



## High Fashion Consumer Behaviors & Perceptions on Cause-Related Marketing

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### ABSTRACT

Past research has shown that fashion companies engage in various endeavors to promote social causes, and occasionally market that they are engaging in these causes to consumers (Barone, Miyazaki, & Taylor, 2000). Companies' goal is to attract socially aware consumers, who align with their values and would be more likely to support their products.

Although cause-related marketing is beneficial to general fashion brands and other companies, less is known about luxury brands and how they are received when engaging in CSR. As brands are promoting products through cause-related marketing, high fashion consumers, who seek to convey their social status in their fashion choices, may regard cause-related marketing as weakening the exclusivity and lure of the brand. On the other hand, high fashion consumers' definition of luxury may shift due to societal changes. With the rising importance of sustainability, human rights, and ethical norms, luxury fashion is now more than just social status and material wealth. Consumers may increasingly value fashion brands that demonstrate a genuine commitment to social causes, viewing them as personal values and aspirations. As such this is an important theoretical and practical question to resolve.

The study aims to investigate how high fashion consumers view the relationship between luxury, social consciousness, and their behaviors, particularly in the context of cause-related marketing. The knowledge of how luxury brands are received can enhance the effectiveness of cause-related marketing and help brands adapt to changing consumer values, ensuring alignment with consumers' expectations. Moreover, it will provide valuable insights into the evolving expectations of high fashion consumers and the changing dynamics of luxury consumption, offering insights to fashion brands thriving to engage with their target customers.

### Introduction

#### Cause-Related Marketing

Cause-related marketing, also known as CRM, is an impactful marketing strategy that enables businesses to simultaneously promote their products or services while supporting social or environmental causes (Brønn & Vrioni, 2015). By aligning themselves with these causes, companies aim to attract socially conscious consumers who are increasingly seeking brands that demonstrate a genuine commitment to making a positive impact on the world.

One of the primary methods employed in cause-related marketing is the collaboration between businesses and nonprofit organizations (NGOs) that are dedicated to addressing pressing global issues (Bianchi, Daponte, Pirard 2020). Through these partnerships, companies and NGOs work together to launch products or initiatives that generate mutual benefits. This approach allows businesses to leverage the credibility and expertise of NGOs, while NGOs gain access to the resources, reach, and marketing prowess of companies.

The advantages of such collaborations are manifold. By associating with a reputable NGO, businesses can effectively enhance their brand image and reputation (Brønn & Vrioni, 2015). Consumers are more likely to support and trust companies that actively contribute to social causes, viewing them as responsible corporate citizens. This positive perception often translates into increased customer loyalty, higher brand affinity, and ultimately, improved sales

performance. Furthermore, cause-related marketing campaigns offer businesses a unique opportunity to differentiate themselves from competitors in an increasingly crowded marketplace. By highlighting their support for meaningful causes, companies can create emotional connections with consumers, fostering a sense of shared values and purpose (Chen, 2010). This connection goes beyond mere transactional relationships and can create a lasting bond that extends beyond a single purchase.

In addition to the benefits reaped by businesses, NGOs also stand to gain significantly from cause-related marketing partnerships. By collaborating with companies, NGOs can tap into new fundraising channels and reach a broader audience. The exposure generated through these collaborations can amplify their message, raise awareness about their mission, and attract new supporters or donors. As a result, NGOs can increase their financial resources, expand their programs, and make a greater impact in addressing critical social or environmental challenges (Bianchi, E.C., Daponte, G.G. & Pirard, L., 2020).

However, it is essential for businesses engaging in cause-related marketing to ensure authenticity and transparency in their efforts. Consumers are becoming increasingly discerning and can easily detect insincere or superficial attempts to align with causes. Concerns and ethical questions have arisen among consumers. Critics argue that NGOs should prioritize their original mission instead of relying heavily on CRM relationships (Dahl, Darren, Anne & Lavack, 1995). Therefore, it is crucial for businesses to carefully select causes that align with their core values and purpose and to communicate their commitment to these causes in an honest and transparent manner.

### **Definition of Luxury**

Luxury is a subjective concept that people can perceive differently. While traditionally associated with opulence, extravagance, and material possessions, luxury can be viewed from various alternative perspectives (Wiedmann, Hennigs, Siebels, 2007). Individuals' viewpoints on luxury can differ greatly due to various elements, such as personal values, cultural impacts, socioeconomic backgrounds, and individual life experiences. The perception of luxury is frequently influenced by societal aspects, notably the link between luxury and wealth or material possessions. This particular perspective tends to center around the exhibition of status and the capacity to acquire exclusive products and services (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012).

However, cultural influences also play a crucial role in shaping perspectives of luxury. Different cultures have unique ideals and symbols of luxury that are deeply rooted in their traditions, history, and social dynamics (Teimourpour & Hanzae, 2011). Luxury in one culture may be associated with intricate craftsmanship, historical heritage, or elaborate rituals, while in another culture, communal experiences and social connections may be valued as a form of luxury (Barnier & Valette-Florence 2012).

Moreover, personal values greatly contribute to the divergence of perspectives. Some individuals prioritize experiences, personal growth, and meaningful connections over material possessions (Atkinson & Kang, 2021). They may perceive luxury as the opportunity to engage in unique and memorable experiences, travel to exotic destinations, or participate in cultural events that enrich their lives (Nwankwo, Hamelin & Khaled, 2014). Others may find luxury in owning high-quality possessions that hold personal meaning or reflect their individual style and taste. The focus is less on conspicuous consumption and more on the joy and satisfaction derived from these possessions.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of sustainability and ethical responsibility, which has influenced the perspective of luxury for many individuals (Athwal,

Wells, Carrigan & Henninger, 2019). The concept of sustainable luxury has emerged, emphasizing environmentally friendly and ethically produced goods and services. Those who adopt this perspective value brands and experiences that align with their commitment to social and environmental causes, ensuring that their luxury choices have a positive impact on the planet and society.

Additionally, the emotional well-being and personal fulfillment derived from luxury can shape perspectives. Luxury is seen as a means to increase one's overall happiness and life satisfaction. For some, luxury may involve indulging in self-care practices, seeking inner peace and tranquility, or engaging in activities that promote personal growth and well-being.

Finally, perspectives of luxury are known to evolve with changing trends and cultural values (Cabigiosu, 2020). As society shifts and new ideas and concepts emerge, individuals may adopt different perspectives on luxury. This could be influenced by factors such as technological advancements, evolving lifestyles, and shifting social norms.

### **Cause-Related Marketing in Luxury**

Different perceptions of luxury can significantly impact cause-related marketing initiatives. For some people, supporting a cause through their purchasing choices or affiliating with a socially responsible luxury brand can enhance their perceived social status and image. By aligning themselves with a cause or brand that is seen as socially conscious and caring, they may be seen as more selfless, compassionate, or influential within their social circles (Kim, Park, & Shrum, 2022).

Alternatively, others may believe that luxury brands engaging in CRM are diluting the essence of luxury itself. In other words, luxury should be entirely associated with exclusivity, refinement, and indulgence, detached from any societal or philanthropic obligations. From this viewpoint, luxury brands participating in CRM might be seen as compromising their prestigious image and diluting the allure that comes with the notion of luxury. Such individuals argue that luxury brands should focus solely on delivering superior quality products or services, rather than diverting attention to social causes.

In the area of high fashion, consumers ask for exclusive designs, unique craftsmanship, and more importantly a prestigious image. Nevertheless, in an era where the importance of sustainability and social consciousness has increased, it is essential to investigate the multifaceted relationship between high fashion consumers and luxury brands.

The alignment between luxury brands' CRM initiatives and the values and beliefs of high fashion consumers plays a significant role in their perceptions and choice-making. When luxury brands demonstrate a genuine commitment to CRM initiatives that align with the values and beliefs of their target consumers, it creates a sense of shared purpose and resonance. For example, if a luxury brand actively supports sustainable fashion practices, which aligns with the growing consumer interest in environmental sustainability, it establishes a connection between the brand and consumers who value sustainability.

Thus:

***Hypothesis 1: Degree of alignment between consumer values and luxury brand CRM initiatives will be positively associated with support for luxury brands.***

Status concerns are deeply rooted in human psychology and social dynamics. People often seek to improve their social standing and reputation, and they may use consumption as a means to signal their desired status. By associating themselves with luxury brands or products that are engaged in CRM, individuals can enhance their perceived social status and gain recognition from others (Amatulli, Angelis, Korschun & Romani 2018). Therefore, it is plausible

to assume that individuals with higher status concerns will be more inclined to support brands or products that align with their aspirations for higher status.

Thus:

*Hypothesis 2: Consumer desire for status will be positively associated with consumer support for cause-related marketing.*

## Methods

### Participants and Procedure

I collected data from participants across a range of locations, using the convenience sampling method. The survey includes multiple-choice questions, Likert scale items, and open-ended questions gathering both quantitative and qualitative data. The survey link, made from Qualtrics, was distributed through various channels, including social media platforms, and community forums, to individuals aged 18 and above, aiming to gather diverse perspectives on the topic of CSR. A total of 84 data was collected. Since some participants were in a hurry or filled in the survey without deep consideration, 31 results were found to have missing data and were discarded.

### Measures

**Status Consumption.** For status consumption, I asked participants five items from the Status Consumption scale (*Eastman et al., 1999*), from 1 - “strongly disagree” to 5 - “strongly agree.” Sample items are “I would buy a product to increase my status” and “Products which increase my social standing interest me.”

**Luxury Definition.** For luxury definition, I asked participants a multiple choice question - “Which qualities listed below are closest to your ideal qualities of luxury?” The four choices are: “More expensive items,” “Sustainability,” “Knowledge and Transparency” & “Social Status.”

**Consumer Values.** For consumer values, I asked participants five items adapted from values alignment in status consumption (*Eastman et al., 1999*), from 1 - “strongly disagree” to 5 - “strongly agree.” Sample items are “Buying products from luxury brands that are social conscious would improve the way people think about me” and “If a brand has similar values as me, I am more likely to buy its products.”

**Consumer Social Awareness.** For consumer social awareness, I asked participants two items, from 1 - “strongly disagree” to 5 - “strongly agree. Items are “I have been more aware of global issues lately” and “It is important for companies to be aware of global issues.”

**Responsibilities of Brands.** At the end of the survey, participants were asked an open-ended question about the responsibilities of a company or brand to consumers or the environment - “What do you think is the responsibility of brands and companies to consumers or to the environment?” Participants were encouraged to share their thoughts and opinions freely, without being limited to predefined response options.

## Results

		Correlations											
	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Status Consumption	3.55	0.80	1	0.231	-0.068	0.275	.411*	-0.131	.449*	0.062	-0.147	.297*	-.304*
2. Social Awareness	3.91	0.61	0.231	1	-0.198	.378*	-0.061	0.089	0.199	.537*	0.003	-0.169	-.390*
3. Valuing expense (single-item)	0.06	0.24	-0.068	-0.198	1	-0.007	-0.004	-0.064	-.304*	-.325*	-0.063	0.091	0.219
4. Knowledge and transparency (single-item)	0.68	0.47	0.275	.378*	-0.007	1	0.040	-0.227	0.215	.433*	-0.179	-0.021	-.382*
5. Valuing social status (single-item)	0.34	0.48	.411*	-0.061	-0.004	0.040	1	-0.154	0.164	0.019	-0.197	.401*	-0.071
6. Valuing sustainability (single-item)	0.46	0.50	-0.131	0.089	-0.064	-0.227	-0.154	1	-0.078	0.024	0.270	0.133	0.216
7. purchase status improvement	3.54	0.73	.449*	0.199	-.304*	0.215	0.164	-0.078	1	0.272	-0.079	0.164	-.327*
8. Caring about similar values (single-item)	3.98	0.77	0.062	.537*	-.325*	.433*	0.019	0.024	0.272	1	-0.106	-0.188	-.283*
9. Doing research pre-purchase (single-item)	2.86	0.78	-0.147	0.003	-0.063	-0.179	-0.197	0.270	-0.079	-0.106	1	-0.097	0.187
10. Belief that brand CSR damages product status (single-item)	2.28	1.09	.297*	-0.169	0.091	-0.021	.401*	0.133	0.164	-0.188	-0.097	1	0.265
11. Luxury brands not suitable for social causes (single-item)	2.40	1.09	-.304*	-.390*	0.219	-.382*	-0.071	0.216	-.327*	-.283*	0.187	0.265	1

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).  
\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Figure 1

In order to test Hypothesis 1, we created a scale about values alignment between brands and consumers - "If a brand has similar values as me, I am more likely to buy its products". Data shown that Hypothesis 1 was supported. We found a positive correlation between status consumption and consumer values,  $r(48) = .06, p = .30$ . This suggests the importance of value alignment regarding cause-related marketing.

Furthermore, there was a significant moderate positive correlation between status consumption (caring about status when purchasing products) and believing that buying products from socially conscious luxury brands would improve the way people think about the consumer,  $r(48) = .45, p = .001$ , proving Hypothesis 2. However, while the relationship is not significant, there was also a trending positive correlation between status consumption and the belief that brands engaging in social causes (e.g. charity, sustainability, etc.) could lower the status of a brand's products,  $r(48) = .30, p = .04$ , posing a seeming contradiction.

LuxuryDefinition - Which qualities listed below are closest to your ideal qualities when purchasing products that you like from companies and brands?

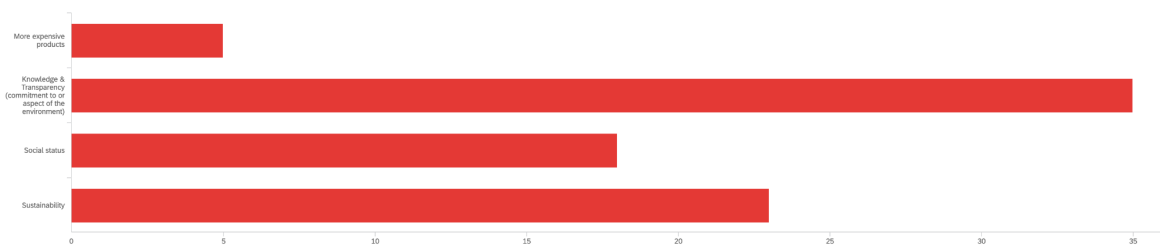


Figure 2

Moreover, a positive correlation was shown in Luxury Definition (consumers' perceptions about luxury) and consumers believing Knowledge & Transparency (commitment to or aspect of the environment) is one of their ideal qualities when purchasing products that they like from companies and brands,  $r(48) = .28, p = .053$ . Majority participants has chosen Knowledge & Transparency among the three other options: More Expensive Products ( $r(48) = -.07, p = .64$ ), Social Status ( $r(48) = .41, p = .003$ ), and Sustainability ( $r(48) = -.13, p = .366$ ).

"The publicity of well-known brands can influence the society to pay more attention to environmental protection, and should give back to the society," was stated by a participants The statement suggests that the publicity of well-known brands has the power to influence society, both in terms of environmental protection awareness and the brands' responsibility to give back

to society. Through their advertising and promotional efforts, well-known brands can effectively raise awareness about environmental issues, thereby bringing us closer to a sustainable future. This shows a positive perception of luxury brands participating in CRM - having the potential to attract more consumers while being beneficial to the environment. In addition, multiple participants mentioned the importance of taking the initiative of participating in CSR and using sustainable materials - "Take the lead in doing more good deeds, have a good image, and use raw materials that do not harm the earth's environment" (translated from Chinese).

### **Limitations**

Small sample size - is the contradiction shown owing to participant inattentiveness as the second item is worded negatively; or could this represent a real contradiction in the way that people view products; i.e. they believe that buying from these brands could raise their own (the consumers') status but at the same time the brands engaging in these endeavors are putting themselves at a certain risk, perhaps if it does not pay off.

### **Discussion**

Previously mentioned, a contradiction was found between believing purchasing products from socially conscious brands could improve the way people think about them and the status of products from luxury brands being lowered when luxury brands participate in CRM. The contraction possibly occurred due to the perceptions and expectations of luxury brands. Luxury brands usually build their status on exclusivity, superior quality, and a sense of prestige, with the image of being elite and luxurious, engagements in CRM can be perceived as being inconsistent with the core identity of luxury brands (Wiedmann, Hennigs, Siebels, 2007). On the other hand, luxury brands can leverage CRM as an opportunity for brand differentiation. Instead of merely adopting generic CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) strategies, they can develop bespoke initiatives that align with their core values and resonate with their discerning clientele. Emphasizing the authenticity of these initiatives and their alignment with the brand's heritage and identity can enhance the perceived value and appeal of luxury products in the eyes of consumers. This way, luxury brands participating in CSR can also change people's perceptions of purchasing products from luxury brands. Consumers can not only satisfy their material needs, but also make it reasonable since it has become a way to do public welfare.

Value alignments take a major role in CRM. According to the data, about 79% of participants agreed (20.75% strongly agreed) that if a brand has similar values as them, they would more likely purchase their products. This is because when consumers find that a brand's values resonate with their own beliefs and principles, they are more likely to establish an emotional connection with the brand. This alignment creates a sense of authenticity and trust, as consumers perceive the brand as an extension of their own identity. As a result, they become more inclined to support the brand and its products, resulting in increased brand loyalty and repeat purchases. In order to maximize the benefits of value-based CRM, brands should invest in understanding their target audience's values and preferences. Market research, surveys, and customer feedback can provide valuable insights into what matters most to their customers. With this knowledge, brands can position themselves as allies to their customers, working together towards common goals and creating a sense of community around shared values (Chen, 2010).

Although CRM has become a popular, beneficial marketing strategy, there might be negative perceptions of people questioning brands' commitment. According to the result,



brands' Knowledge and Transparency is especially important in CRM. Multiple participants also mentioned "Honesty" and "Being Trustworthy" in the question about responsibilities of brands and companies. When a company openly shares information about its practices, policies, and performance, it demonstrates accountability and honesty. This fosters a positive perception of the company and its intentions, leading to increased trust from customers, investors, employees, and the public while building trustworthy relationships with consumers (Patel & Dallas, 2002).

### **Conclusion**

The focus of this study was on investigating how high fashion consumers view the relationship between luxury, social consciousness, and their behaviors, in the context of cause-related marketing (CRM). We found that Value Alignment and Knowledge & Transparency takes a major role in building a long-term trustworthy relationship with consumers, especially in CRM. Although some people might perceive luxury brands' engagements in CRM as being inconsistent with their core image and lowering the status of their products, research findings revealed that a considerable proportion of participants had positive perceptions of luxury brands participating in CRM. It has become a new way to contribute to public welfare. Limitations of this study are small sample size and time constraints, limiting the depth and scope of the study. Future studies could consider conducting an experimental design comparing two luxury brands, one engaging in CRM and other doesn't, building a deeper understanding of the different perceptions on luxury brands participating in CRM.

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