

The effect of immersive sustainability storytelling in 360° virtual reality on the emotional experience and sustainable brand image of a luxury brand

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Abstract:

This study aims to investigate the effect of two types of sustainability storytelling by a luxury brand (immersive vs non-immersive) on sustainable brand image. A laboratory experiment was conducted with 110 consumers. . The results showed that immersive sustainability storytelling in 360° virtual reality elicits a more emotional experience than non-immersive sustainability storytelling. Furthermore, the results showed that the emotional experience positively influences the sustainable brand image.

Keywords: Storytelling; virtual reality; sustainability; emotional experience; sustainable brand image

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Introduction

Sustainability is one of the most pressing challenges, particularly for luxury brands, in order to ensure the responsible use of natural resources (Klaus, P., & al., 2025). Indeed, *“At least 8,000 chemicals are used to transform raw materials into textiles, and 25% of the pesticides used worldwide are intended for the cultivation of non-organic cotton.”* The consequences of these practices are irreversible for individuals and the environment (Woodside & al., 2019). Chemicals penetrate the soil and groundwater, causing cancer, immune and nervous system problems, and birth defects. They also destroy wildlife. This water is then discharged into the environment, contaminating drinking water and aquatic ecosystems with toxic chemicals (Van Wert, 2017). It has become impossible for fashion companies to focus exclusively on economic growth without considering the environmental, social, and ethical consequences of their activities. According to Genç (2017), despite criticism of the luxury industry for its negative impact on the environment, communicating about sustainability poses a dilemma for prestigious brands in the context of sustainable luxury. While integrating environmentally friendly practices may respond to growing social pressure, it can also lead to negative attitudes among consumers. Indeed, research conducted by Quach & al. (2022) showed that consumers were less likely to prefer luxury goods when they were made using recycled materials. The pursuit of sustainability has become an essential quality for luxury goods consumers, forcing some brands to reconcile their actual practices with the expectations of these consumers. In the age of social media, luxury brands face increased reputational risk, highlighting the importance of implementing mitigation strategies to manage these complex consumer perceptions. However, storytelling can be a valuable asset for luxury brands seeking to communicate their sustainable practices. Indeed, it is considered a powerful tool for communicating about sustainable development and influencing consumer behavior (Dessart & al., 2023). This fills a gap in the literature, which mainly explores the impact of storytelling in general contexts without focusing specifically on luxury and sustainability. Nevertheless, storytelling appears to be an alternative style of execution to argumentative advertising for generating a sustainable brand image. However, with the emergence of new technologies, immersive storytelling has experienced strong growth. It is one of the major developments in contemporary storytelling, serving to immerse the viewer to the point where they feel like they are an integral part of the narrative. It refers to a form of storytelling that uses immersive technologies, mainly driven by immersive technologies such as 360° virtual reality (VR). He latter refers to a simulated experience that recreates real phenomena using specialized software and hardware (Cavusoglu & al., 2019), offering a middle ground between traditional 2D video and virtual environments, allowing for a high degree of realism and immersion at a reduced cost. They have profoundly transformed the ways in which individuals interact due to their technical accessibility and their ability to

generate a strong sense of presence (Slater & Sanchez-Vives, 2016). However, the literature on storytelling does not address the exact process behind these effects. Indeed, the influence of sustainability storytelling on the sustainable brand image of a luxury brand has not yet been examined in immersive contexts. While research on advertising storytelling provides some initial insight, it focuses on the textual content of more traditional media (Kim & al., 2017). However, this research has limited direct applicability. The direct applicability of this research to digital contexts remains more theoretical than practical (van Laer & al., 2019). Few studies have examined how storytelling can help luxury brands and consumers forge personal connections by evoking emotional experiences (da Silva & al., 2022; Hagarty & al., 2009). Little research has been conducted to determine whether sustainability storytelling can have an impact on emotional experience and sustainable brand image. This topical subject, which has not yet been analyzed sufficiently, will therefore enable us to understand these gaps. First, it determines which type of sustainability storytelling (immersive or non-immersive) is most effective for sustainable brand image. Secondly, it proposes and tests a conceptual model on the role of sustainability storytelling on sustainable brand image. Following this analysis, the present research aims to fill the gaps in the existing literature. This study examines the impact of 360° virtual reality storytelling on emotional experience and sustainable brand image. We thus seek to answer the main research questions:

RQ1. Does immersive virtual reality storytelling enhance the emotional experience and sustainable brand image?

RQ2. Does the emotional experience influence the sustainable brand image?

This research is structured as follows: first, a review of the literature is presented, along with the hypotheses and conceptual model. Second, the methodology used is outlined, followed by the main results. Finally, the last section is dedicated to discussing the results obtained and presenting the research perspectives.

Theoretical background

In this research, we drew on one theory and two models. We begin with narrative transport theory, which posits that narrative structure triggers narrative processing (Escalas, 1998). This type of processing differs from analytical processing, which is generally associated with advertisements based on product attributes or characteristics (Chang, 2012). Information presented in the form of a list of characteristics triggers fragmentary or analytical processing of evidence and product characteristics in argumentative advertisements (Adaval & al., 1998). Next, to structure our analysis, we draw on the S.O.R. (Stimulus-Organism-Response) model developed by A. Mehrabian and J. Russell (1974), which provided a suitable framework for the development of a rich body of literature on the study of the atmospheric effect. This is an explanatory model of consumer behavior that takes into account the role of situational and personal factors. In particular, it considers the emotional reactions evoked by the atmosphere. This paradigm is based on the premise that once individuals have been exposed to specific stimuli, these stimuli generate cognitive and emotional states which, in turn, lead them to consider adopting (or not adopting) certain behaviors (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). In line with the first model, we introduce the second ELM model or the elaboration likelihood model (Cacioppo and Petty, 1986), which explains that persuasion can manifest itself through a process centered on arguments (systematic, individual, motivated, and capable of elaboration) or through a peripheral process (heuristic cues, emotions, simple signals). This model shows that when motivation and the ability to process information are high, rational arguments generate a lasting change in attitude. On the other hand, in situations where elaboration is low, emotional or heuristic cues generate a more pronounced immediate effect, but one that is often less stable. After examining the reference models, it is relevant to look at the concepts they highlight, which will be used in our analysis. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) define experiential consumption as “a subjective state of consciousness, accompanied by a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses, and aesthetic criteria.” However, Brakus et al. (2009) define this concept as “subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses elicited by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, communications, and the environments in which the brand is marketed or sold.” However, the term “experience” refers to consumers' internal and subjective reactions triggered by the various stimuli they encounter during their interactions (Gómez-Suárez & Veloso, 2020). Thus, Schmitt (1999) showed that emotional experience translates into the set of moods and emotions generated during shopping. This concept is closely related to the concept of sustainable brand image, which refers to “a system of images and thoughts existing in human consciousness, expressing information about a given brand and the fundamental attitude towards it” (Zhang, 2015). Brand image refers to consumers' perceptions of a brand based on their experience and knowledge. It is closely linked to thoughts and beliefs. Furthermore, it “can be considered as the set of associations anchored in memory and linked to the brand” (Keller, 1993).

Development of hypotheses and conceptual framework

Based on the theory and models presented, this study proposes a conceptual framework integrating all of the variables defined above. This integration forms the basis for the formulation of hypotheses and empirical analysis in our research, which focuses on storytelling, one of the advertising formats used by marketers to communicate with consumers. It is of exceptional importance for luxury brands, emphasizing the integration of elements of brand heritage and tradition (Donzé & al., 2020). It refers to the telling of stories for communication purposes (Chouaib & al., 2024). Consumers become fully absorbed in a brand's storytelling initiative and develop feelings similar to those of the characters featured in the advertisement (Curenton et al., 2008). Storytelling is similar to fictional stories; it is "filled with characters, plots, points of view, and an implicit goal called 'meaning'" (Twitchell, 2004). This is in contrast to argumentative advertising, which presents an argument or evidence concerning the characteristics of the product. Storytelling facilitates learning through deduction (Wells, 1989). According to Escalas (2004), storytelling presents a two-dimensional narrative structure. This two-dimensional structure comprises (1) chronology, or a temporal dimension of episode organization, and (2) an organized framework that allows for relational structure and causal inferences (Escalas, 1998). However, compelling storytelling could promote heuristic processing, decrease elaboration, and stimulate persuasion (Lim & al., 2020). Indeed, this reduced desire to focus on the benefits of an advertisement promotes peripheral processing (Brechman & al., 2015). As a result, dramatic advertisements, such as advertising storytelling, generate fewer counterarguments (Deighton & al., 1989), trigger holistic information processing (Adaval et al., 1998), and reduce counterarguments to the message (Green & al., 2000). Stimuli are external forces that influence individuals' emotional states (Young, 2016) and trigger organic reactions (Eroglu & al., 2001). The organism corresponds to the internal processes that occur between external stimuli and reactions (Bagozzi, 1986). However, sustainability storytelling is a form of stimulus that can positively influence consumer behavior by offering a memorable emotional experience, thereby strengthening lasting bonds with consumers (Inside LVMH, 2023). By telling a captivating story, storytelling can generate an emotional experience and other brand-related outcomes (Sangalang & al., 2013; Wang & al., 2015). At the heart of the narrative universe, immersive devices elicit deeper emotional experiences. This involves telling stories, such as the company's sustainability initiatives, in a way that enhances the sustainable brand image (Chouaib & al. 2024; Dessart & al., 2023). It is an associative network integrating various types of information, whether verbal, visual, etc. Storytelling appears to be a driving force for positively influencing sustainable brand image (Chouaib & al. 2024). We propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Exposure to immersive 360° virtual reality sustainability storytelling by a luxury brand increases consumers' emotional experience more than exposure to non-immersive sustainability storytelling by a luxury brand.

H2: Exposure to immersive 360° virtual reality sustainability storytelling by a luxury brand increases participants' perception of the brand's sustainability image more than exposure to non-immersive sustainability storytelling by a luxury brand.

A positive emotional experience, i.e., one that touches the emotions, moods, and feelings generated Yang, Z. Y., & He, L. Y. (2011) that makes consumers think, encourages them to take an interest, and triggers several of their senses is highly likely to increase consumer responses to the brand in question (Chuchu, T. & al., 2018). The results of Sahin et al. (2012) indicate that experience allows consumers to reflect and benefit from their creativity. It is therefore a way of engaging consumers with the brand (Schmitt, 1999). Experience has a specific modifying effect on consumers, triggering awareness and changing their level of knowledge about the brand, leading to a positive change in brand image (Krishna, 2012). Yang and He (2011) emphasized that emotional experience generates an effective experience, i.e., a strong emotion of joy and satisfaction associated with a brand. Brakus et al. (2009) suggest that emotions have a significant impact on the formation and modification of attitudes, thereby enriching knowledge and influencing memory and behavior. The study by Cleff, Walter, and Xie (2018) shows that a deeper emotional connection with a brand improves brand image. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Emotional experience positively influences sustainable brand image of a luxury brand.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework.

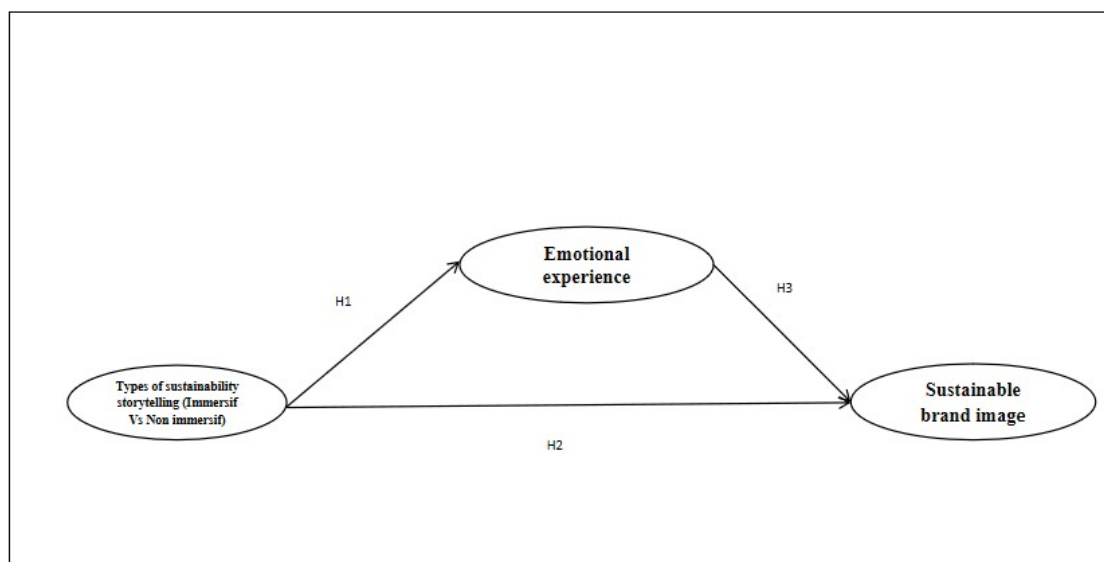


Figure 1: conceptual framework.

Research methodology

Given that the objective of this study is to examine the effect of two types of sustainability storytelling by a luxury brand (immersive vs. non-immersive) on sustainable brand image. To this end, a video from a luxury brand was used to test our hypotheses. The choice of this format was justified by studies on storytelling advertising, which increasingly use real-world video advertisements as experimental stimuli (Chen, 2015). A laboratory experiment was conducted. We chose to conduct the experiment in a laboratory setting to improve internal validity (Ying & al., 2021). For this experiment, we used an inter-subject design consisting of manipulating the type of sustainability storytelling (immersive vs. non-immersive) and measuring all the variables in this research after exposure to one of these two experimental conditions. The experiment was conducted in person and each session involved a single participant. They were welcomed and informed of the confidentiality and anonymity of the study in order to improve the validity of the data collected. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. They were informed that they could interrupt the experiment at any time. Subjects who participated in the immersive condition used a virtual reality headset (Samsung Gear VR), into which a smartphone (Samsung Galaxy S9) was inserted to broadcast the 360° storytelling. For the non-immersive condition, subjects used a desktop computer. After viewing the sustainability storytelling (immersive or non-immersive), participants were asked to indicate their level of brand experience and their perception of the brand's sustainability. They were then thanked for their participation and informed that they could receive the results of the study upon request at the end of the study.

Participants

The subjects were students at a public university in Tunisia. They were recruited through an advertisement posted on the university's online platforms (website and Facebook page). The choice of the student category was justified by the fact that our study required the use of virtual reality devices. By taking advantage of the relative homogeneity of the student groups, we were able to strengthen control and internal validity (Thomas, 2011). In addition, previous research has highlighted the similarities between different demographic profiles. Indeed, participating students and non-students exhibit identical behaviors (Wang and Yang, 2008). The final sample consists of 55 participants for each condition. The sample consists of women (n=60, or 54.5%) and men (n=50, or 45.5%). Participants are between the ages of 18 and 30.

Table 3. presents the descriptive statistics.

Table 3: descriptive statistics

Demographic variables		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Women	60	54.5
	Men	50	45.5
	Total	110	100
Age	18-20	62	56.4
	21-25	36	32.7
	25-30	12	10.9
	Total	110	100
Education level	Bachelor's degree	67	60.9
	Master's degree	40	36.4
	Doctoral degree	3	2.7
	Total	110	100

Measurements

In order to measure the variables, we used scales borrowed from the literature and adapted to the context of our study. The measurement of emotional experience refers to Brengman and Geuens (2004), using six items, which is designed as a semantic differential scale (continuum with a pair of opposites). To measure sustainable brand image, we used the scale developed by Salmones et al. (2005), which comprises five items. Manipulation checks were performed using a single item developed by Barnidge et al. (2022): “To what extent did you find the storytelling immersive?” (1 = not very immersive; 7 = very immersive). Table 4 presents the measurement scales.

Table 4: Measures

Construct	Item
Emotional experience Brengman and Geuens (2004)	“Depressed—Contented”
	Unhappy—happy”
	Unsatisfied—satisfied
	Annoyed—pleased”
	“Bored—relaxed
	Despairing—hopeful
sustainable brand image Salmones et al., (2005)	!The Louis Vuitton brand strives to achieve maximum long-term success.
	The Louis Vuitton brand always strives to improve its economic performance.
	The Louis Vuitton brand behaves ethically/honestly with its customers.
	The Louis Vuitton brand cares about respecting and protecting the natural environment.
	The Louis Vuitton brand is concerned with improving the general well-being of society.

Verification of manipulation

To verify the manipulation of sustainability storytelling (immersive versus non-immersive), an independent samples t-test analysis was performed. The results show a significant difference between the two groups. In order to ensure that the differences between the groups are related to the manipulation of sustainability storytelling and not to other factors such as brand name and age, control measures were carried out. The results obtained show that the control variables have no significant effect on the dependent variables. This allows us to

ensure that the differences observed between the experimental groups are differences related to the manipulation of the sustainability storytelling variable and not to these factors.

Reliability and validity

Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to verify the reliability and validity of all measurement scales. The results obtained allowed us to conclude that all scales were reliable and valid. Table 5 presents the results of the exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses.

Table 5. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses

Item	Factor loadings	CR	AVE	Cronbach alpha
Emotional experience		0.878	0.718	0.879
BE1	0.786			
BE2	0.861			
BE3	0.863			
BE4	0.824			
BE5	0.853			
BE6	0.796			
sustainable brand image		0.883	0.772	0.882
SBI1	0.824			
SBI2	0.853			
SBI3	0.802			
SBI4	0.813			
SBI5	0.845			

Hypothesis testing

The effect of sustainability storytelling type on emotional experience was explored using an independent samples t-tests. The results of sustainability storytelling type on emotional experience reveal that immersive sustainability storytelling in virtual reality elicits a higher level of emotional experience (immersive $X = 4.55$ vs. non-immersive $X = 3.72$), ($t=4.112$; $p=.000$) than that experienced after exposure to non-immersive storytelling. These results confirm hypothesis H1. The table 6 presents the results of the mean comparisons.

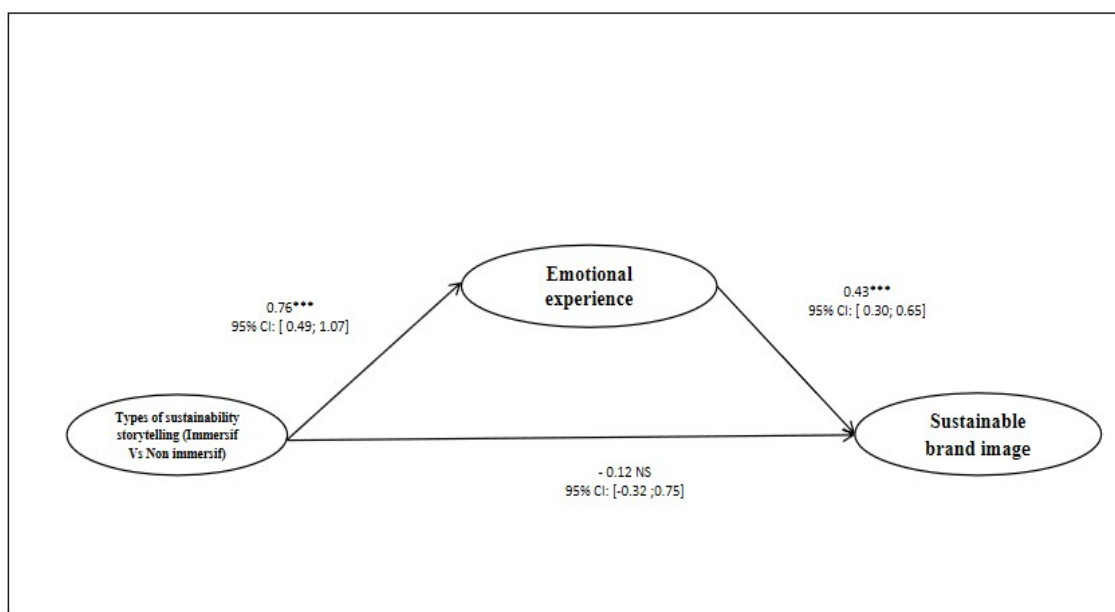
The table 6. Results of the mean comparisons

	Type of sustainability storytelling			
	Immersive	Non immersive		
	Mean	Mean	T	Sig.
Emotional Experience	4.55	3.72	4.112	0.000

To test hypotheses H2, H3 and H4, a mediation analysis was performed using Hayes' macro process, model 4 (Hayes, 2018), with a bootstrap method (5000). The hypothesis was that immersive 360° virtual reality

sustainability storytelling (as opposed to non-immersive sustainability storytelling) influenced the emotional experience, which in turn should have a positive impact on the sustainable brand image (H3). The results (Figure 2) reveal that sustainability storytelling (immersive or non-immersive) has a significant and positive impact on emotional experience ($\beta = 0.76$; $p < 0.01$); 95% CI: [0.49; 1.07]. This suggests that immersive sustainability storytelling in 360° virtual reality is associated with a higher level of emotional experience than non-immersive sustainability storytelling.

Therefore, immersive sustainability storytelling is more effective at enhancing consumers' emotional experience than non-immersive sustainability storytelling. The emotional experience, in turn, positively influences the sustainable brand image ($\beta=0.43$; $p<0.001$); 95% CI: [0.30; 0.65], confirming hypothesis H3. Nevertheless, the direct effect of sustainability storytelling type on sustainable brand image was not significant ($\beta = -0.12$; $p > 0.05$); 95% CI: [-0.32; 0.75]. These results indicate total mediation of the emotional experience in the relationship between the type of sustainability storytelling and sustainable brand image. Figure 2 presents the mediation analysis.



Note : *** $p < 0.001$ significant

NS : not significant

Figure 2. Mediation analysis (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

Discussion of results

Our results show the positive influence of immersive sustainability storytelling in 360° virtual reality on the emotional experience. Consumers can be easily transported into the fictional world by watching immersive sustainability storytelling. This innovative approach stimulates their neural activity (Escalas, 2004). Therefore, luxury brand marketers should develop immersive sustainability storytelling tactics to elicit emotional experiences. These results are consistent with the findings of several authors, such as (Teraiya, V. al., 2023).

Immersive storytelling acts as a catalyst for emotional experiences, amplifying their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral impact. Unlike traditional storytelling, which relies mainly on verbal or visual narration, immersive storytelling offers an experience where the user becomes a participant, witness, or even an actor in the story. What's more, it engages the consumer in an emotional experience: they no longer just listen to the brand's story, they actively live it through virtual reality devices. This approach promotes multisensory involvement, which reinforces the memorability and significance of the emotional experience. This is in contrast to non-immersive storytelling, which relies on a linear structure where the viewer remains passive. Nevertheless, our results confirm that the emotional experience has a positive influence on lasting brand image. All of the emotional interactions that a consumer has with a brand contribute positively to reinforcing the sustainable brand image.

When a brand seeks to build a strong sustainable image, sustainability is not an isolated additional dimension: it must be integrated into immersive storytelling in order to enhance the emotional experience. This promotes the improvement of the sustainable brand image. However, our results show that the direct effect of the type of sustainability storytelling on the sustainable brand image was not significant ($\beta = -0.12$; $p > 0.05$). These results can be explained by the fact that technological one-upmanship can distract consumers from the ethical dimension of the message. In this case, immersion no longer promotes understanding of the message and the sustainable brand image.

Conclusion

Theoretical implication:

The theme of sustainability is becoming crucial for the development of luxury fashion brands (Arrigo, 2018). Our research shows that the strategic and skillful use of immersive sustainability storytelling in 360° virtual reality can be a valuable asset for luxury brands seeking to communicate effectively about their sustainable practices. Nevertheless, our study focused on the influence of consumers' emotional experience on sustainable brand image, whereas previous studies focused solely on behavioral experiences (Zhang & al., 2020). Similarly, previous research by Nuske & al. (2013) and Zhang & al. (2020) examined the impact of experience on brand loyalty, but previous studies have not yet explored the influence of emotional experience on sustainable brand image.

This research provides a better understanding of the mechanisms by which immersive sustainability storytelling in 360° virtual reality influences the emotional experience and sustainable brand image in the luxury sector.

Managerial implications

Luxury brands should incorporate immersive 360° virtual reality sustainability storytelling into their communication strategies in order to raise consumer awareness and improve their sustainable brand image. To preserve their reputation, luxury brands must meet consumer expectations and integrate sustainable practices into their strategies. Executives must ensure that their immersive 360° virtual reality sustainability storytelling is not only engaging but also emotional.

Limitations and future research directions

Future research may incorporate other variables of interest to improve the proposed conceptual model, such as perceived value. Furthermore, this study is based on the choice of one brand; although the selection of Louis Vuitton seems appropriate for the study, it limits the generalizability of the results. Therefore, to overcome this limitation, it would be interesting to examine the proposed model with other brands.

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