The Impact of Designers Changed on Luxury Brands-- Celine and Yve Saint Laurent

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Abstract. Hedi Slimane is the former designer of Yve Saint Laurent and the current designer of Celine, and the idea of the study is based on this fact. The aim of study was conducted to analyse the influence of designers on luxury brands by exploring the stylistic changes of two brands in nearly a decade. The methodology is comparing the visual perception and commercial data of each brand respectively,combining subjective and objective analysis to reach the final conclusion. The discourse will focus on actions and achievements of three designers during their tenure with brands. The consequence is that the transformation of Celine is completely different in various phases, while the development process of Saint Laurent is the continuation of its history and constant innovation. A point to note is that sample size is too small for two brands to serve as a pattern of development in the luxury market, and no reference significance for other brands.

Keywords: Designers, Luxury Brands, Style, Commercial Performance.

1. Introduction

Two French brands are selected, Celine and Yve Saint Laurent. The similar established time, and small difference of the market position and brand size are reasons for choosing two brands as examples. If two brands are compared with first-tier luxury brands such as Chanel, Louis Vuitton or Gucci, the research will seem to be less justified.

Visual aesthetics and style are subjective. The products, especially the ready-to-wear, is one of the intuitive signs of the brand's style. Fashion shows are expressions of designers' personal aesthetics and a clear display of brand culture. The comparison of fashion shows and clothing is part of the study. As the personal experience of designers and the background history of brands are rarely mentioned in academic papers, in addition to the information provided by the official website, the articles from the editors of large formal magazines and industry-recognized fashion websites will be cited.

The objective commercial data represents the brand's achievements, which shows the talent and influence of designers. Although data of 2020 is used, the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the luxury market will be excluded as much as possible. Data from the last 5 to 10 years will be included, since the time of designer turnover cannot be ignored. Most of the data were obtained from the official financial reports of the brands' groups and a small part from the calculations of luxury or financial industry analysts. The latest objective data and calculations of 2021 and 2022 will be used in order to reduce the bias on the results.

The basic information about brands and designers in the first part serves as a prelude to the analysis, providing readers a clear understanding of cases used in the study. In the second part, the analysis and discussions of brands development in several aspects following chronological order. Finally, after summarising the results of the comparison, the article will briefly identify the challenges and give relevant recommendations.

2. Description

2.1. Yve Saint Laurent

Founded in 1961 in Paris, France, by Yves Saint Laurent and his business partner Pierre Bergé, the House of Haute Couture is now part of the Kering group. In 1966, Mr. Yve Saint Laurent created

the Le Smoking tuxedo suit specifically for women, saying "Chanel liberated women, and I empowered them", breaking the limits of what women could wear in the 1960s[1]. Alber Elbaz was briefly the brand's designer between 1998 and 1999, and after the brand was acquired by the Gucci Group in 1999, Mr. TomFord became creative director, leaving YSL in 2004 to build his own brand. The founder retired in 2002 and closed the Haute Couture line. In 2008, he passed away and in the same year Saint Laurent Beauty was acquired by L'Oréal Group[2]. In 2012, Hedi Slimane became creative director and changed brand name to Saint Laurent Paris, a position he held until 2016. Then Anthony Vaccarello took over the creative director position to continue and innovate the brand[3].

As of the first half of 2022, they currently have 271 stores worldwide and expect to expand to 300 stores in the mid-term[4]. According to the data, the brand value of Saint Laurent is 6805 million USD in 2022, ranking 8th in the global luxury brand value[5]. Excluding the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on luxury goods which lead to a decline in profits in 2020, revenue of Saint Laurent doubled to 2521 million euros, up from 1220 million euros in 2016. The share of sales revenue in the Kering Group is 14%. With the recovery of the global economy in 2021, Saint Laurent's performance rose 44% compared to 2020, surpassing Gucci's 31%[6]. The Kering Group's first half financial report shows that Saint Laurent's revenue for the first half of the year was 1481 million euros, an increase of 34% compared to the first half of 2021, making Saint Laurent the fastest growing brand in the Kering in 2022[7].

2.2. Celline

Founded in 1945 in Paris by Céline Vipiana and her husband, Celine has had six designers including the founder in its 77-year history. In 1973, the most iconic logo was born, inspired by the Arc de Triomphe , and this logo is still in use today. As the brand expanded and entered the global market, it was officially acquired by the LVMH group in 1996. After the death of Céline Vipiana in 1997, Michael Kors became the director of ready-to-wear until 2004, he left to establish his own brand. From 2004 to 2008, two designers, Italian Roberto Menichetti and Croatian Ivana Omazic, did not perform well[8]. Until September 2008, Phoebe Philo was appointed as creative director, creating a golden decade for Céline until she left in December 2017, the 2018 Fall was her last show as the end. In 2018, Hedi Slimane became the new creative director, opening a new era for Celine.

Celine is now the brand of LVMH group, they currently have 178 points of sale worldwide including stores and counters[9]. According to industry analysts, Celine's sales revenue in 2021 may exceed 720 million euros, excluding the decline in 2020 due to the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic, compared to 600 million euros in 2019 which has increased 19%[10]. In 2021 and the first half of 2022 financial reports of LVMH, both mentioning the excellent performance of Celine[11]. The brand revenue is expected to exceed 2 billion euros.

2.3. Phoebe Philo

Phoebe Philo is a British designer born in 1973 and graduated from Central Saint Martins College in London. She worked for Chloé for nearly a decade, from 1996 to 2007, as assistant designer and design director, making Chloé grow rapidly in the luxury market, where her style can still be seen in many products. She then became the designer of Céline, during this period she released 17 fashion shows, deeply implanting minimalist aesthetics into the DNA of old Céline until she quit Céline in 2018[12]. 'It bags' that she released had a huge impact on the handbags category. According to the latest news, she will soon return to the fashion design industry in 2022 and plans to launch her own eponymous brand, which is strongly supported by the LVMH, and many people in the fashion industry have expressed their expectations for her personal brand[13]. She won the CFDA Award of International Designer of the year in 2011.She is one of the most prominent and influential female designers of modern times, and a legend among handbag designers.

2.4. Hedi Slimane

Born in Paris in 1968, Hedi Slimane is a designer and photographer with a rich resume of work as creative director for several top luxury brands, specialising in menswear[14]. He was the director of menswear at Saint Laurent from 1996 to 2000, and was supported by the founder Pierre Bergé. From 2000 to 2007, he worked at Dior Homme, where he made a name for himself with his tight, slim menswear, and Karl Lagerfeld even lost weight to wear his design. In 2012 he returned to Saint Laurent as creative director, leaving in April 2016. In 2018, he joined LVMH group which is a rival of Kering, as Artistic, Creative and Image Director of Celine[15]. The genius of menswear design is also well versed in the commercial operations, which has been a great success.

2.5. Page Numbers

Anthony Vaccarello, a Belgian-Italian born in 1982, graduated from La Cambre School of Design in Brussels. The 40-year-old designer is currently the creative director of Saint Laurent, where he designs ready-to-wear for both men and women. He does not have as much experience as the other two designers. He founded his own label in Paris in 2008, but is no longer the creative director of his own label in order to focus on his work at Saint Laurent. He was the designer of the Fendi fur collection in 2006, working with Karl Lagerfeld. He then spent three years at Versus Versace,working with Donatella Versace as a good partner,and launched several successful capsule collections, then became creative director in 2015[16]. Since his appointment as a creative director, Saint Laurent has made an outstanding performance. He is a brilliant designer who is well versed in modernism.

3. Analysis

3.1. Yve Saint Laurent

Hedi Slimane was the creative director at Saint Laurent from 2012 to 2016. Shortly after his appointment, he dropped the ‘Yve’ from the brand's name and replaced it with Saint Laurent Paris, a move he made with his ‘Ain't Laurent Without Yves' T-shirt, which generated a lot of buzz. He incorporated a strong personal style into Saint Laurent's designs, such as his obsession with skinny silhouettes, and his ready-to-wear designs and creations were darkly rock and roll and musical. Classic menswear items such as leather jackets, jeans and boots are iconic products, which are sought after by a large group of consumers, accounting for roughly one-third of the brand's sales revenue. These design works include tight-fitting black suits and black and white photography, all of which are his masterpieces[17]. The avant-garde artist, who specialises in both fashion design and business models, has increased Saint Laurent's sales revenue by 33% during his tenure, from 470 million to 970 million euros in 2015. He has brought a special chapter to Saint Laurent. In 2016, Kering Group officially announced the withdrawal of Hedi Slimane, there was a financial dispute between them, and then YSL removed all the Slimane related content[18].

In April 2016, Anthony Vaccarello (the following will be referred to as Vaccarello) became the sixth creative steward. In his first debut fashion show at Saint Laurent, he did not show too much his personal style and aesthetic by overturning all of the brand's past designs, considering the artwork of previous designers of Saint Laurent as part of the brand's values and legacy, and he retained the strong DNA of Saint Laurent as his source of inspiration. He started his first menswear show in New York in 2018, and the Le Smoking tuxedo, a classic masterpiece in brand history, has reappeared in ready-to-wear collection. Vaccarello has bought over 4,000 vintage garments from a private collector in 2020, and put them to the historical archive in Paris, deepening the connection between design and the history of the brand. He specialises in capturing the current fashion elements and reinventing the classics.

Black colour has always been the main tone of Yve Saint Laurent. Vaccarello repurposed the Saint Laurent logo adding an element of luxury and modernism to his work. He specialises in cutting sharp lines and silhouettes and using dark tones, subtly incorporating black and dark colours such as browns

and tans, as well as materials such as metallic and glossy patent leather, to give a more luxurious visual effect to ready-to-wear and leather goods. With a focus on ready to wear and leather goods, these categories have grown and expanded rapidly. Using the three letters of the YSL logo as a pattern, designed as the heel of women's leather high heels, it was one of the hottest selling items in 2016, combining a sexy and rebellious image of women. Vaccarello and his team worked on renewing the leather goods collection, such as the LE 5 À 7 HOBO BAG was launched in the Spring/Summer 2021 show, which is following the shoulder bag trend, and opening a new leather goods factory in Italy to increase productivity[19]. They focused more on leather goods, so that these categories experienced rapid growth and expansion, which accounted for 72% of total sales revenue, while ready-to-wear and shoes accounted for 21%. One of the functions of ready-to-wear is deepening the image of Saint Laurent as French fashion representatives[20].

Francesca Bellettini, the CEO of Saint Laurent commented that the aesthetic and design philosophy of Vaccarello match perfectly with the brand culture and that he could lead the brand to further success.

The performance of Vaccarello was outstanding at the 2023 shows. In the Saint Laurent Women's Spring Summer 2023 show held under the Eiffel Tower in Paris, long silhouette coats which accentuated the shoulders were paired with slender dresses that outlined the curves of a slavish body, impressing the audience. The runway looks reappeared the style of Mr. Yve Saint Laurent in the 1980s, and the classic and avant-garde artistry is blended into the clothing simultaneously, creating an image of a Parisian woman who was both stern and elegant[21]. Unlike most women's shows set under the Eiffel Tower, the designers chose to set Men's Spring Summer 2023 Runway in the Agafay desert of Marrakech, Morocco, a place of great importance to Mr. Saint Laurent. With flowing, soft fabrics and loose, fluid silhouettes, the hemline trailing jacket and high-waisted pants were the invisible tuxedo design style[22]. The unisex style is dedicated to blurring gender boundaries. Vaccarello keeps finding a balance between feminine and masculine fashion.

The brand has its own regular faces and muses, such as Betty Catroux and Loulou de la Falaise, who have contributed to the creation of products such as the tuxedo and the eponymous Loulou bag[23]. Vaccarello's best friend, supermodel Anja Rubik, is his longtime muse. In order to promote the brand's rejuvenation, they invited ROSÉ from BlackPink to be the a global brand ambassador as a new face of the brand. Leveraging the global influence of K-pop icons to expand the consumer base and achieve higher social media value. In addition to attending fashion shows, appearing in magazines and advertising campaigns, ROSÉ has also joined Anthony on the red carpet at the Met Gala, deepening her collaboration and connection with the brand[24]. Vaccarello has said that ROSÉ is the embodiment of the Saint Laurent girl.

The designers and management didn't follow the trend of collaboration with other brands and artists, ditching many marketing gimmicks. The brand's strategies has enabled them to successfully maintain the height of the old fashion house and also enhance the value of the brand.[25] First of all they gradually phased out the price reduction strategy to keep the value of the brand, their products rarely appear in the discount section. At the same time, their pricing is also relatively conservative so that more people can afford to consume their products, unlike other brands such as Chanel and Celine, who frequently raise prices drastically. According to the official website, the pricing of Saint Laurent bags ranges from a minimum of £920 to less than £5,000. With handbags and leather goods becoming important areas contributing to sales revenue, while ready-to-wear serves as products that maintain and deepen the brand's image. Under the leadership of CEO Francesca Bellettini and Design Director Anthony Vaccarello, the revenue of YSL became the fastest growing brand in the Kering Group, the second largest brand after Gucci, which exceeded €2.5 billion[26]. Revenues and sales of all kinds continued to rise in different regions, mainly in Asia Pacific, North America and Western Europe. The majority of Saint Laurent's business model is directly operated stores, while online business is growing, online business figures have tripled compared to 2019. The performance for men's and women's lines are also growing rapidly[27]. The Kering Group set a medium-term goal for Saint Laurent to reach €5 billion in sales.

In conclusion, the rich heritage of the brand became the source of inspiration and the classic elements of Saint Laurent especially from the 1970s to the 1990s were constantly recreated by Vaccarello. The rock 'n' roll and rebellious style is gradually eroded in favour of a more sophisticated and classy image. Under the leadership of Vaccarello, the brand becomes more recognisable and the commercial scale grows steadily.

3.2. Celine

In 2008, Phoebe Philo (the following will be referred to as Philo) took over the position of creative director of Céline under the invitation of the LVMH group, and the modern normcore aesthetics and minimalist aesthetics were her characteristics. She removed the big logos from the products design, used clean lines and silhouettes and neutral colours. She successfully implanted the sophisticated minimalist unisex style and pragmatism into old Céline's DNA, which started a golden decade of Céline, and made it greatly famous and commercially successful. She has been shaping the image of female independence and elegance, showing the modern ladies' demand for luxury clothing and aesthetics. In 2017, Philo resigned from the position of creative director on the grounds of returning to her family[28].

Hedi Slimane (the following will be referred to as Slimane) completely overturned the female design concept and feminism created by Phoebe in the past ten years of Celine , after becoming the design director, and he rebuilt the brand style by breaking the original image. Slimane has removed all the Old Céline related content and traces left by Philo on social media. In the same way as he did during he worked at Saint Laurent, he changed the brand name, including changing the font of the logo, removing the accent on the 'é', from Céline to Celine[29]. Only several handbags which were designed by Philo,the classic box, luggage bag and belt bag are some of the few products where the old Céline style has been preserved.

Breaking the brand's original image and rebuilding it seems to be his usual tactic, despite the controversy and criticism it has caused. In the first two years of Slimane's tenure, he copied his designs from Saint Laurent Paris to Celine almost intact, and the runway looks were as same as in black base of the rock style in the 2019 Celine 01 summer show. With the similar tailoring, colour scheme and elements, it was difficult to distinguish the products of two brands during 2018 to 2019. His first show at Celine was met with huge scepticism, while bringing huge buzz to the brand with search volume rising by 52%[30]. Considering the sales and commercial performance, he had to curb his overly obvious personal style and use more vintage and minimalist elements to create artwork. Bringing back to the Bourgeois style that Celine started in the 70s and 80s, the French retro aesthetic has continued from the 2019 03 Celine winter show to 2020 fall winter show. The unsatisfactory sales performance did not meet the target set by LVMH, because the original consumer groups of Celine as Philo's followers and lovers of minimalism, especially urban middle-class working women, turned to choices like Bottega Veneta,Jil Sander or Loewe.

In 2021 Celine 08 women summer show ushered in a turning point for the brand, Slimane launched a new runway which become more trendy and street-oriented ,a large number of ordinary and practical clothing such as sweatshirts, jeans, baseball cap and Chelsea boots etc. were performed by models, in order to comply with the luxury market trends and meet the aesthetics of the young millennials. One of the biggest highlight is the re-application of the classic Triomphe logo in a wide range of products including handbags and jewellery, the another redesign of the monogram pattern and the launch of the Triomphe canvas series, these eye-catching brand symbols are sought after by young consumers making demand of Celine products increased significantly[31]. In addition to ready-to-wear and leather goods collections, Slimane started to develop Celine's Haute Couture house, including the first Haute Maroquinerie and Haute Parfumerie collections.

As a photographer, Slimane has personally directed several advertising campaigns, with his famous photography style in melancholic black and white photos. He even redesigned the flagship stores in Paris, London, New York and Tokyo, etc. as part of the Celine Art Project.The large paved

black and white marble with minimalist tones and elaborate patterns, decorated by shiny metal and wooden furnishings, in purpose of enriching the brand culture.

Slimane utilised digital marketing to attract more young millennial consumers, for example hit songs on Tiktok were playing as background music of the runway. In September 2020, Lisa from BlackPink was invited to become the first global ambassador of Celine, which is a perfect match for the new designs and products[32]. Her influence on youth and social media is used to increase exposure and awareness of the brand. She was featured in a number of advertisements and magazines and became an impressive new look for the brand.

Celine is gradually expanding in scale, as pricing and sales keep rising. According to projections by analysts, sales revenue rose from 400 million Euros in 2017 to 728 million Euros in 2021[10]. Although LVMH's financial report does not give detailed figures for each brand, the report on the fashion and leather goods group repeatedly mentions the outstanding performance of Celine and Slimane, which are growing very quickly, especially the leather products with the Triomphe logo[33]. LVMH group will help Celine to plan and implement further strategies to accommodate the expansion of the brand's scale.

In conclusion, the style of the previous decade seems to have disappeared from the current design work of Celine, and entirely a new image is emerging. The current style of Celine is versatile, and Slimane is keeping up with the trends of young luxury consumers in recent years. Transformation of Celine is a high-risk adventure for Slimane, and dramatic changes are also reflected in the rapidly growing commercial performance.

4. Conclusion

Celine's brand culture seems to be more influenced by the designer's personal aesthetic and has undergone major leaps in style at different times, with each period being separate and there seems to be no way to find similarities and identical characteristics in Phoebe's and Hedi's work. The style and culture of the House of Saint Laurent has been created jointly by each designer, and the core philosophy of the House has been carried through the different periods, with the designers adding personal elements and innovations based on the tone of brand, allowing a glimpse of history in the present. The challenge for Saint Laurent is to find a balance between maintaining the brand's core style philosophy and avoiding falling behind the trends and fashions of the new era. They can consider the redevelopment of the haute couture house, weighing up the pros and cons of the return.There are no criteria for judging good or bad brands in this study.

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