

## **Luxury advertising and recognizable artworks: New insights on the “art infusion” effect**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This research advances current knowledge about *art infusion*, which is the ability of art to favorably influence the assessment of consumer products. In particular, the research investigates the effectiveness of artworks that evoke their creators’ most *recognizable* style in luxury advertising.

**Design** – The research encompasses three studies – two conducted online and one in a real consumption situation. The first study explores the effect that a recognizable vs. non-recognizable painter’s style has on consumers’ judgments about luxury products. The second and third studies explore the moderating roles of *desire to signal status* and *desire for distinction*, respectively, which are relevant to advertisers interested in targeting these individual differences.

**Findings** – Advertisements that incorporate artworks that evoke a painter’s most recognizable style enhance the advertised products’ perceived luxuriousness. Consumers with a higher desire to signal status exhibit greater purchasing intention in response to recognizable artworks. By contrast, consumers with a higher desire for distinction exhibit greater purchasing intention when the painter’s style in the featured artwork is less recognizable.

**Practical implications** – The results provide marketers with suggestions on how to select and incorporate visual artworks into luxury brand communication: They could focus on recognizable vs. non-recognizable artworks based on whether their main goal is to communicate status or distinctiveness.

**Originality** – This research offers novel insights into the practical value of art infusion by showing when and for whom the beneficial effects of pairing art with luxury products are more likely to occur.

**Keywords** Artistic style, desire for distinction, luxury products, recognizability, status signaling, visual artworks.

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The use of visual artworks to promote luxury products is becoming increasingly common in marketing communication (Kapferer, 2014). Indeed, recent years have seen a proliferation of luxury advertising campaigns that feature visual artworks. Luxury companies that utilize this communication strategy typically pair their products with famous paintings or with visual stimuli that are visibly inspired by such artworks. In 2009, for example, Lexus' *Every piece is a masterpiece* campaign used images that evoke the subjects and styles of popular artworks such as *The persistence of memory* by Salvador Dalí, *Four Marilyns* by Andy Warhol, and *Sunflowers* by Vincent Van Gogh (Ads Of the World, 2009). In 2011, Hermès promoted a collection of bracelets by inserting pictures of its products into paintings by notable French artists, such as *La Grande Odalisque* by Gustave Courbet, and *Nevermore* by Paul Gauguin (Orientalist Style, 2014). In 2013, Dior ran an advertisement featuring an image inspired by Édouard Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*. In 2014, Christian Louboutin launched a lookbook that promoted his bags and shoes through images inspired by Paul Cézanne, Camille Pissarro, Claude Monet and other master painters' works (Vogue, 2014). In 2015, the *GucciGram* promotional initiative invited some emerging artists to create artworks that paired Gucci products with images inspired by René Magritte, Francesco Hayez, and Grant Wood's most recognizable paintings (DigitalGucci.com, 2015).

In all these examples, companies have considered artworks that were emblematic of their creators' most popular styles. They opted to feature their products alongside visual artworks that are universally recognized as masterpieces in the hope that such an association could bring positive returns in terms of product images and sales. Although this reasoning might appear logically correct, it remains under-investigated in advertising research. The present research provides an experimental test of this notion by showing whether featuring products alongside highly recognizable artworks, as compared to those with a less recognizable style,

is more effective in communicating an image of luxury. Furthermore, the research sheds light on the potential types of consumers for whom the strategy of employing visual artworks with a highly recognizable style could be particularly effective or counterproductive.

The article proceeds as follows: First, we address the notion of artwork recognizability and introduce three research hypotheses; then we present three empirical studies, discussing the obtained results and their practical implications; finally, we highlight the limitations of the studies to provide suggestions for future research.

### **The “art infusion” effect**

The efforts to associate luxury products with art reflect a broader marketing strategy aimed at increasing said products’ perceived luxuriousness (Huettl and Gierl, 2012) and presenting the luxury company as an art patron (Joy *et al.*, 2014). This practice leverages the so-called *art infusion* effect (Hagtvedt and Patrick, 2008a, 2008b), in which the sense of excellence typically associated with an artwork spills over onto a product, thereby increasing consumers’ evaluations of that product (Lee *et al.*, 2015) and intention to buy it (Huettl and Gierl, 2012). Past research suggests that such an effect derives from the mere association of products with art: Artistic elements may be incorporated in the product (Hagtvedt and Patrick 2008a, 2008b; Lee *et al.*, 2015) or merely represented beside the product in an advertisement (Huettl and Gierl, 2012). In all cases, the prestige of art transfers to the products due to a spillover effect (e.g., Hagtvedt and Patrick 2008a, 2008b; see also Argo *et al.*, 2006; Newman and Dhar, 2014; Newman *et al.*, 2011).

Previous studies also maintain that art infusion does not depend on the content of visual artworks or the popularity of their creators (Hagtvedt and Patrick 2008a, 2008b; Lee *et al.*, 2015). In fact, consumers perceive greater prestige in products that incorporate artistic elements, even when the makers are not renowned masters and their creations are unknown to

the general public. Nevertheless, the present research posits that such details – and in particular, the artworks’ *recognizability* – could be relevant to consumers’ evaluations and differentially affect them. Specifically, we demonstrate that (at least in the realm of print advertisements of luxury products) associating a product with a highly recognizable visual artwork increases consumers’ evaluations of that product compared to when the artwork is less recognizable. This effect has never been assessed before.

By pursuing this goal, our research also advances knowledge about possible moderators of the art infusion effect. Research on such moderators is indeed quite limited, beyond a few notable exceptions (Hagtvedt and Patrick, 2011). In their experimental investigations, Hagtvedt and Patrick (2011) found that making consumers think of an artwork as if it were a mere illustration rather than as a piece of art attenuates the art infusion effect. They also showed that the effect diminishes among consumers with a concrete rather than an abstract mindset, as the former consumers tend to focus on what is depicted in the artwork rather than on how it is depicted. However, despite this research on such situational moderators, no study to date has explored consumer-related moderators that capture chronic individual needs and desires.

The present research contributes to closing this gap and responds to Patrick and Hagtvedt’s (2009) call for investigating “the possible moderating role of consumer goals on luxury brand evaluations and purchase intent” (p. 276). Our research provides evidence for a possible double-edged nature of art infusion. In particular, we show that the use of highly recognizable artworks may be a more effective advertising strategy when the intended recipients look at luxury consumption as a way to signal status to others (e.g., Eastman *et al.*, 1999; Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014). Conversely, the use of highly recognizable artworks could be a less effective tactic when recipients look at luxury consumption as a way to distinguish

themselves from other consumers (e.g., Bellezza *et al.*, 2014; Chan *et al.*, 2015; Leibenstein, 1950).

### **Recognizable vs. non-recognizable artworks**

Artworks that reflect an artist's most notable style – hereafter, *recognizable artworks* – are easily identified by a large number of people, regardless of their inherent interest in art (Decrop and Derbaix, 2014; Gabora *et al.*, 2012; Mñniz *et al.*, 2014; Schroeder, 2005). Such artworks feature colors, images, or painting techniques that are recurrently used by their authors. For this reason, they easily elicit the artist's image in people's minds. Recognizable artworks conform to a preconceived mental schema (Moulard *et al.*, 2014) and, therefore, are more likely to be associated with their creators. However, during their careers, many popular artists also create lesser-known pieces – hereafter, *non-recognizable artworks* – whose styles deviate considerably from their authors' popular styles. To illustrate, the overwhelming majority of people would likely recognize paintings such as *The dream* or *The demoiselles d'Avignon* as belonging to Picasso, but fewer would recognize *Boy with a pipe*, which expresses a very different and less popular style.

We propose that using more recognizable artworks in luxury advertising may more effectively elicit perceptions of luxury than using non-recognizable artworks. Our reasoning is that, because easily recognized art is often valued more highly (e.g., Decrop and Derbaix, 2014; Mñniz *et al.*, 2014; Schroeder, 2005), people might consider the former artworks more valuable than the latter. Indeed, recognizable artworks often represent masterpieces and are generally sold at considerably higher prices than less recognizable artworks by the same artist (McAndrew, 1998; Scorcu and Zanola, 2011). On this basis, we reason that the sense of excellence assigned to recognizable artworks might spill over onto the advertised luxury products that assume an analogous connotation of prestige and exclusiveness (Hagtvedt and

Patrick, 2008a, 2008b). Furthermore, in line with Huettl and Gierl (2012), we suppose that this effect might occur because the artwork and its prestige are easily accessible information (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974) that anchor consumers' evaluations of the advertised product. Thus, we propose that:

*H1.* The presence of recognizable artworks in luxury product advertisements increases the perceived luxuriousness of the advertised products more than the presence of non-recognizable artworks.

#### *Recognizable art as a means of signaling status*

While luxury consumption typically concerns the purchase of products that have a high symbolic value and convey a sense of prestige and exclusivity (Dubois *et al.*, 2005), different motivations might drive consumers' decisions to purchase such products and lead them to select more or less publicly visible luxury products. Many consumers principally buy luxury products to demonstrate a higher social standing to people who cannot afford prestigious brands (Eastman *et al.*, 1999; Wang and Wallendorf, 2006). Thus, they purchase highly recognizable luxury products. Other consumers do not principally buy luxury products to signal status, but to differentiate themselves from other luxury consumers (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014).

The tendency to signal status via luxury consumption varies based on how much consumers want to display their wealth. Such a desire typically manifests itself in actions aimed at flaunting wealth in order to impress others (Dubois and Duquesne, 1993; O'Cass and McEwen, 2004). As a consequence, consumers with a higher desire to signal status might be more interested in buying products whose luxurious qualities are easily recognized by others (Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996; Nelissen and Meijers, 2011). This is supported by past

research, which shows that such consumers tend to prefer products characterized by highly visible brand logos (Han *et al.*, 2010) and easily recognized stylistic codes or designs like Louis Vuitton's monogram or the Burberry check (Wilson *et al.*, 2013).

Considering the above, we suppose that featuring recognizable artworks in luxury advertising may increase public prestige and visibility of the advertised products and propose that:

- H2.* Compared to consumers with a lower desire to signal status, those with a higher desire to signal status are more interested in buying luxury products promoted in advertisements that feature recognizable artworks rather than non-recognizable artworks.

#### *Non-recognizable art as a means of signaling uniqueness*

Not all consumers are interested in signaling status by purchasing expensive and conspicuous products. Indeed, there are consumers who might purchase rare or special luxury products mainly to express their individuality and uniqueness (Chan *et al.*, 2015; Gierl and Huettl, 2010; Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014). This tendency is stronger for consumers with a higher desire for distinction (Chaduri *et al.*, 2010; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004) – that is, an inner need to feel different from other people and signal uniqueness (Ruvio, 2008; Simonson and Nowlis, 2000; Tian *et al.*, 2001). Those consumers typically prefer products with distinctive and non-conforming designs (Bellezza *et al.*, 2014; Bloch, 1995), which are particularly rare on the market (Schaefer, 2014; Snyder, 1992).

Berger and Ward (2010) found, indeed, that consumers with a higher desire for distinction prefer luxury products that use subtle or uncommon signals of luxuriousness (e.g., a very small logo knitted on a tie, a colored sole applied to women's shoes), as these transmit a sense



of uniqueness and allow consumers to express their own style (Chan *et al.*, 2015; Gierl and Huettl, 2010). Meanwhile, Amaldoss and Jain (2008) noted that luxury fashion companies often label their products as limited editions in order to make purchasers feel different and unique, thus catering to some of their customers' desire for distinction.

Based on the above, we suppose that featuring *non*-recognizable artworks in luxury advertising may be a way to convey a sense of uniqueness, as such artworks will only be recognized by a select few, and propose that:

- H3.* Compared to consumers with a lower desire for distinction, those with a higher desire for distinction are more interested in buying luxury products promoted in advertisements featuring non-recognizable artworks rather than recognizable artworks.

## **Empirical studies**

The research consists of three studies, with each testing one of our hypotheses. Study 1 tested whether the incorporation of a recognizable artwork in a luxury advertisement increases the product's perceived luxuriousness more than the incorporation of a non-recognizable artwork by the same artist. Study 2 replicated this finding by using different artworks and tested whether an advertisement that incorporates a recognizable artwork activates a stronger willingness to buy the advertised product in consumers aiming to signal their status. Finally, Study 3 aimed to demonstrate that the incorporation of a recognizable artwork in a print advertisement may also have an opposite effect, particularly by reducing the willingness to pay for the advertised product among consumers with a strong desire for distinction. Figure 1 provides a summary of the research framework.

Figure 1 about here

## Study 1

### *Stimuli and pretest*

To determine a usable set of visual stimuli, we sought the assistance of an expert in visual art. We asked this expert to indicate some painters who employed different artistic styles, but only came to be associated with one style in particular. This expert recommended a focus on modern-style artists and suggested Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) and Mark Rothko (1903-1970). We considered Kandinsky's paintings in our first study and Rothko's paintings in the second study.

Next, we asked the expert to indicate sixteen of Kandinsky's paintings: eight that could be representative of his most popular style – and hence, potentially classifiable as highly recognizable artworks – and eight that could reflect a style far less known by mainstream consumers. A second expert in visual art, unaware of our research goals, agreed with the first expert's suggestions. The sixteen paintings were then combined to form eight pairs of paintings, with each pair including a recognizable and a non-recognizable painting. With the help of the first expert, we selected one pair that featured the most striking stylistic contrast, namely *Yellow-Red-Blue* (1925) as a recognizable painting and *Blue rider* (1903) as a non-recognizable painting.

We pretested the respective recognizability of these two paintings using fifty Italian consumers ( $M_{\text{Age}} = 39$ ,  $SD = 10.97$ ; 46% males) recruited from the same population of respondents as the main study. Participants received a formal invitation via e-mail that linked them to an electronic questionnaire. At the onset of the questionnaire, participants were introduced to Kandinsky's most popular style with a selection of three paintings. These paintings were derived from the initial set of eight that represented the artist's most popular

style (Figure 2, panel A). Then, participants were randomly assigned to look at either *Blue rider* (Figure 2, panel B) or *Yellow-Red-Blue* (Figure 2, panel C). Participants were then asked to rate three items on seven-point scales that respectively measured: the final painting's degree of recognizability relative to the paintings seen at the beginning of the survey (1 = Not at all recognizable, 7 = Very recognizable), their familiarity with Kandinsky's style (1 = Not at all familiar, 7 = Extremely familiar) and their liking toward the final painting (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much).

Across both conditions, respondents did not differ in their degree of familiarity with the painter's style ( $M_s = 1.96$  vs.  $2.08$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) or their liking toward the presented painting ( $M_s = 3.12$  vs.  $3.23$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). However, *Yellow-Red-Blue* ( $M = 5.29$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) was rated as significantly more representative of Kandinsky's most recognizable style than *Blue rider* ( $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 1.79$ ),  $F(1, 48) = 44.29$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . This result did not change substantially after controlling for respondents' familiarity with Kandinsky and liking toward the painting.

Figure 2 about here

### *Main study procedure*

Sixty-nine participants ( $M_{\text{Age}} = 36$ ,  $SD = 10.72$ ; 58% males), recruited from an online pool of Italian consumers, participated in a two-cell study in which the artwork's recognizability was a manipulated factor (low vs. high). Like before, these participants received a formal invitation via e-mail that linked them to an electronic questionnaire. At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants read that a luxury company was interested in running an ad featuring a painting by Wassily Kandinsky as part of a product promotion. To avoid potential biases connected with prior knowledge about the painter and his artworks, participants were introduced to Kandinsky's most popular style with the same three paintings used in the

pretest. Next, participants in the low-recognizability condition were shown an advertisement featuring the product alongside *Blue rider*, whereas those in the high-recognizability condition saw the same product alongside *Yellow-Red-Blue*. To avoid possible inferences of higher product quality and value by those participants who were presented with the highly recognizable painting, all participants were told that the monetary value of the fourth painting was equivalent to that of the previous three. Then, all participants rated the perceived luxuriousness of the advertised product using four items (“luxurious”; “prestigious”; “attractive”; and “high class”; 1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much;  $\alpha = 0.85$ ) derived from Hagtvedt and Patrick (2008a). They also rated their familiarity with Kandinsky’s style and the advertised brand, as well as their liking toward the product and its advertisement, using scales similar to those employed in the pretest. Finally, they indicated their gender and age.

### *Results*

Across both conditions, respondents did not significantly differ in their levels of familiarity with Kandinsky’s style ( $M_s = 1.86$  vs.  $2.27$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) and the advertised brand ( $M_s = 3.55$  vs.  $3.64$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), nor did they differ in their liking toward the advertised product ( $M_s = 3.22$  vs.  $3.39$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) and the advertisement itself ( $M_s = 3.09$  vs.  $3.11$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Respondents in the high-recognizability condition rated the advertised product as significantly more luxurious ( $M = 4.81$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ) than their counterparts ( $M = 4.26$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ),  $F(1, 67) = 4.52$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . This result did not change substantially after controlling for respondents’ familiarity with Kandinsky and the advertised brand, as well as their liking toward the product and its advertisement. Hence, H1 was supported.

## Study 2

### *Stimuli and pretest*

Study 2 revolved around Mark Rothko's paintings. The same expert who supported us in Study 1 suggested sixteen of Rothko's paintings, half of which reflected his most popular style and half of which reflected his lesser-known styles. Another expert in visual art – different from the one questioned in Study 1, yet still blind to the study's purpose – endorsed these suggestions. As before, we selected a pair that featured a strong stylistic contrast, settling on *Magenta, Black, Green on Orange* (1949) as a highly recognizable painting and *Untitled* (1948) as a less recognizable painting. As with Kandinsky's paintings, we ran a pretest with forty-one consumers ( $M_{\text{Age}} = 37$ ,  $SD = 11.77$ ; 34% males), recruited from the same population of respondents as the main study, to assess the respective recognizability of the two Rothko paintings. Participants were introduced to Rothko's most popular style using a procedure similar to that of the previous pretest. Then, they were randomly assigned to look at either *Magenta, Black, Green on Orange* or *Untitled*, and completed the same measures as the previous pretest. Respondents in the two conditions showed similar levels of familiarity with Rothko's style ( $M_s = 2.05$  vs.  $2.33$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) and liking toward the painting they saw during the survey ( $M_s = 3.38$  vs.  $3.15$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). However, *Magenta, Black, Green on Orange* was rated as significantly more recognizable ( $M = 5.65$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) than *Untitled* ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ),  $F(1, 39) = 74.82$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This result did not change significantly after controlling for participants' familiarity with Rothko's style and liking toward the painting.

### *Main study procedure*

One hundred and twelve participants ( $M_{\text{Age}} = 36$ ,  $SD = 11.62$ , 54% males), recruited from an online pool of Italian consumers (different from Study 1's pool), participated in a two-cell

study with the artwork's recognizability as a manipulated factor (low vs. high) and desire to signal status (measured continuously) serving as a moderator.

Participants received a formal invitation via e-mail that linked them to an electronic questionnaire. At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants read that a luxury company was planning to run an advertisement featuring an artwork by Mark Rothko as part of a product promotion. In order to introduce participants to Rothko's style, the survey presented them with three of his most recognizable paintings. Afterward, participants in the low-recognizability condition saw an advertisement featuring the company's product alongside *Untitled*, whereas those in the high-recognizability condition saw the same product alongside *Magenta, Black, Green on Orange*. As before, all participants were informed that the monetary value of this fourth painting was equivalent to that of the previous three. Then, they rated the perceived luxuriousness of the advertised product using the same items as before ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ). They additionally rated their willingness to buy the advertised product using two items ("I would consider buying the advertised product"; "I would purchase the advertised product"; 1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree;  $r = 0.85$ ) and their desire to signal status using an adapted version of Gierl and Huettl's (2010) single-item scale ("I would buy a luxury product mainly to show off my social status to others"; 1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). They also rated their familiarity with Rothko's style and the advertised brand, and their liking toward the product and the advertisement itself using the same items as before. Finally, they provided their gender and age.

## Results

Respondents in the two conditions were equally familiar with Rothko's style ( $M_s = 1.90$  vs.  $2.00$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) and the advertised brand ( $M_s = 2.46$  vs.  $2.66$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Furthermore, they expressed a similar amount of liking toward the advertised product ( $M_s = 3.14$  vs.  $3.28$ ,  $p >$

0.05) and the displayed advertisement ( $M_s = 3.15$  vs.  $3.23$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Again, respondents in the high-recognizability condition rated the advertised product as significantly more luxurious ( $M = 4.63$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ) than their counterparts ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ),  $F(1, 110) = 5.78$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . This result did not change substantially after controlling for respondents' familiarity with Rothko and the advertised brand, and their liking toward the product and its advertisement.

In a next step, we regressed participants' willingness to buy the advertised product on the recognizability of the artwork featured in the advertisement (coded as a binary variable taking value -1 when recognizability was low and 1 when it was high), the desire to signal status (set as a continuous and mean-centered variable), and their interaction. The desire to signal status exerted a positive and significant effect on the willingness to buy the advertised product ( $b = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, there was a significant interaction between recognizability and the desire to signal status ( $b = 0.18$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

The conditional effects of artwork recognizability at low ( $M - 1SD$ ) and high ( $M + 1SD$ ) levels of desire to signal status (see Table I and Figure 3) revealed that, for respondents with a lower desire to signal status, their willingness to buy the advertised product was unaffected by whether the artwork was recognizable (estimated value of willingness to buy = 1.55) or non-recognizable (estimated value of willingness to buy = 1.65),  $b = -0.05$ ,  $p > 0.05$ . Conversely, for respondents with a higher desire to signal status, their willingness to buy the product was stronger when the advertisement featured the highly recognizable artwork (estimated value of willingness to buy = 3.38) rather than the non-recognizable artwork (estimated value of willingness to buy = 2.63),  $b = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . This result did not change considerably after controlling for both respondents' familiarity (with Rothko's style and the advertised brand) and liking (toward the product and its advertisement). Hence, H2 was supported.

Table I about here

Figure 3 about here

### Study 3

#### *Stimuli and pretest*

Because the effects we found might have been driven by the paintings themselves rather than by the difference in their recognizability, we conducted a third study that used only one artwork as a visual stimulus and manipulated its recognizability directly. We asked the director of an Italian art gallery to suggest three painters whose artworks are typically characterized by similar artistic elements (subjects, painting style, etc.) and, as such, may not be easily distinguished from each other by a mainstream consumer. The director mentioned Claude Monet (1840-1926), Pierre-August Renoir (1841-1919), and Camille Corot (1796-1875). For each artist, the director indicated eight artworks that would not be classified as masterpieces and were relatively unknown to the general public. With the help of this director, we selected *View of Antibes from the Notre-Dame Plateau* (1888) by Claude Monet for our study, as it was the only painting that seemed emotionally neutral while also featuring a common theme in painting, i.e., a landscape. To verify the painting's relative obscurity, we ran a pretest with fifty luxury consumers ( $M_{\text{Age}} = 35$ ,  $SD = 10.86$ ; 50% males) who were approached at the exit of luxury multi-brand boutiques in Italy. The pretest confirmed that about 90% of participants were unable to identify the painting's author ( $\chi^2 = 27.94$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

#### *Main study procedure*

Ninety consumers ( $M_{\text{Age}} = 36$ ,  $SD = 11.38$ ; 50% males), recruited using the same procedure as the above pretest, participated in a two-cell study with recognizability of the artwork (low vs.



high) as a manipulated variable and desire for distinction (measured continuously) serving as a moderator. Of these consumers, 64% had a household annual income equal to Euro 50,000 or less; 26% had a household annual income between Euro 50,000 and 100,000; the others had an income higher than Euro 100,000. In addition, 42% were self-employed; 32% were employees; the others were students, housewives, or did not report any profession.

Participants completed a printed questionnaire. At the onset of the questionnaire, participants read that a luxury company was planning to promote one of its products with an advertisement featuring a painting. They saw the advertisement in question on the next page of the questionnaire, but were not provided with information about the painting's author. Below the advertisement was a short text that varied across the two conditions. In the low-recognizability condition, the text reported that the artwork was not representative of its author's most popular style and, as such, few people would recognize it as one of that artist's paintings. Conversely, the text in the high-recognizability condition reported that the artwork was very representative of its author's most popular style and, as such, even people who are not particularly knowledgeable about painting could easily recognize it as one of that artist's pieces. All respondents were told that experts consider the painting to be a valuable piece of art.

In the next step, respondents expressed their interest for the advertised product, which we assessed by measuring their willingness to pay for it: participants indicated what percentage of the retail price they would be willing to pay for the advertised product using a 12-point scale (1 = 10% of the retail price of the product, through 12 = 120% of the retail price) drawn from Rucker and Galinsky (2008). Afterward, participants rated their desire for distinction using five items (e.g., "I would buy an interesting and uncommon version of a product to show others that I have an original taste"; "By choosing a product having a distinctive look and design, I show my friends that I am different", 1 = Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly agree;

$\alpha = 0.94$ ) derived from Chaduri *et al.* (2001). Like their counterparts in the previous studies, participants also indicated their familiarity with the advertised brand, as well their liking toward the product and its advertisement. Finally, they provided their gender, age, annual income and profession.

### *Results*

Across the two conditions, respondents did not significantly differ in their level of familiarity with the advertised brand ( $M_s = 3.35$  vs.  $3.52$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) or their liking toward the advertised product ( $M_s = 3.30$  vs.  $3.70$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) and the advertisement itself ( $M_s = 3.32$  vs.  $3.87$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Similar to Study 2, we regressed participants' willingness to pay for the advertised product on the recognizability of the artwork featured in the advertisement (coded as a binary variable taking value -1 when recognizability was low and 1 when it was high), the desire for distinction (set as a continuous and mean-centered variable), and their interaction. The desire for distinction exerted a significant and positive effect on the willingness to pay for the advertised product ( $b = 0.84$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). More importantly, there was a significant and negative interaction between artwork recognizability and the desire for distinction ( $b = -0.42$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Next, we assessed the conditional effects of recognizability on the willingness to pay for the advertised product at low ( $M - 1SD$ ) and high ( $M + 1SD$ ) levels of respondents' desire for distinction (see Table II and Figure 4). This analysis revealed that, for respondents with a lower desire for distinction, the recognizability of the artwork did not affect their willingness to pay for the advertised product, which itself did not vary significantly as a function of whether the artwork was recognizable (estimated value of willingness to pay =  $3.56$ ) or non-recognizable (estimated value of willingness to pay =  $3.04$ ),  $b = 0.26$ ,  $p > 0.05$ . Conversely, respondents with a higher desire for distinction were more willing to pay for the advertised

product when the artwork was described as non-recognizable (estimated value of willingness to pay = 6.79) rather than recognizable (estimated value of willingness to pay = 4.80),  $b = -0.99$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . This result did not change considerably after controlling for respondents' familiarity with the advertised brand and their liking toward the product and its advertisement. Thus, H3 was supported.

Table II about here

Figure 4 about here

## **Discussion and implications**

The present research makes two significant contributions to the previous literature on art infusion. First, it shows that such an effect may significantly change depending on whether or not consumers perceive the artwork paired with a luxury product as a popular and easily recognized piece of art. Because recognizable artworks increase the perceived luxuriousness of advertised products, marketers involved in the selection of artworks may need to consider the degree of recognizability when designing luxury advertising campaigns. Second, the present research responds to Patrick and Hagtvedt's (2009) call for elucidating the potential moderating role of consumers' goals and characteristics by showing that the effect of art infusion varies based on consumers' chronic desires for status signaling and distinction.

More specifically, the present research provides new insights into the effectiveness of using visual art as an appealing communication tool in luxury advertising. The obtained results show that the tactic of pairing luxury products with recognizable artworks may only engender a greater willingness to purchase the advertised products among consumers with a higher desire to signal status. Such consumers might be particularly attracted to highly recognizable artworks and may perceive the products paired with these artworks as an

opportunity to better signal their social status to others. Conversely, consumers with a higher desire for distinction may respond better to less recognizable artworks. As these consumers seem primarily concerned with distinguishing themselves from others and expressing their identities through non-conforming behaviors (Gierl and Huettl, 2010; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004), their attention may be better captured by artworks that are not recognized by the majority of people and thereby satisfy their desire for distinction. This desire may also incline these consumers to pay more for products that are aligned with less recognizable artworks.

These results suggest that luxury companies seeking to employ art in their advertisements should carefully select the pieces according to the driving desires of their target customers. In particular, when these companies aim to deliver products designed to cater to current or prospective customers' desire to signal status, marketers could design advertising campaigns centered on highly recognizable visual artworks. Alternatively, when companies aim to cater to consumers' desire to distinguish themselves from others, their campaigns could revolve around less recognizable artworks. This finding provides a novel guideline for those luxury companies that overlook the potential effectiveness of pairing products with less recognizable artworks in their advertisements.

The present research features some limitations that pave the way for future investigations. First, participants in our experiments were all Italian consumers. Thus, future studies could test whether our results could be extended to consumers from other countries. Furthermore, future research could employ broader samples than those examined in our research in order to test more complex models. Second, our studies did not examine potential interactions between consumer-related moderators and situational moderators. This choice allowed us to keep our research design parsimonious; nevertheless, future studies could address this issue. Researchers might, for example, assess the impact of consumers' chronic desires for status

signaling and distinction while inducing consumers to see the visual artwork in an advertisement as a mere illustration or a piece of art.

Third, to avoid inferences of greater product quality and prestige from recognizable artworks, we told all participants that both the recognizable and non-recognizable artworks in our luxury advertisements were all valuable pieces of art. However, to deepen our results, future research could assess whether recognizability actually inclines viewers to associate a higher economic value to both the artwork and the product paired with it, as well as heightens the intention to buy that product. Finally, all our experiments included an introductory phase aimed to inform participants about the selected artists' most recognizable styles. This was necessary to alleviate the possible influence of participants' prior knowledge about such styles. However, considering that consumers in real consumption contexts do not generally receive information about painters' styles, future research could avoid priming participants with samples of recognizable artworks. By exploring these avenues, future researchers could further improve current knowledge about art infusion and uncover the most fruitful ways to leverage its potential in marketing communication.

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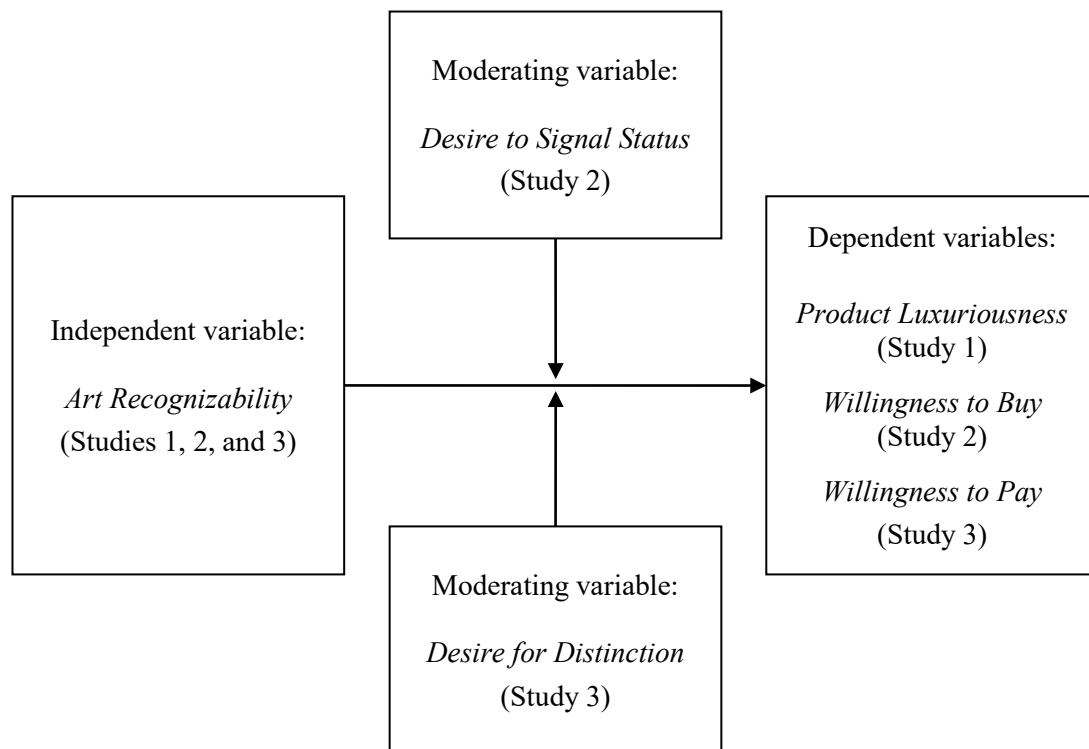


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## FIGURES



**Figure 1.** Research framework



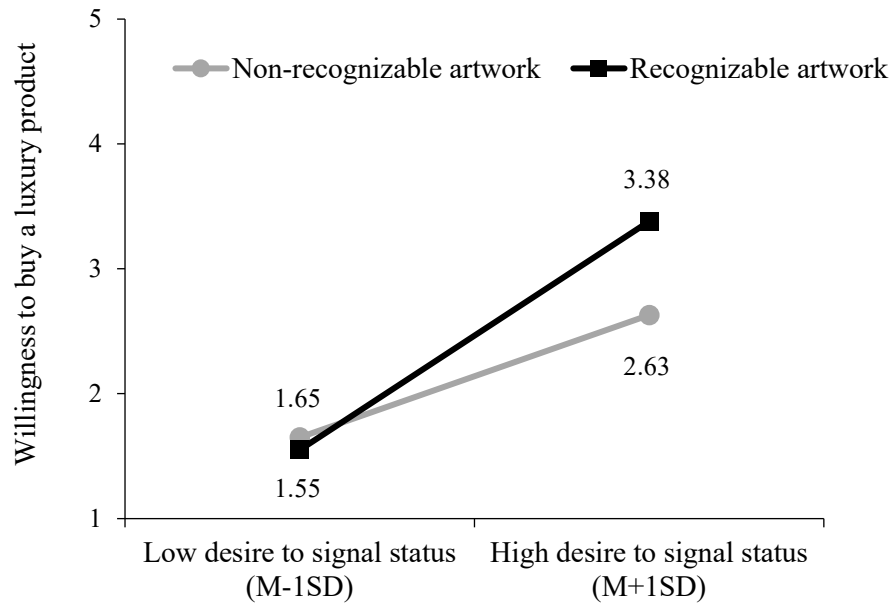
A: Recognizable artworks by Wassily Kandinsky used in the pretest and the main study



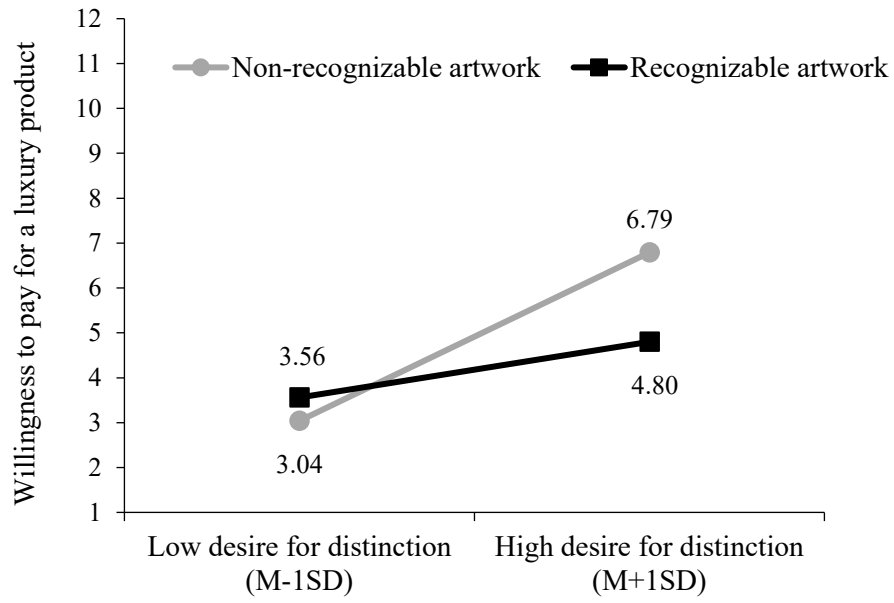
B: Ad with non-recognizable artwork

C: Ad with recognizable artwork

**Figure 2.** Stimuli used in Study 1



**Figure 3.** Willingness to buy a luxury product as a function of art recognizability and desire to signal status



**Figure 4.** Willingness to pay for a luxury product as a function of art recognizability and desire for distinction

## TABLES

<i>Moderator: Desire to signal status</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>
Low desire to signal status	-0.05	0.14	-0.37	0.71	-0.33	0.23
Moderate desire to signal status	0.13	0.11	1.12	0.26	-0.10	0.35
High desire to signal status	0.37	0.17	2.23	0.03	0.04	0.71

**Note:**  $n = 112$ .

**Table I.** Conditional effects of art recognizability on willingness to buy a luxury product at low, moderate and high levels of desire to signal status.

<i>Moderator: Desire for distinction</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>
Low desire for distinction	0.26	0.37	0.71	0.48	-0.47	0.99
Moderate desire for distinction	-0.37	0.26	-1.40	0.16	-0.88	0.15
High desire for distinction	-0.99	0.37	-2.66	0.01	-1.73	-0.25

**Note:**  $n = 90$ .

**Table II.** Conditional effects of art recognizability on willingness to pay for a luxury product at low, moderate and high levels of desire for distinction.