PART III

CRAFTING LEGENDS:

THE ARTISTRY OF BUILDING ICONIC FASHION BRANDS

STYLE ALIGNMENT

INTRODUCTION

The luxury goods industry is significant not only in terms of its market value but also in terms of its growth rate, which has significantly outpaced any other category of consumer goods in the last 10 years. This development is due to a variety of factors, the most important being the increase in the number of individuals with high financial incomes and a strong appetite for consuming luxury goods. In response to the increased interest and demand, luxury firms and fashion houses have had to find new business strategies to cope. The development of this market has also increased the mass media's interest in luxury consumption, making luxury brand awareness an integrated element of consumer culture. Consequently, luxury brands are among the most recognized and respected brands by consumers worldwide (Fionda & Moore, 2009, p. 347).

WEALTH

A very important aspect regarding luxury is subjectivity. Similarly to art, luxury can be approached from different angles, with extremely subjective outcomes: "your luxury is not my luxury" (Kapferer, 2012, p. 476). Certainly, the concept of luxury is also integrated into a cultural dimension. In France, they tend to consider essential luxury as those expensive objects, bought for hedonistic and status reasons, one could say for any reason other than functionality. In contrast, in the United States, nothing should be bought if there isn't a practical reason behind that choice, and every dollar spent must have a logical justification. Even those products in limited editions are not bought just for personal pleasure, as they can be resold later at prices perhaps even higher than the initial ones, thus becoming real investments (Kapferer & Moore, 2012). From a psychological point of view, luxury is identified as a symbol of high social status and represents a consumption experience closely linked to a person's self-esteem and the concept they have of themselves and the environment they come from (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999, pp. 1-15). Luxury is the result of dynamics within a society, through which some groups seek to signal their superiorit symbolically through taste, if not wealth and power. All members of society use brands to position themselves, but luxury brands are used in the game involving elites, old or new, seeking recognition (Kapferer, 2012, p. 484). From the product perspective, luxury brands are often defined by their excellent quality, value, distinctiveness, exclusivity, and the craftsmanship with which they are created. Qualities such as those listed above, combined with the image and status of such a brand, make luxury goods desirable for many reasons other than functionality (Jackson & Shaw, 2004, p. 158). There are four main categories of luxury goods: fashion (couture, ready-to-wear, and accessories), perfumes and cosmetics, wines and spirits, and watches and jewelry. Recently, luxury cars, luxury hotels and tourism, private banks, luxury furniture, and private airlines have been added to the luxury market. The luxury fashion category is by far the one that accounts for the largest share of luxury goods sales, representing 42% in 2003. Moreover, luxury fashion marketing is the most complex and costly as a result of differences in product quantities and the tendency of fashion companies to take direct control over the distribution of goods in the market (Fionda & Moore, 2009, p. 348).

& POWER

WIND OF CHANGE

The fashion brand industry differs from other categories of luxury goods because its perspective over time is short-lived. Luxury in other domains has a long-term perspective, but in fashion, profits must be made quickly because this industry changes from season to season. For this reason, fashion houses and designers rely on artificial rarity and contagious desire (René, 1979). Thus, they resort to limited edition items or time limits to maximize profit and maintain their status as exclusive brands. It is worth noting that these brands do not adopt the same business model as other categories of luxury brands but rather a business model specific to the fashion industry. Next, we will see what actions a brand in the luxury fashion industry takes to maintain its relevance and success.

NEED TO BE ICONIC

In order for a fashion brand to thrive, it's crucial to have a deep understanding of the target audience, particularly their wants and needs. When individuals decide to invest in a piece of clothing or an accessory, it's not just about acquiring an item; it's about embracing a statement, expressing identity, and communicating without words. Clothing holds immense symbolic value, functioning as a form of silent communication. Marketing experts emphasize the pivotal role of brand image in consumer decision-making. When faced with numerous options, individuals gravitate towards brands that resonate with them on a personal level. This suggests that successful fashion brands not only offer quality products but also craft a compelling narrative and aesthetic that align with the desires of their target audience.

To create or maintain the desired image, these brands need a brand concept, more specifically, they need a name and an identity. This aspect is fundamental. A luxury brand also needs a relevant, clear, and well-defined marketing strategy. The strategy is formed to assist in the global development of the brand's presence and reputation and to serve as leverage in establishing the brand's status and awareness. In conjunction with the brand concept, there are other crucial attributes to create a luxury brand, such as excellent product quality and design, craftsmanship mastery, innovation, and the creation of unique products (Okonkwo, 2007).

Iconic coveted products are essential for the luxury goods offering. These iconic products are characterized by authenticity, quality, exclusivity, and other aspirational features. They often symbolize the brand's signature or "DNA" because they can help portray the personality and values of the creators. Often, the audience instantly associates a fashion house with its "star" products, which become synonymous with the brand. These goods help gain popularity for the brand and raise its profile to a much higher standard. Iconizing certain products in a brand's range is how luxury counterbalances the loss of the aura of rarity that widespread technical reproduction of products has led to.

Iconic products are meant to become timeless, even eternal. This result is achieved in two ways. First, they are constantly on the market, as is the case with the Birkin bag from the French fashion house Hermès or the trench coats from the English brand Burberry. Secondly, these products are made iconic by relating them to a significant and representative moment in the brand founder's life. The spirit attached to this moment and the story that accompanies it endow the product with that brilliance factor that was lost with mass production. The iconic product is a product of cult, and consumers dream of owning at least one of these products throughout their lives (Kapferer, 2012, pp. 453-462).

Luxury products are not only meant for the elite; in today's world, they are also conceived and created by the elite themselves. Appointing a high-profile designer to lead a fashion house enhances the appeal of the products and, consequently, their relevance in the market (Fionda & Moore, 2009, p. 351). Unlike craftsmen, renowned solely for their craftsmanship, designers are now true celebrities, known for their multifaceted talents as artists. Karl Lagerfeld, besides his exceptional qualities as a designer and businessman, possessed a talent for photography and cinematography. Like Lagerfeld, Tom Ford showed a strong interest in photography and cinematography, also directing two award-winning films. Some designers not only have artistic inclinations but also embody the typical image of an artist in their personal brand, as is the case with John Galliano (Kapferer, 2012, pp. 453-462).

DESIGNERS ARE ARTISTS

Therefore, the transformation of fashion creators into iconic art figures is a consequence of seeking growth and development through democratization. Designers who succeed in the luxury fashion sector are those with strong, perhaps even polarizing personalities, who are able to create "followers" and emotional connections among a large audience. Such designers are at the forefront and intentionally do not appeal to everyone, thus forming a cultural elite of individuals interested in both them and the brands where they serve as creative directors. They exploit a cultural segmentation in which the creative elite stands out. The media transforms fashion creators into cultural personalities, true celebrities admired by people worldwide.

Step by step, art and commerce intersect, especially in the luxury sector. Many fashion houses collaborate with artists to reinvent their most beloved products, as seen with brands like Dior and Louis Vuitton. The luxury industry enjoys being associated with art because, like art, luxury aims to be perceived as timeless. The proximity between art and business aims to position products as authentic pieces of contemporary art, each crafted under the blessed hand of the designer (Kapferer, 2012, pp. 453-462). Through this process, luxury brands emphasize craftsmanship that requires time and effort. The association with art further enhances a brand's ability to expand beyond its core production (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2008, pp. 379-389).

EMOTIONAL TIES

Speaking of emotional connections with the target audience, emotional branding emerges as a critical factor in developing brand loyalty, conceptualized as a long-term, engaged partnership laden with affection, intended to characterize consumer-brand obligations (Fournier, 1998, pp. 343-373). The increase in loyalty driven by emotional branding, in turn, leads to higher sales. Generally, emotionally engaged consumers are 52% more valuable to a brand than those who are merely satisfied. As expected, emotionally attached consumers constitute a highly profitable market segment for the brand. Since fashion has traditionally been associated with hedonistic products or symbolic value, emotional branding is a vital approach to directly communicate with consumers in such a competitive environment (Otley, 2016). The desire to appear non-commercial in the luxury fashion industry and fully immersed in the world of art is exemplified through advertising. Luxury advertising should never adhere to classical rules. When it comes to luxury, the less explicit and easily understandable the advertising, the better. In this category of goods, advertising seeks to maintain distance while simultaneously aiming to communicate with the masses. This social construction of advertising as art holds communication as a true creative and complete product of the respective brand. For example, when discussing Dior advertisements, they must be treated like other products of the brand, such as shoes or dresses. For this reason, many fashion houses do not hire communication directors; rather, the creative director imposes their vision on all brand productions. To communicate this vision, some luxury brands go as far as advertising their new ads: discussing the famous director recruited to create it, the top models wearing the brand's products, the impressive location where it was filmed, and other similar details. Luxury brands now post videos on YouTube and other social media sites, documenting the making of their TV commercials. Since advertising is essentially unbelievable, focusing on the artistic construction of their ads, luxury brands diffuse their commercial nuances (Kapferer, 2012). Most admirers of these luxury brands do so from a distance, experiencing the brand through the advertising products created by the creative directors behind these brands. The privileged few, however, have the opportunity to experience the brands in top-tier stores located in major capitals and fashionable cities worldwide. These stores enjoy huge financial investments and are considered crucial by marketing experts for the reputation of fashion houses. Alongside support from the customer service department, these stores offer a consumer experience that allows the customer to "peek" into the lifestyle proposed by the brand, turning it into reality (Fionda & Moore, 2009, p. 351). Their emblematic stores represent magnificent pieces of urban art designed by famous architects. These stores exude a secret and subtle order where people have selective access. Consumers visit the stores alone or in small groups and participate in: reception services, demonstrations, explanations about the uniqueness of each item, etc. (Kapferer, 2012).

FAMOUS

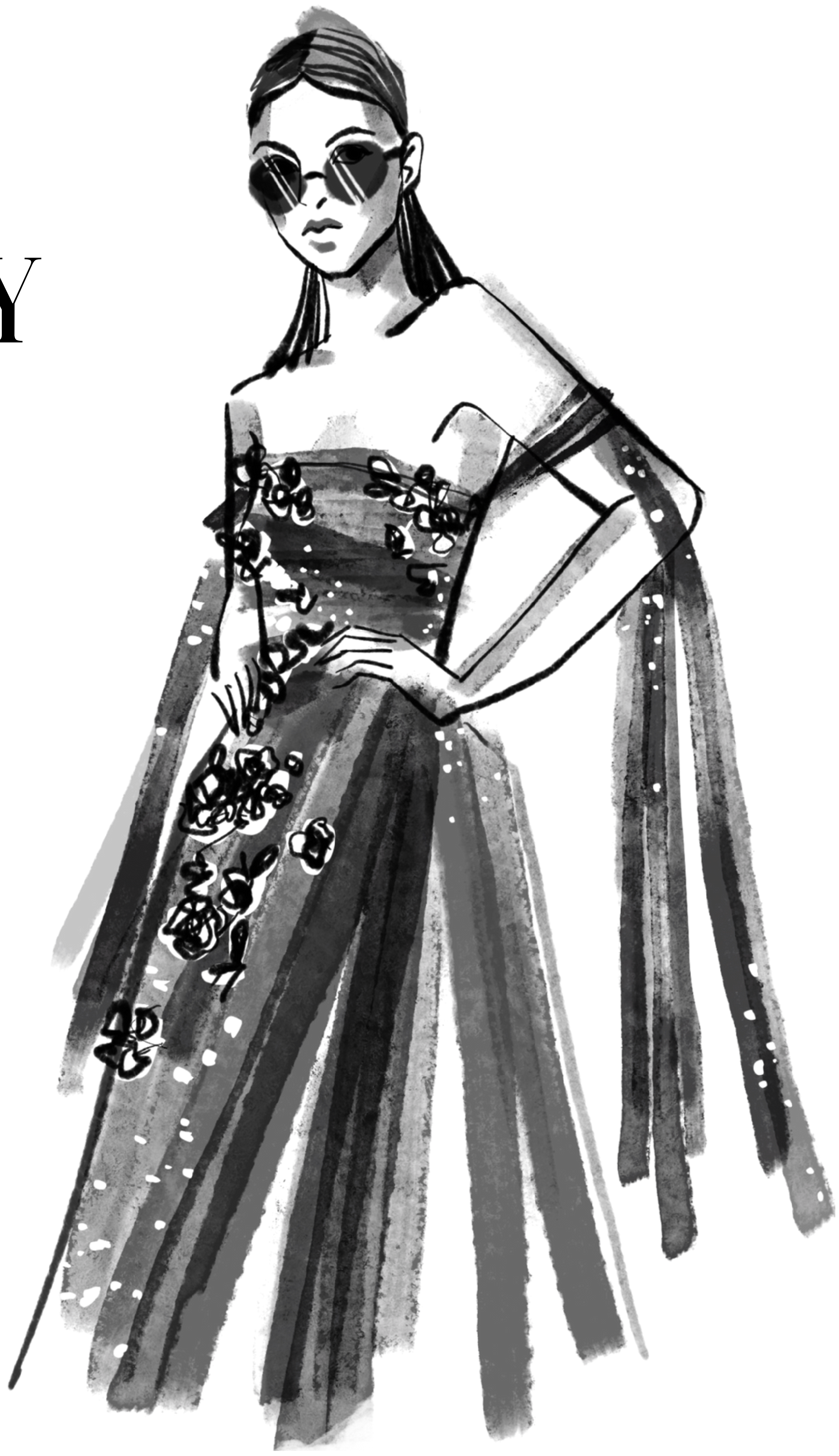
Another action luxury fashion brands undertake is celebrity endorsement. Engaging celebrities to promote a brand has become a popular approach both in branding, regarding gaining and retaining attention, and in creating favorable associations leading to positive brand awareness and distinctive brand image. This works fundamentally by creating a congruent image between the brand and the consumer. The benefits of engaging celebrities to support a brand strategy may include increased attention, polishing the brand image, brand introduction and repositioning, and the potential to support global campaigns (Jiang et al., 2015, pp. 50-63).

To precisely target only a segment of the population, namely the elites, prices must be appropriate. The constant increase in prices is considered necessary in the business model adopted by fashion houses, as the middle class continues to grow wealthy. To keep the dream alive, marketing experts recommend that luxury brands never lower their prices. If more accessible lines are created, this must be done on a limited scale and must be counterbalanced by systematic trading. Pricing distributes rarity through discrimination at levels. There is a price for the majority and a price for a few. Even lower prices must be seen as a sacrifice, otherwise the aura of luxury magic disappears. Although it is generally understood that high price positioning does not automatically mean luxury positioning, luxury goods are considered to need premium prices to differentiate them from other products in the same categories (Kapferer, 2012).

As can be observed, luxury brands in the fashion industry endeavor through every action they undertake to maintain the impression of rarity. Their image is built to convince their audience of their superiority in everything they do, but also to convince consumers of their own superiority through the purchase and use of luxury goods. The luxury fashion industry is built on a mechanism meant to enchant, seduce, and make people dream of perfection.

Many brands have their own stories, but telling a good story is an important step in building a strong brand. A well-structured story can convey the meaning of a brand to consumers and helps people "break down events and experiences into smaller pieces to understand them more easily" (Huang, 2010, p. 309). Therefore, telling a brand's story using an appropriate structure can be a powerful way to convey the brand's messages and build relationships. Brand messages, when properly narrated, help people understand and retain the information presented by the brand. Brands use stories to create a brand culture internally and externally (Mosberg, 2008, pp. 195-210). A brand story provides content about the brand's origin, what the brand represents, its values, and why consumers use that particular brand (McKee & Fryer, 2003, pp. 51-55). A compelling story conveys the brand's values and builds a bridge between the brand and the consumer (Fog et al., 2010, pp. 131-160). The story doesn't necessarily have to be true, but it will most likely be considered a "true story" if there are some historical connections that sound true to the public. The historical connections made must align with the customers' mental perception of how things "should be" (Loebbert, 2005). Therefore, the historical connections of a story are perceived by the public regardless of the truth of the story.

OUR STORY



By focusing on branding with a well-structured story, brands can build long-term meaning that stimulates consumers' subconscious memory. Emphasizing brand storytelling can function as an amplifier of branding efforts. Understanding how story-based messages affect consumers' cognitive processes and how consumers respond to such messages will greatly alleviate concerns about building brand image in the luxury fashion industry. To gather more loyal customers than other brands, applying a compelling brand story can help provide entertainment and an experience. Through these staged experiences, consumers begin to include luxury brands in their fantasies (Wu & Liang, 2009, pp. 586-593). Additionally, these brand-related narratives can help advertising and marketing professionals communicate the heritage of fashion houses (Kent et al., 2016, pp. 398-419).

NARRATIVE

It’s clear that brands have a very powerful tool at their disposal: storytelling (Wang & Calder, 2006). Crafting compelling narratives allows brands to deeply engage their audience and establish a robust brand image. Picture your favorite book or movie - a well-structured story pulls you in, making you feel like an integral part of the narrative. The same principle applies to brand storytelling. Imagine a brand as the hero of its own story. Its presentation, the plot it follows, and the characters it introduces all shape its narrative. Similar to a bestseller, a well-crafted brand story captivates the audience's attention and maintains their interest from start to finish. Research suggests that stories with clear plots and well-defined structures are more effective in captivating audiences (Escalas, 2004). When a brand story has a clear direction, consumers are more likely to emotionally and intellectually connect with it. They become immersed in the story, feeling like active participants alongside the brand. This phenomenon, known as "narrative transportation", implies that fully immersing consumers in a brand story can evoke powerful emotional and cognitive responses (Deighton et al., 1989). They begin to internalize the brand's values, develop positive attitudes toward it, and may even alter their behavior accordingly. What makes a brand story compelling? Clarity and coherence are key (Van-Lear, 2014). A brand story should have a clear beginning, middle, and end, just like to any well-told tale. When consumers can easily follow the plot and grasp the brand's message, they're more inclined to engage with it on a profound level. Think of it as a journey: the brand serves as the guide, leading consumers through a sequence of experiences and emotions. Along this journey, consumers become emotionally invested in the story, forging a bond with the brand and its message. In today's fiercely competitive market, where consumers are inundated with advertising messages, a compelling brand story can differentiate a brand from its competitors. It's not merely about selling a product or service; it's about forging genuine connections with consumers, fostering loyalty, and ultimately shaping their perception of the brand (Mosberg, 2008). By harnessing the power of storytelling, brands can establish meaningful connections with their audience, driving engagement, loyalty, and ultimately, success (Kent et al., 2016).

TRANSPORTATION

ALL IN

At the marketing level, a well-structured brand story aids in developing the brand's uniqueness by incorporating various historical events (Kelley & Littman, 2005). On a more personal level, a well-crafted brand story can assist management and employees in communicating the essence and vision of the brand. Such narratives are perceived as more persuasive than mere facts and can enhance trust in the brand, increase awareness, and differentiate the brand from others (Kaufman, 2003). The meanings embedded within the story can resonate deeply with the audience, exerting a profound influence on them (Chatman, 1980).

COCLUSION

The luxury brands market is experiencing greater growth than all other categories of consumer goods, thanks to the changing dynamics of today's society. Through the consumption of luxury products, members of society seek to symbolically signal their superiority and position themselves in the game of recognition and power.

Among all categories of luxury products, the fashion brand industry differs from all others because its perspective is short-term, given the changing collections from season to season and the continuous birth of trends. For these reasons, fashion houses seek to maintain the idea of artificial rarity and adopt a different business model from that adopted by other luxury product brands. Iconic products, the intertwining of art with commerce, emotional branding, top-tier stores, celebrity endorsement, and high prices are the actions these brands undertake to build their image and maintain the impression of rarity and exclusivity. However, most importantly, these brands utilize storytelling to tell the brand's story and to create a brand culture internally and externally.

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