

Will You Become More Responsible When Uniquely Individuated or Harmoniously Deindividuated? Personal Social Responsibility to Corporate Social Responsibility in Luxury Fashion

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Background and Significance: Given rising environmental and societal concerns about the adverse impact of extravagant materials use and production wastes, luxury fashion brands have committed to adopting more responsible business practices (Atkinson & Kang, 2021). Despite such claims of devotion, unethical behaviors remain concealed behind their advocacies. For example, Hermès continues to extensively use exotic animal skins for their bags, exerting detrimental effects on biodiversity and contributing to species extinction (Tee, 2023). Louis Vuitton is criticized for its failure to be transparent about the progress of its sustainability initiatives and for implementing inadequate policies to support its workers during the pandemic (Rauturier, 2022). Such discrepancies may obscure consumers' perceptions of luxury brands' corporate social responsibility (CSR). Meanwhile, luxury fashion consumers were found to rarely bring up sustainability when making luxury purchase decisions, highlighting the need to prompt their own social responsibility (Connell & Piccirilli, 2021). Under these controversial circumstances, the sustainable development of the luxury industry requires collaborative efforts from *both* individual consumers and brands. The *New York Times* proposed the term "responsible fashion" to replace "sustainable fashion," arguing that each party should be accountable for their own decision-making and behavior, even though absolute sustainability may be difficult to achieve (Friedman, 2022). Therefore, it is worthwhile to identify ways to activate consumers' personal social responsibility (PSR) at the individual level and determine how it can be connected to perceived corporate social responsibility at the brand level (perceived CSR: refers to consumers' recognition of luxury brand's CSR commitments as genuine), which are the fundamental aims of the present study.

Research Purpose and Theoretical Framework: Extant research primarily investigated how a brand's CSR affects consumers' perceptions, attitudes, and purchase intentions toward the brand (e.g., Dang et al., 2020; Fatma et al., 2020; Min et al., 2023). These explorations focused on the outcomes of CSR but not its antecedents. Less attention has been paid to preceding factors that influence consumers' CSR perceptions (Vock, 2022). Accordingly, the present study focuses on the activation of PSR and its link to perceived CSR, addressing the following question: *How can we activate individuals' PSR and better connect it to their perceived CSR of a luxury fashion brand, which in turn ultimately increases their support for the brand?* To answer the question, the present study integrates two theories: the value-belief-norm (VBN) model (Stern et al., 1999) and deindividuation theory (Festinger et al., 1952; Le Bon, 2002). The VBN model served as the process-oriented underpinning for describing how individuals' innate yet conflicting personal values (*universalism*, the importance of living in harmony with other people and nature as a personal guiding principle, versus *hedonism*, the importance of having fun and enjoyment at every chance in one's life) stimulate their PSR, which in turn affects their perceived CSR from a luxury fashion brand and willingness to pay a premium (WIP) for the brand. Per deindividuation theory, deindividuation occurs when people are anonymous and immersed within a group (Crossey et al., 2021).

On the one hand, it can reinforce social roles and conformity to social norms, encouraging people to behave in a pro-social manner (Vilanova et al., 2017). On the other hand, it reduces self-awareness and individual responsibility, thereby cultivating anti-normative behaviors (Deng et al., 2021), which is a more dominant premise in literature. Thus, this study proposes the moderating effects of individuation (vs. deindividuation) in strengthening the 'positive' effects of universalism on PSR while weakening the 'negative' effects of hedonism on PSR; together, the positive effects of PSR on CSR can be strengthened in the individuation condition than the deindividuation condition.

Preliminary Study - Manipulation Check for Individuation/Deindividuation: A preliminary study was conducted for the manipulation check of individuation/deindividuation and the realism validation of a responsible luxury brand description. Amazon's M-Turk was used to recruit 81 participants, who were randomly assigned to the individuation or the deindividuation group. The *individuation* group was asked to reflect on characteristics that *differentiate* them from their families and friends, whereas the *deindividuation* group was instructed to think about attributes that they *share with* their families and friends. Manipulation check was shown to be effective in an independent t-test ($t(79) = -3.67, p < .01$). A description explaining how a luxury brand commits to three (economic, environmental, and social) pillars of corporate responsibility was given, and the participants found it highly realistic ($M = 5.44$).

Main Study - Methods and Results: In the main study, the model specified the relationships among two conflicting personal values (hedonism and universalism), PSR [first mediator], perceived CSR [second mediator] of a responsible luxury fashion brand, and WIP for the brand. All were measured using established scales. A valid sample of 419 was recruited through another round of data collection via M-Turk. They were first asked to select a luxury brand they had recently purchased and responded to the measures of personal values and PSR. Then, they were randomly assigned to either the individuation ($n = 202$) or deindividuation condition ($n = 217$) and viewed a responsible luxury brand description. Finally, participants indicated their perceived CSR and WIP. All necessary analysis steps were taken, including measurement model and structural model testing, common methods bias check, indirect effect testing, measurement invariance testing, and multi-group analysis (MGA). With good model fit (CFI = .96; TLI = .95; RMSEA = .05), overall structural model testing showed that: individuals' universalism, but not hedonism, positively affected PSR, which in turn increased perceived CSR. These effects engendered a greater WIP for the brand. MGA demonstrated that the positive effects of universalism on PSR were strengthened in the individuated condition ($\gamma = .807$) rather than under the deindividuated condition ($\gamma = .635$); moreover, this effect was transferred to the perceived CSR, thereby reinforcing the relationship between PSR and the perceived CSR more strongly ($\Delta\chi^2 = 9.50$ ($\Delta df = 1$), $p < .01$).

Contributions and Implications: To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to investigate the activation of personal social responsibility (PSR) and its connection to the perceived CSR of a brand, thus contributing to the literature on the intersection of sustainability, CSR, and luxury fashion. By applying deindividuation theory, it adds novelty to the body of knowledge on sustainable luxury. Our research underscores the significance of individuation as a critical moderator in strengthening the effects of universalism on PSR; it can also transfer effects from individuals' PSR to the brand's CSR. The findings suggest that luxury fashion brands should tailor their communication messages in a way that highlights how their consumers can distinguish themselves from others, provide one-on-one services, and address consumers by their names to reinforce their unique individuality. These actions can help people's

universalistic values to be more easily and effectively connected to a sense of personal responsibility, further encouraging consumers to recognize the CSR initiatives more clearly to which luxury brands are committed and therefore foster a greater willingness to support the brands.

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