status signaling and sense of balance variables resulted only marginally significant for the respondents' final choice. Secondly: in spite of the first evidence, the interaction between these two constructs, on the intention to buy the sustainable alternative, returned significant evidence. Thirdly, in line with our H1b supposition, the interaction occurring between the status signaling variable and the activation of the sense of balance is not statistically significant in terms of correlation, when considering a status signaling product.

A satisficing explanation of this empirical results can be derived partly through the application of behavioral economics principles and partly through the recall of the luxury and sustainability theoretical framework. As we supposed, following the logic of Inclusion/Exclusion Model and conceptual metaphors, the activation of the sense of balance effectively allows an implicit and unconscious recall of parity concept on consumer mind. On the other hand, this mental process cannot be considered true in the case of a status signaling product. The recalled parity concept, in fact, is not considered on the dimension of judgement as not in line with the "Champagne Category". As a consequence, the concept is directly omitted or eventually used as subtraction factor in the process of judgement resulting in a neutrality of the balance activation variables on the respondent choice.

In light of this findings we can state that our work contribute for two different branches of the academic literature: the branch of behavioral economics investigating the influence of context effects on consumer choice and the researches on sustainable luxury topic. Starting from the contributions to behavioral economics, we already discussed in the theoretical framework about the more general works explaining the general functioning of choice arbitrariness, decision-making, judgement formation processes, conceptual metaphors (respectively, Tversky and Shafir, 1992; Simonson and Tversky, 1992; Shafir et al., 1993; Schwartz and Bless, 2007; Landau et al, 2010) and in particular we dwelled on the particular reverberations of this general models on consumer choice. Secondly, by focusing on sustainability, luxury and status signaling, our study

contribute to the particular and evolving branch of sustainable luxury. As far as sustainable luxury is concerned, we can affirm that this study contributes to the discussion of whether the concept of responsible luxury can be considered a contradiction in terms by showing that the acceptance of a sustainable luxury product appears not to strictly depend on the equilibrium framing effect recalled by the type of exposition of the advertised product.

Moreover, the results of our research can be useful for all those managers that want to exploit framing effects in order to influence the intention of the consumer towards the purchase of a sustainable product. Based on the present study, in fact, we know that, when the sense of balance is activated the consumer is more inclined to opt for a sustainable choice. Accordingly, managers and marketing efforts should also be generally oriented on POP materials, visual advertising, and communication campaigns that could stress the equilibrium and consequently activate perceptions of parity on consumers' mind. On the other hand, considering that this influence effect of balance on sustainable purchase intentions does not seem to be significant for luxury products, the considerations above can be used by managers of the luxury segment as a further confirmation about the complex combination and the difficulties to trigger a perception of fit between luxury and sustainability concepts. Hence, our research can be interpreted as a clear suggestions for luxury firms to focus their sustainability efforts on the durability and rarity dimensions of their product offer.

Although this study provides some relevant empirical evidence we have to acknowledge some limitations. First, in terms of stimuli creation, for our questionnaire we used fictitious brands in order to limit some possible *a priori* knowledge effects on consumers' judgement process. Secondly, always considering the stimuli design, for our experiment we actually decided to activate the sense of balance without a direct physical experience but only throughout the use of images and brief description recalling the concept of disequilibrium. Third, this experimental study uses typical ephemeral products as stimuli, both in the case of non-status and status signaling conditions. This element can be seen a limitation in consideration of the fact that, in line with the evidence by Janssen et al. (2013), the fit between luxury and sustainability can be triggered by a different product ephemerality. Fourth, as far as the statistical samples is concerned, we can identify a research limit in the composition of our sample. The fact that only 46% of the respondents are actually workers, and considering that the average age of the sample is 27.2 years,

we can conclude that the familiarity of the subjects with luxury products could not be so high and, consequently, not aligned to the typical client of luxurious goods.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

We introduced this dissertation making reference to the shopping activity as a typical example of active and dynamic circumstance characterized by a myriad of external surrounding factors bombarding the potential consumer. Hence, we focused our research on the role of bodily sensation as factors of influence on consumer consumption choice and, in particular, we organized our study starting from the specific research questions: how can the activation of balance influence people's assessments of sustainable products they observe in-store or in an advertising message? And how can these effects be eventually moderated by the type of product considered?

Therefore, in order to clarify these points we first exposed a theoretical framework based on the three main constructs composing the crucial variables of our research model: sustainability, responsible luxury, context effects from bodily sensations. Then, throughout a survey, we manipulate the role of balance activation and status signaling attribute of the product in order to find an empirical evidence of the influence effect on consumers' sustainable choice.

The ensuing experimental observations allowed us to theorized a statistical moderation model on which the activation of balance is significantly correlated with the sustainable choice of the consumer, if the product considered is not featured by a status signaling attribute. Additionally, our statistical model confirmed us our sub-hypothesis by which the influence effect of balance activation on sustainable purchase intentions does not seem to be significant for luxury products.

The dissertation empirically showed the influence of the ubiquitous physical phenomenon of balance on abstract consumer's cognition. Hence, we propose that a proper activation of this basic and sometimes not-considered physiological sense can affect the consumers' cognition, through the accessibility of the related concept of parity, leading them to choose the more equal option of the set, in our case, the sustainable version of a product. But this does not happen when considering a status signaling product.

Thus, the results of our study essentially confirmed the expectations we had with regard to the potentialities of balance activation in terms of sustainable purchase influence. Nevertheless, the

empirical evidence, also highlighted how much difficult can be finding a nexus between the concept of luxury and the concept of sustainability too. The influence of the balance stimuli on consumers' purchase considerations becomes consequently meaningless and not enough significant.

In conclusion, from a practical point of view, in a market reality where the raising affirmation of sustainability trend is increasingly affecting consumers' choice and attitudinal approach towards products and services, the evidence of our study becomes an important message for all the professionals that are interested in implementing retailing and advertising strategies willing to enhance the sustainable attributes of a product. Meanwhile, from a more academic point of view, the study further explored a particular side of context effects and bodily sensations theory that can pave the way to future researches about the specific and particular reverberations of the physical balance activation on subjects' choice behavior in correspondence with different contextual situation and decision sets.

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