

Mapping the geographies of luxury cognitive “purity”

Federica Carlotto

Regent's University London, Inner Circle, Regent's Park, London, NW1 4NS, UK.
carlottedof@regents.ac.uk

Simon O'Leary

Regent's University London, Inner Circle, Regent's Park, London, NW1 4NS, UK.
olearys@regents.ac.uk

Abstract: This study aims to profile the cognitive and perceptual constructs on place and luxury products shared by individuals on the Internet. A netnographic study was conducted on selected digital platforms (Q&A websites, Forum Groups, Blogs), with further engagement in interviews, participant and non-participant observation. Building upon a corpus of about 3,000 posts, a specific interpretive framework was devised, based on “purity”. The findings indicate that, when referring to luxury goods in relation to places, the sampled individuals rely on a clear set of assumptions. This framework is put to the test when they are called to discuss specific issues related to the contemporary reality of the luxury industry, such as delocalization. In confronting these ambiguities and/or anomalies, they react in different ways. Some of them become sceptical and question the essence of luxury. Some loosen or stretch their expectations, thus coming to terms with the fragmented reality of luxury, while others positively suggest new criteria to re-define “pure” luxury. Further researchers can focus on specific luxury sectors or brands. In addition, the study can be quantified by measuring patterns of recurrence, correlations of variables, and moderation effects from other products' indicators. Practical implications of the research include the observation that cognitive “purity” adds to the analytical tools of customer-based brand equity. By profiling consumers' “pure maps” around brands and/or products, brand managers can monitor their evolution and act against potentially disruptive factors. This work builds on the constructionist approach to “place”, and provides an anthropological account on how individuals build, negotiate and act upon their views on “place” in relation to luxury.

Keywords: Luxury branding; Purity/impurity; Digital users; Netnography; Place indicators.

Word count: 11,268.

Introduction to luxury; an industry “all over the place”

Over recent decades, globalization and the development of the Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have both expanded and compressed the time-space dimensions, allowing companies to delocalize their sourcing/manufacturing operations (Miller, 2013; Tonkiss, 2006; Barney, 2004). This flexibility has also impacted on the “place indicators” of the production process. The unitary coherence of Country of Origin (CoO) has been segmented into chunks - Country of Origin of Brand (COB); Country of Design (CoD); Country of Parts (CoP); Country of Assembly (CoA); Country of Manufacture (CoM). Similarly, other related indicators exist: Brand Origin (BO); Product Image (PI); and Country Image (CI).

As in other industries, luxury operators have been lured by the cost-saving opportunities of delocalization. This process, however, has mainly involved the entry-level lines of their production (Ilari, 2012), and it has been managed with the utmost discretion (Tsui, 2012). Miuccia Prada openly commented on the issue in 2010: “Made in Italy? Who cares!” (Tokatli, 2014, p.1). When it came to disclosing the origin of its “Made in Worlds” items, however, Prada adopted a strategy of gradual transparency (Visconti and Di Giuli, 2014). As a “temporary remedy” (Tokatli, 2014, p.8), the company revealed the link with Peru and Scotland before admitting to that with China.

The clandestine exodus to China and other countries of low-cost production is being counterbalanced by migration waves towards the traditional poles of luxury manufacturing. Detaching from the tarnished “Made in China” label and in search of skillful know-how, Chinese fashion companies head to Italy (Mackinnon, 2014). In 2014, the American watchmaker Fossil established a design-and-development centre in Switzerland and, by leveraging the “Swiss made” premium tag, Fossil aims to widen its portfolio of luxury licensors. Meanwhile, Britain and the USA are undergoing a revival. British mill houses are renovating their infrastructures to gain back domestic sourcing (Chesters, 2014). For the American manufacturers, the challenge is to capitalize on the “made in the US” cachet, and to develop it to embrace “even luxury” (Williams, 2012; Cheng, 2013). While the emergence of Chinese luxury brands that are “made in China” accounts for the reputational upgrade of the country from “producing hand” to “creative mind” (Milnes, 2017), other locations - such as Portugal and India - have recently appeared on the map of luxury production.

As opposed to the “made-in diaspora”, a stable geographic imagery is still one of the most distinctive traits for the identity of luxury brands; the British-ness of Burberry, the Mediterranean folkloric repertoire in the collections of Dolce & Gabbana, the Swiss seal of “Made in le Brassus” for Audemars Piguet and of “Hallmark of Geneva” for Vacheron Constantin, up to the “Secret Garden” film series shot by Dior at Versailles in 2015.

With Solca (2015), we can argue that the contemporary luxury industry is indeed “all over the place”; with British Jaguar Land Rover together with Tata Daewoo under the Indian ownership of Tata Motors, the Italian-ness of the brand “Armani” legitimizing a T-shirt made in Turkey or Romania, geo-brands like “Made in Italy” and “Made in Switzerland” being sliced up in terms of percentage or stage of production.

In the above scenario, the paper turns to the market side, and explores the impact of the globalized reality of luxury production on consumers. More specifically, the paper aims to profile the perceptual and conceptual construct individuals used to make sense of the fragmented - and yet integrated - geography of luxury.

In the eye of the beholder: Places and human perception

The paper considers place as a human construct emerging from individuals’ cognitive and interpretative processes. This constructionist approach aligns with the research direction explored by the scholarship of “Country of Origin” (CoO) and “Sense of Place” (SoP).

Country of origin

As Phau and Prendergast (2000) recount, many researchers in CoO are concerned with “Country of Origin” as the “made-in” indicator of a product, and explored it in its interplay with other cues - price,

design, performance, brand - and other factors - consumers' personal preference, product typology, brand lifecycle (Tse and Gorn, 1992; Hamzaoui-Essoussi et al., 2011). Facing the globalized reality of hybrid products, however, a few scholars have introduced conceptual alternates to "Country of Origin", such as "Country of Origin of Brand" (Phau and Prendergast, 2000) or "Country Image", a "multidimensional attitudinal construct consisting of cognitive, affective, and conative components and aligning with the country to which a global brand has historical or developmental ties" (Pharr, 2005, p. 41).

Pharr's definition indicates that researchers have also developed an interest for "place" not as a product feature, but as an attribute lying "in the eye of the beholder". Rather than measuring the accuracy of consumers in detecting the CoO of a product, researchers have started focusing instead on how individuals create and manage their perceptions about products and place-related indicators (Magnusson and Westjohn, 2011; Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2008).

Geographic associations and imageries have been operationalized both in their emergence and in their impact. Han (1989), for instance, has delved into "Country Image" as a "summary construct" through which consumer orientate their choice. Others have further explored the different dimensions of "Country Image" - cognitive and affective - at work on consumers' purchase intentions (Wang et al, 2012; Roth and Diamantopoulos 2009).

Sense of place

The scholarly research on "Sense of Place" has developed to counterbalance the objectivist approach of geographers towards spatiality. Whilst geographers considers spatiality in terms of space, i.e. the external context where human actions unfold, "Sense of Place" develops around the concept of place as the fabric where social and physical forces interweave (Convery et al., 2012; Guthey et al., 2014.; Beidler and Morrison, 2016).

As a result of the human interaction with the environment, places come to be engrained with "an intangible quality", that is ultimately related to the "meaning, value, emotions, and mystery" individuals perceive in living or imagining the place itself (Markevičienė, 2012). This is what researchers define as the "genius loci", or "spirit of a place" (Graham et al., 2009; Zia et al., 2014). The "spirit of a place" thus brings together the twofold dimensions behind the concept of place; the human interaction with the external environment, and the human reflection on this interaction. As such, place can be considered a "product of human perception and experience" (Guthey et al., 2014, p. 256).

Studies on place and luxury

The scholarship on luxury related to place has generally developed along a classic "CoO research approach"; place has been operationalized in specific place indicators ("Country Image", "Country of Origin", "Brand Image") and analyzed against brand name and brand imagery, which are the main attributes commanding a premium price in a luxury product (Agrawal and Kamakura, 1999; Godey et al., 2012; Paciolla and Mai, 2011; Jung et al., 2014). Considered in their interaction with other attributes - brand awareness, product price, design - place indicators have proved to offer a remarkable contribution to the high magnitude of equity of the luxury brands (Shukla, 2011; Piron, 2000; Aiello et al, 2009). Despite the apparent supremacy of place imagery over the actual production location, recent studies conducted online have recorded customers' discomfort towards luxury products whose "made in" is associated with low quality production sites (Yu et al., 2013).

Scant attention has been paid to the analysis of the relationship between luxury production and places based on consumers' perceptions. Considering the relevance that place-related indicators retain for luxury brands, and building on the cognitive epistemology of place developed by the CoO and SoP stream of research, the paper provides an account of individuals' perceptions, themes, and narratives about places and luxury products circulating in a specific environment; the Internet.

Navigating the world of objects: Cognitive "purity"

Although self-contained and finite in their physical attributes, the existence of material objects is ultimately social. Objects reflect the resource availability, the technological know-how and the

economic mode of their production. In addition, they are also “good to think” (Lévi-Strauss, 1991, p.89). Through the interpretation and the use of objects, human beings are able to build symbolic fences or bridges (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996); they can connect to something beyond their sensorial experience - as the national flag for the soldier (Durkheim, 2008); they state who they are or who they wish they were (McCracken, 1988).

Together with people, events, and ideas, material objects are hence part of that flow of reality human beings are immersed in. In order to navigate their lives and make sense of the world, individuals have to draw mental maps through which to identify, locate, and classify their material and immaterial objects. According to Stone (1962), the identification of objects occurs along location (i.e. what an object is) and qualification (i.e. how an object is), and it works through apposition/opposition (i.e. what an object is/what an object is not; how an object is/how an object is not). By comparison between objects, it is also possible to ‘move vertically’, i.e. to create rankings and hierarchies. Identifying a sporty bag is, for instance, the result of the location of the object as a ‘bag’ in opposition to a ‘backpack’ or a ‘purse’, and of its qualification as ‘sporty’ in opposition to ‘elegant’ or ‘casual’. Internal rankings with other sporty bags can concern the price (e.g. more expensive), manufacture (e.g. better quality), style (e.g. more fashionable), performance (e.g. long-lasting, handier), and so on.

The perception and the interpretation of objects, however, is not a passive action. Rather, it is filtered and shaped by the perceivers through a certain store of knowledge (McCall and Simmons, 1978), which they gather from external sources, abstract from direct experience, or inherit as legitimized sapience (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Schutz, 1967). When the reality of the object under interpretation is out of reach temporally and/or spatially, the perceivers find a variable degree of emptiness to fill. In this case, they can make use of their knowledge to domesticate the unknown by deductive assumptions. Alternatively, they can use these remote areas of meaning as a repository where to project their ideals and ideas, without any further effort to reach the reality of things. Myth and exoticism are practical examples of the purposive construction of remote realities (Schutz, 1967; Spooner, 2005; McCracken, 1988).

By identifying objects, individuals are able to construct an account of reality that, in turn, allows them to take action (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963). As stated above, this cognitive operation is subject to limits and gaps caused by misinformation, omissions, and biases. The perceptual and conceptual sets human beings use to navigate the world of objects, therefore, are not necessarily accurate. However, they need to be perceived by the users as ordered and stable; “in a chaos of shifting impressions, each of us constructs a stable world in which objects have recognizable shapes, are located in depth, and have permanence” (Douglas, 1966, p.37). From a cognitive perspective, congruity is what makes a system ‘pure’, i.e. a classified and intelligible universe where every object - material or immaterial - has a specific and permanent location.

Methodology

Talking places on the internet: The netnography

A netnographic research was undertaken between 2014 and 2015. Netnography usually approaches the Internet as a space populated by aggregations of individuals - the “online communities” (Kozinets, 1998). Here, the authors set aside the Gemeinschaft view by which social affiliation is generated by spatial proximity (Cavanagh, 2007; Rheingold, 2000; Maffesoli, 1996), and considers the space as networked, i.e. originated through connective acts (Cavanagh, 2013; Castells, 2001; Hine, 2000): “Computer-mediated communication is, in essence, socially produced space [...] predicated on knowledge and information [...]” (Jones, 1995, pp.17-19).

Hence, the e-fieldwork consisted of the patchwork of texts exchanged online between individuals on specific digital platforms. The platforms considered included:

- Open knowledge exchange (Q&A) websites
- Forum Groups (FG)
- Bloggers (“thematic” and “lifestyle”)
- Others (comments on news)

Within it, the research focused on communicative and interactional artifacts - posts, comments, threads - about luxury products and place indicators. Differently from many netnographies who analyze texts with the purpose to retrace the structure, practices, or agency issues of a digital community, textual data were here considered to have epistemological value per se.

The digital individuals in the e-fieldwork draw their cognitive maps through their experiences of expats, travellers and luxury consumers, or indirectly through family, friends, media or corporate sources. In the textual accounts, the “purity” of relationship between luxury production and places is addressed.

Operationalization

In order to obtain a set of search keywords, the author conducted desk research on the current affairs of luxury business, together with a review on the CoO literature. The elicited list of sectors, operators, brands, countries, and place indicators was operationalized through search engines (Soovle.com; Spezify.com; Google.com).

The product categories followed the classifications in Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2012) and Abtan et al. (2014), and were further refined during the research. The list has been finalized as follows:

- Haute Couture & High-end fashion.
- Leather Goods & Accessories.
- Timepieces & Jewelry.
- Fine Spirits.
- Cars.
- Cosmetics & Fragrances.

A review on the CoO literature profiled the relationship between products and places through the following place indicators:

- Although serving as an “umbrella term”, CoO currently indicates the headquarters site of a company/brand, with other indicators (CoD, CoM, CoA) defining the different stages of a production process (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1999; Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2008).
- The perceptual and imaginative dimensions linking products to places are expressed through BO (Thakor & Kohli, 1996), PI (Wang et al., 2012), and CI (Pharr, 2005).
- Two CoO-related phenomena have been included: “foreign branding” (Thakor & Lavack, 2003) and “ethnocentrism” (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2008).

In addition to the place indicators, it was also necessary to identify the countries associated to the luxury products. The selection followed the criteria below (Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2012):

- Countries where the companies that are leaders in a specific luxury sector have their headquarters or host the most important part/the majority of their production process.
- Countries where the three big luxury conglomerates - Kering, LVMH, Richemont - have their headquarters.
- Countries the brands that are leaders in a certain luxury sector are associated with.
- Countries a specific luxury sector or product is traditionally associated with.
- Countries perceived as important centers of luxury production and consumption.

As a result, France, Italy, Britain, Switzerland, Germany and the USA are the strongest players in the luxury sector. In view of their specific relationship with the luxury industry, Japan and China have also been included; Japan has been for decades the main gateway to the Asian luxury market and, despite a few economic recessions, it is still considered the ‘litmus test’ for the industry performance in the Far East. In addition, Japan is a producer of luxury items and home to elite brands in the fashion and automobile sectors. China, on the other hand, has been experiencing a paradox; although representing the marketplace for luxury, it has been suffering for a long time from a poor reputation due to counterfeiting and low-quality production.

The e-fieldwork

The author entered the e-fieldwork of Q&A websites and FGs as a non-participant observant. This was to assess the existence and the magnitude of the scoped phenomenon. In a subsequent stage, the

e-fieldwork took the form of participant observation, with the researcher posting a question/starting a thread, and managing the unfolding conversation. Bloggers were also involved in structured/semi-structured interviews through electronic correspondence or inter-device telecommunication software (Skype).

The observant participation phase registered a low response rate, perhaps due to the full disclosure of the researcher's identity. Similarly, bloggers response rate was 1 out of 5. This was counterbalanced by the high-relevance of the posts gathered during the observation phase and by the active contribution offered by the respondents in FGs. The author was thus able to work with a "rich" data set, both in terms of spontaneity and depth.

After reaching the theoretical saturation point, the data was reviewed and further filtered. Undercover advertising, factual information without any personal comment, statements without any explanation (e.g., "yes", "no", "real", "fake"), trolls' attacks and out-of-topic comments were excluded. These criteria were suspended whenever the text had some relevance for the communication flow.

The final analysis relied on about 3,000 posts, shared online between 2005 and 2015 (with a few updates in 2016). Beyond the searching criteria, the data set revealed the existence of "overarching meanings, histories, linkages" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.166). These additional elements of significance have been interpreted and reorganized through a specific framework, which focuses on cognitive "purity" in the human interpretation of objects.

Findings

Manufacturing

Luxury items are ranked at the top of product ranges and a first element of distinction concerns the production process. A luxury good is commonly described as the distinctive output of a serious manufacturing project, which requires full commitment throughout the whole value chain. In this context, space and time are identified as the two conditions enabling the interaction between people and the development of their talents.

As such, Europe is placed at the very centre of the geography of luxury. More specifically, it is France users associate luxury with, because of the "subliminal link to the origins of haute couture and the emergence of luxury goods" (Queen Marie, 2015). Another post highlights how "everything made in France has an instant price mark up or association with luxury teams...from fashion to culinary arts" (suhaesa, 2015).

"Purity" in manufacturing concerns also the correspondence between place and a specific product category. Bloggers associate fashion with both Italy and France (Busra Cam, 2015; Belle Meets the World, 2015; Suze, 2015), with Italy representing leather goods and accessories. UK is renowned for wool and outerwear production - sweaters, shoes, tweed clothing. As for watch production, excellence is related to the mechanical precision and the technical innovations developed in Switzerland (Hobold, 2015). While for medium-range watches the "Swiss-made" tag is a premium feature, for luxury watches it is the very minimum expected; "I don't care about CoO, but if I was into watches in the 20k\$ to 100\$k range I might think otherwise and stick to Swiss" (Sduford, 2014).

The association between place and luxury production is so strong that a country-related cue is able to evoke a whole set of expectations about the features of a product. Hence, an Italian clothing item is imagined to be durable and long-lasting "[...] The quality of the stitching would be high end and almost hand-made. The materials used would be high end. You could just look at it and tell that it's made of more expensive material. They might be more tailored to your shape and be more flattering." (Barile, 2015).

Online users usually identify the sites of luxury production by the number and the magnitude of the operators originated from or headquartered there. France is the country of fragrances because of the "legendary perfume houses and noses" (miracleborgtech, 2015; belle de sud, 2015), and it is also regarded as the most fashionable nation for its long list of historical maisons. The reputation of UK as

one of the poles of European luxury is often proved through lists of the main British brands (Anonymous, 2008; Martijn Sjoorda, 2013). Here, time exerts a legitimizing action on space; throughout time, manufacturing develops into workmanship, expertise and know-how, while intangible excellence stratifies into reputation, tradition and “heritage value” (Devaraj A, 2006). Hence, Savile Row can count on “250 years of heritage” (CiaoChao, 2009), and the city of Grasse on “many generations of master perfumers” (miracleborgtech, 2015).

The osmotic relationship between places and luxury, however, is ultimately cultural. By virtue of geographic proximity and interaction, people come to share certain traits, which end up becoming “national attributes”. France is characterized by “well groomed” people, “stunning cities and sexy language” (NatasazW, 2015). Being fashionable is perceived to be a social imperative for Italians; “the point, for Italy’s peacocks, seems to have been to look as good as they could” (LabelKing, 2007). These traits eventually provide the humus for the development of specific productive talents; aesthetics, design, and art are at the roots of the Italian leadership in the fashion and automotive industries; the “expertise in... rain” favoured the English in producing “top of the range trench coats” (dissidentstockbroker, 2012); mechanical engineering appears to be an extension of the German culture in its quest for excellence, efficiency, and reliability (Fred Landis 2011).

The same criteria apply for non-European countries. The USA is generally acknowledged as another site of luxury, although with some reserve. While some celebrate the achievements of individuals like Tory Burch or Tom Ford in the fashion field (Suze, 2015), some others question the existence of an “American luxury” and point out the European supremacy (Busra Cam, 2015). The argument commonly advanced is that the USA lacks the prestige of a sound tradition; “America’s tradition of top-quality clothing pales in comparison to that of Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, France, and Scotland” (Alexander Kabbaz, 2011). In addition, “in the USA the sartorial workmanship has been severely affected by the lack of an American aristocracy” (derum, 2015).

In the cognitive maps of online users, we find also the “antipode” of luxury: China. China is related to luxury in negative terms for two main reasons; cheap production and counterfeiting. Asian countries in general are considered new entrants in the field of luxury production. As such, they “do not have the necessary hundreds of years of tradition... or the ancestors willing to teach new generations in the ways of top quality” (Alexander Kabbaz, 2010).

Amongst them, however, Japan seems to have gained a different reputation; the evolution of Japan from cheap supplier of electronics to producer of deluxe cars - Acura, Lexus, Infiniti - is a classic example mentioned by users to demonstrate the possibility of developing a luxury production instead of inheriting it. Still, in the discussions about the automotive industry in Japan, one term looms large; cheap. Japanese cars are defined “econoboxes” (knowitall, 2007) or “cheap luxury” (DILLIGAF, 2007). When Japanese and German cars are compared, luxury is still German; “German were MADE for luxury” (Taylor, 2014); “i love the luxury of Germans [cars]” (Andersson, 2009). In the users’ eyes, luxury products carry with them traces of human endeavor behind their production. As such, Japanese carmakers “have trouble injecting the little thing into them where people must have one. Sometimes when something is too perfect, it lacks soul” (phil R, 2007). Similarly, Japanese luxury watchmaking have been building upon the Swiss design, but at a lower cost; as a result, posters feel that Japanese watches are “boring” (Crunchy 2014).

Myth

Myth refers to the evocative power of luxury objects to connect individuals to remote spatial-temporal settings. A Swiss-made timepiece is a “‘ticket’ to own a little bit of that tradition, of that history that is Swiss watch making” (Legion681, 2013a); with a Longchamp bag, “people feel Parisian chic” (Sharad Rathna, 2014); Aston Martin embodies that “unique mix of British muscle, refined luxury, and athleticism” (Woo Brenton, 2012); Bottega Veneta recalls the “Italian ‘stealth wealth’”(Suze, 2015).

Naturally, resonance of a myth operates with different intensity depending on the reality individuals experience; the more remote a setting is perceived, the more evocative power a luxury product associated with that area will be charged with. In the observed forums threads, this phenomenon seems

particularly evident in the posts of non-European online users. Luxury products of European design or manufacture, such as German cars or “Made-in-France” Louis Vuitton bags, activate in the users feelings of “romance” (Linipie, 2015). For Asian users, they resonate instead in terms of social distinction; Swiss-made mechanical watches and Western perfume brands are highly relished for their capacity to draw an aura of status, prestige, and wealth around their beholders (Lian, 2008).

Corporate ownership

This dimension has emerged in absentia in a few threads dedicated to the British and the US luxury automotive industry. There, the foreign ownership of a brand seemed to jeopardize the product itself; “[a]n English car company owned by the Germans or Italians or any other foreign country does not qualify as British car company to me” (Ray, 2013). This suggests that the value chain of “purity” starts well above the manufacturing process, with the headquartering up to the ownership of luxury corporations.

Discussion

Facing dis-order

In their approach to luxury production online users seem to align with the concept of “genius loci” developed in Morace et al. (2013). Morace et al. (2013) have applied the concept of “genius loci” to goods’ production. From their standpoint, “genius loci” is the result of the synergic interaction between “Places” and “People”, which nurtures “Peoples’ visions” (“Purposes”), and channels those “Purposes” into specific production “Projects”.

As such, luxury production is expected to be a “Project of/for excellence”, able to preserve the synergic relationship between “People”, “Places”, and “Purposes”. In the narratives about the luxury “production Projects”, “People”, “Places”, and “Purposes” are very well intertwined together; Hermès is “handmade in France from start to finish by skilled craftsmen” (Caplan David, 2010); Chanel, Prada and Armani clothes are “sewn with love in quaint factories and ateliers in Milan and Paris” (Tetra, 2010). These scenarios, however, are quite ideal. The reality of things, in fact, often presents consumers with products that fail to meet their expectations, e.g. with asymmetries between the reputation of their brand and their effective quality, or suggesting different spatial/temporal associations.

While human beings can tolerate a certain dyscrasia between their anticipations and the reality, there is a point where the gap widens too much, and ambiguity (i.e. what is being capable of two interpretations) or anomaly (i.e. difference from what is expected) arises (Douglas, 1966; Lévi-Strauss, 2001). Individuals are thus called to face situations of “impurity”; not only are they temporarily unable to locate the ambiguous/anomalous object, but the cognitive dis-order ends up questioning the whole mental map they have created.

With regards to luxury products, online individuals seem to have quite an inelastic threshold of tolerance towards ambiguities and anomalies. In a few specific cases, the quest for “purity” almost leads them to extreme “purism”. Anomalous are considered Queen Elizabeth II - the “UK Queen” (Evans-Thyme, 2010) and even James Bond (Puneetvijay, 2006), for wearing Hermès scarves and riding BMW cars, respectively. The same “patriotic purity” is also expected from corporations, with a few threads and posts blaming Ralph Lauren for producing the US Olympic uniforms in China (YayYay533, 2012). Ungaro cannot be fully included in the list of French couturiers because of his Italian background (ToryBoy, 2008). Besides these peculiar instances, “impurity agents” affect the three dimensions analyzed above: manufacturing, myth, and corporate ownership.

Delocalization

Delocalization abruptly severs the (perceived) natural linearity of the luxury production by creating a disjunction between the place of origin - in terms of corporate headquartering or cultural DNA - and the place of manufacturing. The brand of a hybrid product may offer the flavor of one place, but the reality of its “made-in” evokes a different one. In other words, delocalization creates an anomaly that generates perceptual ambiguity. This disjunction eventually creates disillusion; “for me personally, I have a real disconnect with a brand when I realise [...] that product is being made somewhere else” (Queen Marie, 2015).

What actually concerns online users is the ultimate purpose justifying delocalization; in their words, delocalization is just a “cost-cutting manoeuvre” (DocHolliday, 2008a) to have it “both ways” (reluctanttorontonian, 2012); the seal of luxury and profit. Again borrowing from Morace at al., delocalization adds to the aforementioned 4 P’s of the “genius loci” a further one: “Price”. Price, however, does not blend with the other P’s; as a matter of fact, it neutralizes all of them. Firstly, “Price” is conflicting with “Place”. Luxury companies “operate with large enough margins of profit [...] that they can still comfortably manufacture domestically” (TraditionalWay, 2008).

“Price” corrupts “Purpose”. Sennett (2008, p.9) defines craftsmanship as an “enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake”. By cost-oriented delocalization, luxury companies seem to lose focus on their business “Purpose”: “[p]rofit, not [p]roduct is what they care about” (Nymphaea, 2012). Some posters point out that if the reason for delocalization were the search of excellence, companies would simply farm out their production to countries with renowned manufacturing traditions, such as Italy or England (DocHolliday, 2008b). This is for instance the explanation provided by a poster for Louis Vuitton having its glasses made in Italy by Luxottica; Luxottica is able to provide the know-how and technical mastery in frames production aligned to Louis Vuitton’s standards (Linda S 2010). Similarly, it is quite acceptable to have a “non-made in France” Dior bag, if it’s made in Italy, or a Prada item made of British wool (Belle Meets the World, 2015). As a matter of fact, in most cases the sites of luxury offshoring are countries characterized by mass production and cost-efficiency.

Craftsmanship is thus replaced by speed and carelessness (okdc, 2007), which evokes in the consumers’ mind human incompetence and shoddy quality in the final product (Stylephox, 2006; OperationAnfield, 2012; thejarc, 2011). Countless examples are provided about China, although users stress that quality is not just a matter of natural workmanship, it is also a planned requirement; in other words, Chinese suppliers “do not always do what they can, but what they are requested to do” (Haffman, 2012). Even the simplest association with China prompts companies to prevent the emergence of any possible ambiguity or anomaly. For example, Guerlain’s research on types of plants in one area for new potential botanical notes generated the quote “all our parfums are made in France” (mr.reasonable, 2012)

A few threads on Louis Vuitton products show the posters’ concern that a possible manufacturing delocalization to China could affect the quality of the products, or that the “made in Spain” tag might “bring down [their] value” (Felix T, 2006). This could also generate a hierarchy of value for the different “made-ins”, making a Louis Vuitton item made in USA “worth less” than one with the prestigious tag “made in France” (Anonymous, 2006).

Finally, “Price” overrules “People”. Instead of “encourag[ing] talent in their own country” (Miket61, 2008), the conglomerates of luxury are accused to “turn a blind eye” (Adam_M, 2008), even to “happily exploit” the loose regulatory norms on health and safety in the supplying countries (Squidward, 2013; Mike_Dowling, 2015). Furthermore, when the offshoring is cost-oriented, companies do not invest in any long-term plan to train the local staff (Sator, 2007b). All in all, “Price” ends up invalidating the whole “Project off/for excellence” in luxury: “I have a particular problem with Burberry - they market their entire aesthetic on an image of Britishness. Yet they pursue a strategy of closing their manufacturing plants in the UK in favour of exporting it to "cheaper" countries such as China. This effectively means that the core values of the brand are meaningless. [...] It's smart business - but at heart, it's not deeply luxe. It's a bit of a fraud” (Tigerrouge, 2007).

Marketing the myth

As mentioned above, luxury goods are semantically very rich objects, which enable us to evoke our imagined places, from the chicness of Paris to the flamboyant elegance of Italy. Online users are aware that oftentimes this is a “dream”, a “romance” or a “bubble”.

Still, they become quite defensive when the products’ intangible aura is used as a marketing tool to increase their commercial appeal and/or to cover up for their defective performance; “Swiss watches are less the creation of watch makers than they are of copy writers” (Somewhere else, 2015). What

is a myth, i.e. a timeless recount of genuine excellence, is purposefully altered into “marketing generated mystique” (Watchbreath, 2013).

Another element of cognitive “impurity” widely discussed is the harsh reality behind the marketed myth of “made in”. In 2013, the Swiss parliament voted a law defining the criteria of a watch “Swissness”. While, in many threads, posters debated about the transparency of the law, somebody pointed out its nonsense application to reality: “[w]hat I personally mean when I think of something 100% made in XYZ means that the whole product was made with raw materials coming from xyz and built + assembled in XYZ” (Legion681, 2013b). Especially for prestigious “made ins” such as “Made in Italy” or “Made in Switzerland”, online users accuse brands of delocalizing the major part of their operations, keeping in-house or local just the cosmetic phases of it, or anyway “the minimum required to comply with the regulations” (Hopelessly, 2009). In the case of “Made in Italy” high-fashion garments, the delocalization seems to happen “within the national borders”, with Chinese illegal immigrants working in Italian sweatshops (Justsayno, 2010; Jungla Juana, 2010; Prosperk, 2010).

Mergers and acquisitions

Mergers and Acquisitions (M&A) is an unexpected area of “impurity”, which has emerged only in the course of the e-fieldwork. As a matter of fact, there are a very few posts dealing with the relocation of a company’s headquartering - which is quite an infrequent event per se. On the other hand, foreign ownership represents an issue, especially in the luxury automotive industry; “I would like to know how can I find out if the Mercedes Benz I want to buy is a REAL German version because I heard Mercedes is affiliated with Chrysler” (12Lord Enki23, 2013). To the question “[d]oes Britain still own Jaguar, Aston Martin, TVR, and Lotus?” (Piersall James, 2012) an online user replies “[y]es and no” (C7S, 2012), thus stressing the ambiguity between the British cultural heritage retained by certain car brands and their actual ownership.

In discussing about the acquisition of Jaguar by the Indian automaker Tata, online posters seem to be sceptical that a company working on “low budget bad quality cars” (Eddy J, 2007) can actually fully engage with such a “Project of excellence”, unless they maintain the workers and the design in loco (Vikaas 2007; Gus 2007). On a similar note, online users debate on the anomalies of; British cars being under German supervision; Acura and Infiniti models being produced by Nissan exclusively for the American market; the possibility for Tata as the owner of the British Daimler to make use of the Daimler brand to provide its other cars with a “German luxury flavor”.

Overcoming the “pure/impure” dichotomy: Purification strategies

In their encounter with “impurity”, online individuals express a vast range of feelings - from surprise to outrage - but they also take action at a cognitive level.

Firstly, they can reject the impurity, preserving their original worldview. Referring to a Louis Vuitton bag “made in USA”, a poster states: “who wants a French bag made in Texas!” (DDD, 2013). In some cases, “impurity” is punished: “I was at the men’s clothing store Thomas Pink in Dublin today, shopping for a birthday gift for my brother. The China-made silk shirts there retail at €300 (roughly \$345.) I walked out without buying anything” (OP, 2013).

Some users look for compromise, i.e. they try to save their “purity criteria” by enlarging their geographic referents; instead of pointing to 100% production in one place, they are willing to embrace larger geographic constructs, such as Europe or the “first world” (CuffDaddy, 2010; Harvey_birdman, 2010). In other words, they desire a wristwatch “[a]s Swiss as possible” (BackInTime, 2014), with a hypothetical 80 per cent of “made in Switzerland”, but the remaining 20 per cent to be “from another European country” (YukOnx11, 2014).

A more complex cognitive strategy concerns the normalization of impurity. In this case, the individual embraces the unexpected and the unfulfilling, thus legitimizing it in their systems of thought. Knowledge and information are crucial “purifications” agents. For these users, not only is the idea of thinking national an “obsolete” and “pointless” mental scheme (Ryeguy, 2013; KiNkS, 2008), but it also becomes “an exercise in frustration” (Ryeguy, 2013). Many users have accepted that production offshoring is

the reality of today's economy. They are aware that Burberry items have different "made ins" (Isotope2007, 2012). They also cope with the fact of having their Louis Vuitton bags "made in France" and their purse "made in Spain" (Jemima201, 2008; Atilano Miguel, 2014). When they are called to judge on the authenticity of a Louis Vuitton item "Made in China", they do not rely on stereotypical assumptions, i.e. China being the "country of counterfeiting", but on factual knowledge about Louis Vuitton manufacturing plants in China. From this perspective, the geographic congruity between design, brand and manufacture comes instead to be perceived as a "positive anomaly": "I got a Karl Lagerfeld for Lacoste polo as a gift and was pleasantly surprised to see it was made in France rather than China" (Prince of Paisley, 2010).

In some of their posts, they actually consider the hybrid reality of luxury as positive and enriching; haute horlogerie is a "real combination of efforts of people from different cultures" (Adams, 2015); the "typical French noses" of high-end perfumery works for multinational companies, and create fragrances across the national borders (The_good_life, 2007); Japanese designers rely on Italian fabrics (Queen Marie, 2015); British or American iconic cars are "made of imported parts or by foreign owned companies" (JetDoc, 2006); Rei Kawakubo and Kenzo have been taking advantage of the stylistic cross-pollination between Asia and the West, while Armani and Antonio Marras draw inspiration from Asian motives (Ashley, 2015).

"Everywhere" and "How": Dimensions of luxury production

As mentioned above, knowledge and culture play an important role in keeping the cognitive framework of an individual flexible and independent from stereotypes, generalizations or biased opinions. A few users reflect on the global and universal nature of luxury; they list several sites of excellence throughout space and time - such as cashmere and silk production in ancient Asia. The identification of luxury as "European", therefore, is just an instance of "geographic colonialism" (Erick D. Brand, 2014). Hence, some posters claim that "non-European luxuries" should be acknowledged in their own existence. US luxury, for instance, cannot be evaluated against Euro-centric criteria - "aristocratic or baroque" (watchnerd, 2015). Rather, it is necessary to find new definitions; if "British, French and Italian luxury items could be defined by this sense of craftsmanship and tradition [...], American luxury items tend to be innovative and with a sense of practicality" (Suze, 2015). The stereotypical identification of "Made in China" luxury as an "oxymoron" (Anonymous, 2013) becomes a "sort of simplistic 'me-too' China-bashing exercise" (mr.reasonable, 2012). As a matter of fact, China has been renowned in the past for the superior quality in the production of ceramics and silk, and its bad reputation is very recent. Even nowadays, China can count on the presence of skilled craftsmen; "by supplying manufacture for Western luxury, Chinese have improved in their workmanship" (eHaberdasher, 2008). This could actually lead to the development of "Chinese luxury" (Ashley, 2015; Belle Meets the World, 2015). From this perspective luxury has been and still is "everywhere".

Escaping from the CoO debate, some other users go back to the roots of luxury production, shifting their focus from "where" to "how": "I suppose all the "made in" have lost part of their appeal due to several factors. What it is really making the difference it is the REAL quality of the goods and the fact they are produced following all the international laws about health care and rights of the workers" (maxb, 2010). In other words, this entails for producers to preserve the integrity of luxury as a "Project off/for excellence". This means, as a broad business strategy, to choose the best option available beyond any "Price" consideration.

First, companies should protect craftsmanship as their main "Purpose", even when the production is segmented. This is usually possible through a rigorous quality control: "Guerlain, Chanel and Hermès are believed to maintain a strict supervision in the manufacturing of their perfumes, even when this is not in-house" (vetements, 2011); and "Some users would accept some BMW models to be made in India, but under strict German supervision" (Natarajan k, 2007).

As mentioned above, luxury is also about "People". It is "not only a question of quality. It's a question of humanity. People want to pay for exclusivity, they want to feel that the products was made with care" (Belletrist, 2006). This means for companies to delocalize also their craftsmanship, by sharing best practice and developing new local pools of expertise. On the other hand, "People" working in

luxury at all corporate levels and roles need to feel passionate about their work, taking pride and “interest in the success of the company” (Donatello89, 2011; Fashion Puss 2006; Alexander Kabbaz 2011). Another stakeholder companies need to take into account is the consumers. Although the business of luxury thrives on the mystique of the dream surrounding brands and products (Kapferer, 2015), the data gathered suggest companies have traded the “luxury dream” to keep their governance and operation unclear and ambiguous; “Secrecy is the enemy, secrecy is the killer: every single day people get upset towards the brands because they are secretive” (Adams, 2015). On this note, online users call for a different approach; “Transparency is appreciated, in that it reveals honesty, upfrontness, integrity” (sduford, 2015).

What about the “Place” then? The globalized and ICTs-based reality of luxury production calls us to develop a different understanding of “place”. As mentioned above, while place is traditionally considered as the location favoring human connection, in a networked reality it is rather connectivity that creates the place. When the production of luxury goods is segmented into different physical spaces, it is up to the companies to manage and nourish the connectivities between headquarters, operations and stakeholders to create a “sense of the place” of their own. From this perspective, the “brand” can become the cognitive guarantor of this “networked genius loci”; similarly to the “made in Prada” concept explored earlier in this paper. Thus, “Louis Vuitton” could certify the authenticity of its bags as the company’s “Project off/for Excellence”, regardless of their actual place of production (Dale, 2006). However, as considered above, this works only as long as “People” and “Purposes” are also respected.

In the contemporary business scenario, there are companies - such as Bottega Veneta - that capitalize on the traditional “genius loci”, but there are also other companies whose “genius loci” capitalizes on both the traditional and the networked place; Norlha Textiles, for instance, combines local and global expertise by making use of the workforce on the Tibetan Plateau to weave and felt the yak wool, with techniques coming from China, Tibet, Nepal, Cambodia, India.

Conclusions

The paper has approached the geography of luxury production as a “pure system”, i.e. a classified conceptual and perceptual framework as emergent from a netnographic fieldwork. The paper has also showed this “system” at work with anomalies, accounting for the complex nature of “place” in relation to luxury production.

Conceived as a pilot research project, the netnography has required the adoption of a wide analytical view, resulting in a bird’s-eye account on the topic; no particular distinction has been considered for the different luxury sectors or for the digital platforms. Time constraints have also limited the data collection phase, which has been mainly relying on posts collected during the observant fieldwork. In addition, the digital nature of the data does not always allow the retrieval of the year of each post or comment, and this limits the possibility to map any diachronic change in the perceptions of online users. These methodological and analytical limits, however, can pave the way for further investigation. Potential research can focus on specific sectors/brands, or digital aggregates/communities. It can also be relevant to support/amend the findings through interpretive statistics or software-based qualitative analysis.

The application of anthropological “purity” to luxury products is not unprecedented; a previous study by Sjödin (2006) built upon Douglas’ definitions of “pure” and “impure” to interpret online users’ perceptions about Porsche Cayenne, profiling the negative feelings surrounding the production of SUVs by a luxury carmaker.

The implementations proposed here concern the dynamic nature of purity. As the analysis has shown, “pure” and “impure” do not pertain to the products, but they rather depend on the individual. Despite their clear semantic opposition, “pure” and “impure” are not stable either; as a matter of fact, this boundary is continuously challenged by the reality of things and - within it - by situations of cognitive dis-order, with ambiguity and anomaly confronting the validity of the individuals’ mental constructs. This “pure luxury” framework is put to the test when online users are called to discuss specific issues

related to the contemporary reality of the luxury industry - delocalization; forms of hybrid ownerships/ventures; commoditization of the luxury mythology; brand extension. In their shifting and blurring, “pure” and “impure” account for the creative activity of human beings navigating through the world of objects, and ordering it internally.

From here, we can also stretch the interpretative vigour of purity/impurity to implement the management of the customer-based brand equity. Together with collecting consumers’ opinions and perceptions about luxury brands, products and companies, marketers need to take into account how all these different elements are ordered in meaningful constructs. Most importantly, by measuring the grade of resilience and the thresholds of tolerance for different indicators (e.g. products’ consistency with the company history, values, specialties, ownership and practices; consistency with the brand codes or images; consistency with the expected style, design, and performance; consistency with the consumers’ personal and social assumptions; consistency with the consumers’ geographical constructions) companies can elaborate suitable strategies to manage possible ambiguities and anomalies.

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