

The New Zealand Asia Institute (NZAI) undertakes research focusing on engagement with Asia, provides a forum for informed debates, and offers a bridge to Asia-related expertise and research within the University of Auckland.

## Luxury for Asian Brands by Artistic Association? The Role of Cultural Congruence in the Art Infusion Effect

Well-established luxury brands often infuse their marketing with art references like pictures of famous paintings to reinforce products' luxury status. Studies show that the actual scenes depicted do not matter – and on brain scans pleasant and unpleasant images alike light up our same mental reward circuitry – so long as we perceive them as art.

Since art is bound to culture and nation, what role will country-of-origin (CO) play? Europe is often stereotyped as the epitome of luxury, but will campaigns like the one by South Korea's signature tech brand Samsung, which playfully pictures European masterpieces being "heisted" from frames on art gallery walls to the frame of one of its QLED TVs, confer by association the luxury status to which Samsung aspires? Recent research\*\* with elements from South Korea itself, Indonesia, Europe and the US teases out the effects of (in)congruence between the art's and the brand's COs, shedding light on how and when art infusion boosts a product's luxury status – or falls flat.

A sequence of six studies across those four locations presented cohorts of 100 to over 300 participants with advertisements especially devised to incorporate artworks. They used both fictitious and real brands, and methods from pen-and-paper experiments to lab experiments. Each study refined preceding ones.

Results bore out the researchers' hypotheses. Incongruence between the COs of the artwork and the brand not only weakened, but completely negated, the art infusion effect. For example, some of the ads paired Sulwhasoo cosmetics or CUCKOO home appliances, real South Korean brands, with Dutch painter Van Gogh's famous Sunflowers and Starry Night. These ads were less favourably received than others infusing South Korean art on corresponding subjects (flowers and night). Although Europe stereotypically carried more luxury cachet than Asia, as an art source it was just too incongruent with a distinctively Asian brand: incongruence trumped

stereotype. Moreover, that applied to third-country art sources, not just some extra-fervent objection to mixing of art from one's own culture. And the final study, offering Indonesian consumers places in sweepstakes worth several hundred dollars, was evidence the results translated to real-world choices.

Incongruence jars, of course. Going further though, the researchers demonstrated a mechanism whereby that operates: CO incongruence detracts from perceived authenticity, whereas we quintessentially expect luxury brands to be "the real thing".

Theoretically, the research documents cultural congruence and consequent perceived authenticity as crucial to the art infusion effect. Practically, it implies that brands from stereotypically non-luxury countries like South Korea (albeit known for quality products) cannot just ride the elegant coattails of artwork from a stereotypically luxury but culturally jarring setting abroad. Finally, there was an interesting but logical twist. When given other reasons to believe a brand was authentic, like accompanying text declaring Sulwhasoo honoured skincare rituals passed down through generations, participants resolved their feeling of incongruence and the art infusion effect was restored.

\*\*The full study results are available in an article authored by Yuri Seo, Felix Septianto and Eunju Ko: "The Role of Cultural Congruence in the Art Infusion Effect". *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, available online 1 May 2021, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.auckland.ac.nz/10.1002/jcpsy.1248>

