

Luxury Brands and the Female Gaze: Challenging Traditional Marketing Strategies

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Abstract. Luxury brands and goods are still leading the fashion trends and play a significant role in people's physical and mental pursuits. Women nowadays are becoming the largest customer group of luxury goods. Facing the female customer group that has high purchase power, it is crucial to think of some strategies that favor female customers to boost profit and build customer loyalty. This article will concentrate on challenging traditional marketing strategies to meet female customers' demands by using secondary research to summarize a set of strategy profiles, including brand philosophy, design, and marketing strategies. Luxury brands should consider more about the female gaze in terms of the three perspectives, the behaviors that meet the needs and wants of the female customer groups so that more women may be willing to contribute to the sales of luxury brands. This article is part of the larger topic of femvertising and the empowerment of female customers, which has been still a blank area waiting to be investigated.

Keywords: Luxury brands, brand philosophy, marketing strategies, women empowerment, female gaze.

1. Introduction

Ascribe to the fierce competition in the luxury industry, brands are willing to create some new ideas that are innovative and creative or incorporate some trendy propaganda and thoughts in their philosophy, designs, and marketing strategies. Finlayson said that "In addition to being accepted by the establishment, feminists have managed to gain a certain level of vogue status" [1]. Women played an important role in the 20th century, and their clothing reflected their various roles. People are all familiar with images of women's clothing, such as Rosie the Riveter, Dior's new look, and later Dress for Success [2]. Thus, one of the most trendy and popular thoughts during the current era may be feminism—the empowerment of women, while the coincidence is that women are the main customer group of luxury goods. Thus, it introduces a chance for luxury brands to incorporate feminism into their brand elements, building up an emotional bond with female customers. This may enhance the brand images which have a positive influence on customer loyalty.

Therefore, luxury brands are becoming a medium for empowering females and spreading feminism. It seems that feminism is the latest High-Fashion trend. "Clothes increasingly are becoming a frontier for political activism", capitalizing on "the power dynamics inherent in clothing", says Emma McClendon, assistant curator at New York's Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology [3].

As mentioned above, luxury brands have made or can make a difference from three aspects: brand philosophy, designs, and marketing strategies. Brand philosophy is the core of a company's value. It means that all business behaviors should obey the brand philosophy and follow the philosophy's instructions. While designs and marketing should also follow the brand philosophy, the company should think of some ideas that manifest the core. As for designs, this essay will focus on how the designs manifest and strengthen feminist images and enhance the uniqueness of the brand. It will take Chanel and Alexander McQueen as two examples. On one hand, Chanel has an excellent and transcendent heritage as its founder Coco Chanel was already a feminist. On the other hand, Alexander McQueen shows their uniqueness through the bold designs that make people face the facts and truth that they do not want to accept. On behalf of marketing strategies, the thesis will concentrate on Victoria's Secret and Dior. Victoria's Secret acts as a relatively negative role, while Dior acts as

a classical representative of feminism. Victoria's Secret shows the Influence of feminism on luxury brands in terms of its management, meanwhile, Dior explores how luxury brands target and connect with feminist consumers.

As a result, this research found that incorporating feminism into luxury brands is relatively widely used and mature. Luxury brands are familiar with blending propaganda, and visual elements in their works, and using their historical heritage and images to enhance their brand images.

While there are still some misconceptions about feminism. Some luxury brands do not have an in-depth understanding of feminism, so they fail in femvertising and other marketing strategies.

There are some blanks that need to be investigated, too. Essays that systematically analyze brands and their feminist marketing strategies are very scarce.

2. Aspects that Luxury Marketing Reflects Feminism

2.1. Brand Philosophy Incorporated with the Female Gaze

A business's brand philosophy concentrates on the ideas that govern the company's ethics, objectives, and vision. Brand philosophy helps build up brand identities. For luxury brands, their heritage, value rarity, etc. cannot be captured by other brands so that brand awareness and recognition can be enhanced. The unique identity and character are used to be perceived by customers and influence their attitude. According to Glyn and Alistair, contemporary consumers express themselves through consumption to create self-identity and a sense of belonging through physical aspects [4]. "Femvertising", or selling empowerment, is a gold mine for an industry that is been trying to connect with an emancipated generation of young women after decades of over-sexualization and gender sexism.

First, exploring what feminist values are. The core of the feminist value is to be aware of the privilege empowered to men and the oppression given to women historically. Thus, feminism is going to tear the fixed pattern down and seek equality. For luxury brands, feminist values can be achieved by marketing campaigns. It is common for brands to use their brand DNAs and brand philosophies for marketing, which is a way to translate feminist values into the context of luxury brands. By marketing campaigns related to feminist elements, female customer groups are favored as they feel engaged and empowered.

2.2. Designs Connected with Brand Value

There are some influences of feminist-inspired designs in luxury products and some corresponding examples. Luxury is often associated with the wealthy woman of leisure and the wearing of luxury fashion is considered the privilege of just a few [5]. This sector will analyze the influence of feminist-inspired designs in luxury products and their impact on consumer perception. First, taking Chanel as an example, Chanel incorporates feminism and empowerment into its brand DNA philosophy and then mixes them into the marketing campaign both historically and currently. The founder and leader of Coco Chanel distasted the flamboyant and hyper-feminine clothing that women were required to wear in that era (post World War I period). Thus, she used more masculine elements in the design of the garments, including the use of black and nude colors. She always looked for ideas from her lovers' garments. This creativity of design manifested the breaking of the stereotypes of "what women should wear". For example, the classical little black dress for women is the milestone of the first feminist representation. Date back to the post-WWI period, women were asked to wear uncomfortable and constrictive tight corsets and flouncy dresses. Women wore fancy objects to please men and society. Coco Chanel was aware of the social restrictions and designed for women who seek liberal, she then designed looser and freer clothes for women. She introduced, shockingly, pantsuits as an option for females as well as males. These characteristics of the products Chanel produced were the key to the success of Chanel's marketing campaign and made a great contribution to the success of Chanel in that era.

What made Chanel so successful in building up its feminist image may be the social background. During World War I, almost all men in society were summoned to engage in the war, leading to the increasing vacancies in the societal workplaces. Therefore, women left home and replaced the men's work. However, there were a lot of physical and long-distance commutes. Wearing long and fancy dresses was not suitable and convenient, and women also wanted to prove their working value. With her natural rebelling personality, Chanel presciently tapped into the desires of the women. She offered women the opportunity to express and simply be themselves more freely through the realm of fashion. As a result, Chanel's design followed the trend of the era, the female empowerment was recognized as a way of marketing campaigns, making the brand philosophy and pursuit affect the whole society's perception towards females and become more progressive. Chanel started from the physical corsets and then the mental ones, reshaping the social atmosphere. This example strongly supports that incorporating the feminist gaze in marketing strategies can somehow bring the brand success.

Today, Coco Chanel is not alive, but the next leader Karl Lagerfeld passed down the feminist tradition and incorporated it into the fashion show in 2015, which is a way of marketing. In the fashion show in Paris, models act as protesters who hold the English and French protest signs. Propagandas that support women were written on the signs. For instance, "Boys Should Get Pregnant Too," "Feminism Not Masochism," "History Is Her Story," and "We Can Match the Machos," Ms. King writes that Mr. Lagerfeld is an "unmatched genius at tapping into the zeitgeist and turning it on its chic head." This campaign is one of the responses to the speech that Emma Watson gave at the United Nations. Undoubtedly, it supports the speech and the proposal, leading the fashion world and society to pay attention to the solidarity activities organized by the United Nations.

Meanwhile, Saint-Laurent has gone through the feminist pathway. There has always been a strong connection between the shoulder width and the carriage of men's suits. The shoulders and career played a major role in Yves Saint-Laurent's first collections in his own name, which enabled both women and men to assert this symbolic power. By pairing his suit jacket with trousers, a symbol of the male wardrobe, he added the finishing touches to this approach [6].

Another example is Alexander McQueen. McQueen claims that he is about what appears in people's minds that people do not want to face that directly. Therefore, he opened his mind to disclose females' wounds, including fear, disgust, desire, etc. Ana Finel Honigman purposed that her dress has an "internal hourglass in which faded beauty represents all the vitality of aging." It is frequently associated with deathliness and trauma that McQueen's heroines are survivors of violent events. Typically, his women are portrayed as rape victims (see Highland Rape collection), warriors, horror heroines, asylum inmates, or dreadful hybrids. McQueen has had two outfits in McQueen's Spring 1996 collection named Hunger, which can be a representation of feminism mixed with McQueen's own perception. One is a semi-transparent white dress and another is the one that elicits disgust and provocative. On one hand, the white and semi-transparent white dress has a black opening in the center, revealing the female pudenda. This reveals the evil of unequal sexuality for women. On the other hand, the bodice was full of worms that elicited disgust. McQueen believes that dying full of putrefaction is the most common fear of human life. Both designs show "wounds", and the wound is one of the most notable signs of women's bodies. What is more, in 2021, McQueen introduced the garments with the pattern of anemone.

Finally, throughout the exhibition "Savage Beauty", the majority of wall texts consisted of quotations from McQueen himself, such as: "I want to empower women. I want people to fear the women I dress" [7].

It is bold that McQueen uses disgusting and engrossing signs and patterns to wake more people up, and leads McQueen to the road of feminism.

3. The Marketing Way that Feminism Influences

3.1. Influence of Feminism on Luxury Brand Femvertising and Commodity Feminism

After talking about how luxury brands interpret and display feminism, it is crucial to discuss how feminism influences the marketing campaigns of luxury brands, including commodity feminism.

Community feminism is proposed by Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath, and Sharon Smith. Consumption and purchase behavior are the defining characteristics of commodity feminism, according to Goldman et al. Using the theoretical framework, brands exploit feminist ideals such as independence, freedom, and sexual agency through their products to regress back to male-possessed individualism.[8] Crouse-Dick explained that Commodity feminism insinuates that A woman must purchase power (one of the core feminist ideals) before she can be powerful. The advertising promotes the idea that women who are sexually independent are only truly sexually independent when they buy the "correct" undergarments [9].

Take another example---Victoria's Secret. In the past decades, Victoria's Secret made a huge success by favoring the masculine gaze so that the brand objectizes women models by "selling sex and sexy". However, as for Gen Z women, it is not that efficient as more and more women are waking up to be aware of feminism and women's own rights. Victoria's Secret began to employ models who have different body sizes to represent diversity and inclusivity. What is more, they began to propagandize that they were going to make 6 females the core directors out of 7, which may not be given attention to. Thus, it is such a weak call-on. However, for Victoria's Secret, femininity has become one of the promotional strategies.

3.2. The Way Luxury Brands Contact with Target Consumers

Dior is one of the most famous luxury brands that incorporate femininity into the brand philosophy. When exploring how Dior targets and connects with feminists by using marketing strategies, it can be divided into two parts including Dior campaigns that celebrate the virtue of women and the women collaborations.

Firstly, Dior has released the second installment "Dior Stands with Women" and "Dior Chin Up Campaign" which includes several short videos for several women. This campaign portrays different stories of different groups of women and discusses the challenges and the motivations for women to continuously fight for themselves, be more confident and embrace their authentic identity.

The second campaign is women's collaborations, which include exhibitions in the galleries, influential female collaborations, and so on.

The exhibition "From Dior to Disco: From Dior to Disco" exhibition will be held in the summer of 2019 at the Goldstein Museum of Design at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul, Minnesota. The exhibition explores the transformation of women's identities from the post-World War II period through the mid-1970s. Curatorially, people looked for elements and narratives that went beyond the common tropes of burnt bras and upper-middle-class white housewives [10].

At the house's Paris gallery, La Galerie Dior exhibition celebrates women artists. The exhibition displays T-shirts with "We should all be feminists", and different interpretations to lady Dior handbags etc.

On behalf of the influential female collaborations, Dior collaborates with feminist artist Judy Chicago for the "Dior Lady Art" project. Judy Chicago designed unique Dior handbags to be a limited type of handbag, targeting customers who seek uniqueness to purchase the product. According to Vogue Business, the house clocked an estimated \$7 billion in sales in 2021, up from a reported \$4.6 billion in 2019.

These campaigns not only pass down the traditions and heritage of Christian Dior, but also help target customer groups who are interested and fond of or even root in the feminism field. These groups of people may tend to get a taste of Dior's products so that they can understand more about feminism. They will do this because they are female, they all want to build such self-identity in terms of financial

support. What is more, this builds up a sense of uniqueness so that customers who purchase products to seek uniqueness will also purchase more or more frequently at Dior.

4. Optimization Suggestions Discussing Luxury Marketing Optimization

The luxury brands and their marketing strategies mentioned above somehow succeed in building up their feminist brand image but some of them are failed. For instance, Victoria's Secret. It cannot be proved that the directors of the brand are women. Meanwhile, as an almost failed brand, Victoria's Secrets joined the trend of feminism may look like hypocrisy. It has not done any other practical behaviors such as the enlargement of the sizes, which is one of the major wishes of the customers. Therefore, the lesson taught by Vitoria's Secrets inspires that the incorporation of feminism should be consistent, holistic, and genuine.

As for successful feminist brands such as Christian Dior and Chanel, the coincidence of the two brands is that they both have strengthened heritage and long-lasting commitment. This builds up the trust between the brand and its customers. Therefore, the feminist marketing strategies should be trustworthy and long-lasting.

However, there are also examples that display immature feminist thought and incorporate into the product, leading to the calamity of the brand image as customers (especially the feminists) may also regard the mistake as unprofessional. This will weaken their good shopping experience and affect the profits gained by the brand.

5. Conclusion

After all, the research shows several conclusions. First, empowering females in luxury brands refers to translating feminist values into the context of luxury brands. It is crucial to understand the authentic meaning of feminism, which is feminism going to tear the fixed pattern down and seek equality. What is more, social background is one of the most essential factors in succeeding in promoting luxury incorporated with feminism. Meanwhile, In the way of fashion shows, galleries, and artist collaborations, expose products to the public and build up a solid brand image among the female customer groups. Finally, unsuccessful situations also exist when the brands do not actually and accurately comprehend the meaning of "empowering women" and "feminism", leading to a lack of explosion and effect among customer groups, even criticized comments. This may backfire and hurt the brand image.

This research helps people to know about the phenomenon of incorporating feminism into luxury brands and gives an insight into the luxury brands that are on behalf of feminism and women empowerment. Besides, the article also provides some thoughts about the ways to blend the two organic elements, which can be the reference to more luxury-related, marketing-related individuals and companies. By showing examples of Chanel's heritage of feminist history, Alexander Mcqueen for bold and new designs and galleries, YSL's empowering design, and Dior's heritage of feminism and galleries. All these brands are sophisticated in building up strong bonds between brand philosophy, and marketing strategies with feminism. Instead, Victoria's secret's feminism demonstration may be weaker.

However, the resources are not sufficient as there is a lack of primary investigations. It is hard to do the quantitative analysis in terms of insufficient data. For future research, data such as statistics and probability should be included in the investigations so that this field can be fulfilled and expanded further and deeper.

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