

The evolving meaning of luxury brands and a framework for creating modern prestige

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To understand how the phenomenon of luxury brands relates to the economy, society and human psychology.
- To understand what makes these brands desirable to humans across generations and geographies, in particular.
- To understand when, why and how building luxury brands evolves and how it stays the same.
- To understand one framework that can help research, assess or develop a modern luxury brand.

Introduction

This chapter explores the role luxury brands might play in the life of individuals and in society, what can make these brands very desirable, how the shape of this desirability might differ depending on the good, geography, generation (or not), and how to elevate a brand to acquire prestige based on this understanding and in the current context. It starts by looking at luxury brands as part of the economy, society and of the modern-day quest for identity. A definition of what is understood by ‘luxury brand’ is provided. The chapter then investigates how changes in time, technology, market or culture might change the manifestation or impact of luxury brands. To illustrate the points, a spotlight will be turned on whether ‘loud luxury’ is dying or how ‘Gen Z’ might impact what luxury brands are or how they act. This will lead to a review of a framework – Dream-Do-Dare – that can help us understand, assess and build brands fit for the modern prestige market.

Luxury brands as part of the economy, society and providers of identity, distinction and ecstasy

Luxury is a very subjective, personal idea, but it is also a social construct. Luxury takes on different meanings in different situations and cultural contexts. It is associated with things and experiences that have been commercialized and branded and which evolve over time.

A quick review of some of the ways in which researchers have sought to frame the unique roles and attributes of luxury and associated brands will provide a definition of the ‘ideal’ luxury brand and help define the criteria by which successful luxury brand building could be judged.

It also serves as an acknowledgement that the project of understanding the power of luxury and of how brands might harness it to be wanted is not a new one and will remain ‘work in progress’ for as long as humanity evolves in its search for meaning and companies in their efforts to create it.

‘And what about the product?’ one might ask. Products certainly are a central manifestation of any luxury brand. But it is the associations that go beyond the material or functional benefits of the ‘thing’ that make it meaningful and transform it into that ‘icon’ of a brand, desired beyond reason. After all, most of us don’t really need another skincare cream, handbag or pair of shoes. And those complicated analogue watches, turntables or sports cars are impractical at best.

Luxury, evolution and economics

Some psychologists and evolutionary theorists link our desire for luxury goods and the brands that signify them with such fundamental desires as procreating or securing a powerful position in a tribe. For example, the conspicuous consumption of luxury brands has been interpreted as a ‘wasteful signal’, employed by males to appeal to potential mating partners (Saad and Gill, 2000; Griskevicius et al, 2007; Miller, 2009) or by females to attract preference over intrasexual competitors in being chosen by a mate. Hudders et al (2014) summarize it from a woman’s point of view: ‘The rival wears Prada’.

Whether such signalling actually works is a matter of scientific debate (Saad and Gill, 2000; Miller, 2009). Either way, brand managers in the luxury and lifestyle industries certainly believe in it judging by ads that illustrate the seductive powers of their products. And their customers seem to ‘buy into it’, judging by elaborate and expensive dress-up or make-up routines that seem exaggerated compared to their utilitarian value.

Social media provides ample documentation of how people use luxury brands to project their status. Ostberg researched an example of such signalling by youngsters and how they use luxury brands to find and differentiate their tribe – in this case the ‘Stockholm Brats’ (Ostberg, 2007). The ‘Rich Kids of Instagram’ (RKOI) is a US-born example that illustrates the perceived value some ‘rich kids’ associate with posting on the platform to show off. They are reported to pay several thousand dollars to be featured with their latest luxury acquisitions (Hewitson, 2020).

Social capital

Kapferer and Bastien, in their popular 2009 book *The Luxury Strategy*, emphasize the need for luxury products or services to deliver a social statement on top of individual pleasure to be a lasting financial success. And so it comes as no surprise that the way in which people use luxury ‘to impress others’ is the most researched theme in this brand tier (Wiedmann et al, 2009). In his 1984 book *Distinction*, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu talks about how the upper social classes bring up their children to adopt certain aesthetics, tastes and rituals, and promote them as virtuous and sophisticated, while making access to this ‘social capital’ difficult for lower classes. In this context, luxury goods and experiences can serve as objectified symbols of high social as well as financial capital that class peers share and lower classes might miss.

This value-creating role and the profit-making potential behind it was not lost on luxury brands. Beyond providing the goods, luxury brands have been providing the young with education when it comes to the appreciation of ‘the finer things’ and related rituals of Old Money and the New Rich alike through their stores or concierge services, as Dion and Borraz have shown (2017). Take the Bourbon House by Dunhill in London or the Global Swann Club events by LVMH’s Berluti shoe brand, for example; they can be seen as training grounds for the (aspiring) high class to hone their luxury aesthetics and practise symbolic consumption (Ings-Chambers, 2008).

Extravagant cost – beyond the price

As signals of financial capital luxury goods are not only associated with steep price tags but with the unusual phenomenon of being more desired and in higher demand, the higher their price is. Such goods are labelled ‘Veblen goods’ after the economist that gave ‘conspicuous consumption’ its name (Veblen, 1899; Dubois et al, 2001; Heine, 2012).

However, blatant displays of wealth are sometimes frowned upon. And this no longer just by a small group of above-it-all patricians and sophisticates but a broader base of affluent and educated consumers,

as we will see later. Thus, to avoid negative perceptions, elites often make a point to display connoisseurship rather than money as a mark of distinction, investing significant time and effort in the education offered by luxury brands (often about themselves), on associated rituals and their appreciation.

Perception of self and personal pleasure

Researchers like Russell Belk (1998), using human psychology and anthropology as a point of departure, have theorized goods to be used as ‘extensions of self’. Grant McCracken (1990) talks about brands as meaningful building blocks of the ‘cultural project’ individuals are engaged in, ‘the purpose of which is to complete the self’. He points out luxury consumption, in particular, as a point of access to our ideals. Later, quantitative experiments by Vigneron and Johnson (2004) show how ‘the supposed luxury of a brand enables a consumer to express his or her own self, an ideal self, or specific dimensions of the self’, while those by Wiedmann et al establish how ‘congruity of a luxury product or service with their self-image or intended self-image’ creates ‘Self-Identity Value’, which they find to be a key driver in the overall value perception of a luxury good.

While helping to satisfy the need for social stature seems a primary function, the satisfaction of cravings for hedonistic pleasure – intimate or shared – has also been called out as an important attribute of much consumption of luxury brands (Dubois et al, 2001; Kapferer and Bastien, 2009). Few are those who would not associate a champagne-fuelled party on a superyacht with pleasant feelings or even states of ecstasy.

Myth and un-marketing

In their aforementioned, seminal study, Vigneron and Johnson (2004) drew on both the ‘personal-oriented perceptions’ (i.e. self-identity building) and socially relevant perceptions of luxury goods (conspicuousness, uniqueness and quality) in an attempt to develop and statistically determine a holistic ‘brand luxury index’. Wiedmann et al (2009) added functional and financial values striving for a holistic definition of ‘Luxury Value’.

Attempts to consistently predict the perceived value or luxuriousness of brands applying the proposed methodologies have mostly failed, however. (Read about a failed attempt by Christodoulides et al (2009) to replicate Vigneron and Johnson's Australian-born Brand Luxury Index (BLI) in Taiwan, for example.) To many, the nature of luxury cannot be expressed in an algorithm or a luxury brand built by following the reason-based marketing models of mass merchandisers.

Dion and Arnould (2011) 'propose that successful luxury brands are auratic', that they need to acquire a charisma and create excitement that comes with something uniquely 'other' and which we crave deeply. Kapferer and Bastien (2009) suggest that this otherness can only be created by following the 'anti-laws of marketing' which ignore concepts of competitive positioning or catering to consumers' needs. Instead, they emphasize the need to 'dominate the client', to be inaccessible, rare, perceived as expensive and to play the 'role of advisor, educator and sociological guide'.

The constants are meaning and mystery

Looking across all the theories and research, some key differences of luxury brands vs others emerge:

- Luxury brands are meaning-full to humans – far beyond their utility. But with meaning also comes mystery.
- Luxury brands have an aura that radiates out from a mythical core versus a rationally superior proposition. Kapferer and Bastien (2009) even talk about luxury cars as 'sacred products'.
- In the past decade and post the pandemic, people's cravings to construct identities, find meaning and experience spirituality have only increased, as we will illustrate next. In that respect, quasi-religious objects and experiences will be as desirable as ever and the framework proposed below appropriately starts with 'Dream' as the first step in elevating a brand but also its central promise.
- However, the socio-cultural developments observed will also point to the fact that ideas of brand-centred domination or of brand-worth being derived primarily from price, provenance and precious crafts and materials will need some adjusting, particularly as brands 'do' and 'dare' to create desire.

How to define luxury brands?

For the purpose of this chapter (and book) we will follow this approximation for what is a 'luxury brand':

Luxury brands are perceived as distinct for their potential to offer extraordinary levels of hedonistic pleasure or of symbolic, socially elevating or self-expressive value. They are generally understood to have a cost that is extravagant for the level of utility obtained or compared to non-luxury alternatives available.

The characteristics listed above are reflected in many definitions by academics who have studied luxury over time, such as Veblen (1899), Bourdieu (1984), Kapferer (1998), Vigneron and Johnson (2004), Keller (2009), Tynan, McKenchie and Chuon (2010), or Heine (2012). And, admittedly, they are also dimensions that are pertinent to our review of how the perception of luxury is evolving and of a strategy framework for brand elevation that accounts for those changes. Of course, luxury and brands are subjective ideas that exist in people's minds but also have shared connotations in various cultural, commercial, academic or other contexts. This makes it likely that some readers might consider the above definition too imprecise – missing other attributes often cited as essentially 'luxury', like provenance or craftsmanship – or too narrowly defined.

The starting point of the brand elevation framework proposed below is to 'dream', which aims at accruing meaning to the beholders of the brand that goes beyond functionality or material value. One can argue over the level of dreaming at which 'true' luxury happens or whether it should be rooted in inspiration or aspiration. The framework posits that dreaming, doing and daring are essential phases when it comes to elevating a brand through meaning. It lets the user be the judge as to whether a sufficient level or desired kind of prestige has been attained to call something luxury rather than lifestyle, premium, masstige or other.

Does luxury branding need a 'total re-invention'?

Marketers and their consultants have called for nothing short of a 'total reinvention of luxury' for a few years now, in the face of social media accelerating and democratizing the consumption and sharing

of news and inter-personal information and of digitally based technologies transforming the way businesses source, make, market or deliver their wares – which might be entirely virtual, by now (Au, 2017; The Luxury Institute, 2020; Kurzke, 2020). A recent concern has been how brands and luxury might exist in a near future where most of our existence is expressed virtually and which some are eager to brand as the ‘Metaverse’ (Hermann and Browning, 2021; Business of Fashion, 2021).

And while consultants or the media have always had a vested interest in warning their audiences about ‘gamechangers’ and have created waves of more or less game-changing management and marketing methodologies over the years, there are two aspects of change that are likely to impact humanity more than in decades past: the ever-accelerated speed at which technological innovation but also environmental degradation change the way we live. The global pandemic of 2020 made that very clear to most and was a further accelerator in itself.

Futurist Ray Kurzweil wrote in 2001, ‘We won’t experience 100 years of progress in the 21st century – it will be more like 20,000 years of progress’, and we have already met some of his predicted technology milestones on the way to a world where man and machine – or rather artificial intelligence – become one. Unfortunately, though, that does not apply to the climate crisis being resolved.

So, what impact might these fast changes have on luxury brands? How can they respond to it? Or better still, be part of the change? Looking at some recent, salient trends in the evolution of society, economy, technology and ecology will provide some criteria to test the relevance and flexibility of the proposed brand elevation framework against.

Luxury markets are maturing

At the beginning of the millennium, US business consultants Michael Silverstein and Neil Fiske (2005) were observing a ‘democratization of luxury’ by serving the significant ‘middle market’ that had emerged from years of sustained economic growth – particularly in the cities.

Baby Boomers were ‘trading up’ to premium propositions in areas they considered core to – and reflective of – their ever more privileged lifestyle. David Brooks (2000) described the most affluent and intellectual crust of the (ex-) hippie generation as concurrently demonstrating their riches and their disdain for the ‘mass consumption’ of the middle. They develop what he termed a Bourgeois-Bohemian or ‘Bobo’ lifestyle and caste, which relied on more subtle signals of wealth like high-end clothes or furniture carefully ‘stressed’ to look lived-in and vintage. This, in turn, made the ‘Old Money’, WASP class reinvent a distinctive kind of ‘preppiness’ to differentiate from all those parvenus rising up.

Since then, we have seen similar growth and transformation patterns in the high-end brand markets across Europe, Japan and emerging markets. China’s cities, in particular, have become the main growth engines of the luxury industry and the biggest market for many brands. Uniquely favourable drivers were steep, sustained and board-scale economic growth mixed with many exceptional fortunes being made fast and a culture that favours signalling good fortune, respect and class belonging through conspicuous luxury consumption or gifting.

The continuous ‘sophistication’ at the high end of these markets can also be observed with ‘ageing money’ moving on from their ‘loud’ expressions of wealth (now associated with parvenus or poseurs in their minds) to more ‘silent’ luxury brands or less obviously ‘logoed’ (and counterfeited) version, for example (see, for example, Wilson et al, 2013, and Han et al, 2010).

Being able to read the more subtle or complex codes of this silent luxury is what elevates one to connoisseur status. Knowledge of idiosyncratic values and beliefs associated with select brands lets the owners make them their own and join an exclusive tribe that shares them (Morency, 2021). Consumption is experienced as more meaningful giving and meaning projecting.

Note, however, that the ageing of ‘old’ money happens much faster nowadays, with some ‘unicorn’ fortunes being amassed in a few years rather than generations, and that ‘sophistication’ is taking on a much younger, less traditional character and aesthetic than was the case

just a few decades ago (Frasier, 2018). In that context, having an axe made by hipster brand BestMade (\$400) handy at your cabin and a vintage Ford Bronco that has been fitted with an electric engine (\$185k) parked in front is a modern expression of sophistication (Fearon, 2021).

Is loud luxury dying?

Jing Daily reports that the *Little Red Book* now censures ostentatious display of luxury (Nan, 2021). The Red Book in question is not the 1964 'Mao Bible', but the 2021 guidelines to the Chinese version of Instagram, which is highly popular among Gen Z. That said, there certainly is a link to the latest leader of China – President Xi Jinping – having an aversion to ostentatious displays of wealth which contradicts the re-discovered mantra of 'common prosperity' (Mullen, 2021).

How did the display of – often pretended – excessive wealth become so prevalent in China that the Communist leadership feels compelled to intervene in the first place? Will 'The Bling Empire's Christine Chiu' (Thomas, 2021) become one rare survivor... because she lives in California?

Those seeking to explain the 'China Bling' phenomenon often point to high collectivism but also high power distance and uncertainty avoidance as being Hofstedeian cultural characteristics of China (Hofstede et al, 2010). Combined, these cultural markers are assumed to motivate people to display brands that are clearly recognized and broadly understood as status-giving to signal their belonging to the higher, more powerful class (Naumova et al, 2019). Similarly, the important Chinese cultural concepts of 'face' (aka 面子 or miànzi), which is much more relational and community oriented (e.g. representing the family or work team), and 'guanxi' (关系 or social relationships) play into items that are strong status signals being used to acknowledge or bestow 'face'. Hence 'gifting' making up a large share of many luxury brands in China. (Atwal and Bryson, 2017)

Finally, one might argue that the rise of luxury in China in the past 40 years is a consequence of the behavioural changes that come hand-in-hand with a society developing capitalist and post-modernist traits. Modern, Western-styled societies being 'other-directed' (rather

than the pre-modern, inner-directed tribal societies), impressing on others who you are is an essential part of having a place in that society (Mason, 1981). Possessions and their perceived nature (value, sophistication, etc) are a shortcut used to signal or assess social rank.

In early 'capitalist' or 'achieving' societies, those now enabled to accumulate wealth exhibited it to gain acceptance or even distinction over the old, aristocratic elite (which had founded its elite status on 'God-given' privileges and exclusive possessions), to acquire social acceptance from their perceived peers and social superiority and admiration over the less fortunate. The advancements and the spreading of industrialization, communication and education brought conspicuous consumption within the reach of the masses, though. And with it came a change in behaviours.

As Galbraith (1984) observed, 'simple forthright display is now out of fashion and is often referred to as vulgar; required instead is a showing of what may be called obtrusive good taste. That, unlike the conspicuous consumption of earlier times, requires a certain measure of artistic and even intellectual effort.'

The now larger group of educated people who have incomes high enough to selectively own or rent themselves into the world of the rich are looking for more tacit signifiers of wealth to not be mistaken for people who 'try too hard'. And that includes categories not immediately associated with luxury consumption, like investing in an Ivy League education for their offspring. In the United States, for example, education represented 6 per cent of household spending among the richest 1 per cent of households in 2007, vs 1 per cent for medium-earning households. In contrast, spending on material goods is trending down among the top 1 per cent while it is flat or up among the rest (Currid-Halkett, 2017).

While still desirous of status and prestige, today's elite is strongly motivated by a pursuit of social and group acceptance. Affluent societies tastefully consume to denote belonging to a particular group (Rassuli and Hollander, 1986). For example, being subscribed to or citing from the 'right' news source, like *The Economist* (see more on how that brand image is built below), is one of the rites of passage into the aspirational class (Currid-Halkett, 2017).

Veblen's depiction of ostentatious display solely for reasons of invidious distinction seems to be dismissed by these post-affluent societies... as it is by the Chinese Communist Party.

Does that mean ostentation and celebration of wealth will disappear? For one, it seems irresistible to the super-rich of today to establish privilege by showing off hyper-yachts, private space ships or country-sized real estate that are out of reach to the onlooking 99.9 per cent of humans. And the admiration and envy of those onlookers seems equally unabated.

There are also those, like historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who contend that history and associated human behaviours oscillate. Schlesinger described 30-year cycles of ostentatious consumption and hedonistic self-indulgence (for the United States, the Roaring Twenties, the Eisenhower years, the Materialism of the 1980s) alternating with periods of benevolence and activism (the New Deal era of the Thirties, hippie activism of the Sixties) (Schlesinger, 1986). Another period of strong demand for bling luxury items would not come as a surprise to those taking a long view.

A case in point. *Wallpaper*, one of the lifestyle magazines for the modern, intellectual, aspirational consumer, reported on 'The ostentation of the Roaring Twenties' being brought back by fashion houses in 2021. The interpretation offered is that 'excess is a signal of aesthetics excellence' (Hawkins, 2021).

Also, an item can be understood as rich or ostentatious in its inner sophistication but 'silent' in its outer expression and discriminating in that way. Take the absurdly expensive but – to the untrained eye – inconspicuous and obscure Alvar Aalto Savoy concrete doorstop by Tobias Wong (Maldre, 2009) or an all-organic vegetarian soup consumed at a neo-rustic farm-to-table tavern. The owner and consumer can be assured of the approval or even admiration of those 'in the know' and thereby of their belonging to this modern elite.

More in the 'loud' vein of luxury, there is talk of the overtly aggressive, muscle- and money-signalling Hummer SUV coming back – in a socially more acceptable electric version (Korn, 2020)

The bottom line: 'Loud Luxury' is a question of perspectives and of periods in time. But no matter whether something is labelled as refined or as a frivolity, the humans seeking out those goods are in search of meaning through what they consume.

Cultures keep evolving

The spreading and growth of brands that are more intellectually demanding or ideologically involving is not only a sign of luxury markets maturing. First and foremost, demand for such brands is driven by the steady march of societies through modernity and post-modernity towards a yet fully to emerge post-industrial... virtual existence?

Jettisoned or lost along the way were many of the traditional institutions that guided (or straight-out told) people how to labour, live or love and provided the structures, rules, rituals and codes that made it work. Luxuries that used to be formally reserved to signify nobility or, later, pointed to an accepted bourgeois hierarchy, have long been abolished (for a historic perspective see Turunen, 2018).

Today, modern markets revere the fully emancipated self-made individual that guides itself through a unique set of ethics and aesthetics. But many people are struggling with creating an identity from scratch and giving life meaning. And the scope feels ever broader and the burden heavier the more money, time and knowledge people have to invest into their personal culture projects and broader societal issues.

Today, the educated classes, from the HENRYs – the ‘High Earners but Not Rich Yet’ – to the high-net-worth individuals, have a desire to express and, if convenient, live their ideals when it comes to matters of self-awareness, body positivity, diversity, ecology, equality, inclusion, sustainability, spirituality and so forth through their discretionary spending (Frasier, 2018; Lewis, 2020; Danziger, 2021). Living in a pristine environment while feeling protected from the elements has graduated from the bottom of the needs pyramid to become part of living in luxury.

Companies see a high-margin opportunity behind delivering on these higher-order needs. They assist in the meaning-finding mission by becoming ready symbols of desirable ideologies or offering the platforms where people with shared beliefs and passions can meet. Luxury brands, in particular, have an opportunity to fill a void when it comes to our desire for spirituality by playing the roles of quasi-sacred objects, rituals and experiences in life (Maffesoli, 2018; Ott, 2018).

In contrast to the passive ‘consumer’ of yesteryear, the customers of today demand that brands are either convenient commodities or are

worthy of their attention, time, effort and money by offering meaning that goes far beyond the material (Schaefer and Kuehlwein, 2015). From the emphasis on ‘owning’, then ‘experiencing’, those who can afford it are stepping up along Pine and Gilmore’s value creation ladder to seek out brands that can assist in the ‘transforming’ towards an ideal self – or even fantasy self (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

And tech as a turbo charger... keeps accelerating

As journalist Virginia Heffernan (2021) relates, ‘the manipulation of undigitized, offline objects, stuff with mass’ has stopped being a promising field of endeavour at the factory as well as office level – at least for those who have a choice. The new elite deals in information, ideas and ideals, looking to create or join tech-fuelled ‘unicorn’ ventures that generate billions in value – seemingly overnight – based on data and virtual realities rather than tangible goods. In fact, authors and artists are imagining us living our lives in a mostly virtual future and today’s digital entrepreneurs are not far behind them, seeking to have a stake in that new world, if they do not succeed in owning and shaping it entirely.

Already today, remote workers spend countless hours interacting on Zoom, Team or Slack, and some transform themselves into e-gamers, living in the universes Roblox or Fortnite in their time off.

This, of course, has spawned new rituals and ways to practise conspicuous consumption as well; people strut ‘their’ stuff in aspirational environments on social media – which might really be theirs, or rented, or a digital filter – an augmentation and idealization of reality. In some cases, the messaging and digital augmentation a brand enables have become more important than its physical materiality.

Given the unstoppable proliferation of media and deep-reaching marketing technologies, audiences have become dispersed, their attention spans shortened to seconds and their base attitude defensive, doubting or indifferent. In other words, for luxury brands to matter in today’s context, they also need to be able to break through and elevate themselves above what looks like a sea of meaningless chatter and not get lost but rather get noticed in the virtual universe.

Does Gen Z hold the key to the future? What do that key and future look like?

Only 'Gen Z' (people born between around 1996 to 2012) might top some form of new technology in being the likely focus of a discussion about the future of luxury brands – or of almost any industry or brand for that matter.

And, judging by how long the preceding 'Millennial' generation took centre-stage for marketers, the mining for – and minting of – 'unique Gen Z traits' and of strategies to satisfy their needs might last for another six to nine years. By which time, 'Gen Alpha' will likely move into focus. But is this somewhat obsessive attention to the latest generation of shoppers warranted? Are the ways in which these generations are clustered and attributes attached to them of use?

Gen Z's share of luxury consumption was estimated at less than 10 per cent in 2020, but forecasters think they might make up 40 per cent of the category by 2035 (Danziger, 2019; BoF Studio, 2021). Rather than their current spending power, what draws attention is that they are seen as the arbiters of what luxury should become.

The netizen-consumers

Without doubt, Gen Z is the first to grow up with their fingertips on a mobile screen, interacting with Web 2.0 sites, 'googling', communicating via social media or shopping via e-commerce from as soon as, and for as long as, their parents would allow them to. It comes naturally to them.

In that way, Gen Z are a natural testing ground, if not a window to the digital future. They approach the virtual world with few reservations and are eager to try the latest offerings, thereby helping to select and fine-tune winning propositions. With their help, app, website and online game designs have become so intuitive and engaging and the algorithms of shopping and social media platforms so refined at serving up ever more emotionally arousing content that an increasing number of young users, in particular, are starting to struggle with digital addiction (Dauk, 2021).

Gen Z is observed to have a seemingly insatiable appetite to match the unlimited information and entertainment the web has on offer. To achieve this, these 'digital natives' have a preference for convenient access, easy juggling between apps, and information in the form of

ultra-short stories, videos and pictures. And they are reported to have an average attention span of some eight seconds or less (Vizcaya-Moreno and Pérez-Cañaveras, 2020).

Getting entangled in networks of desire

Of course, these preferences translate to where Gen Z meet brands, how they learn about them and shop for them. They are more likely to notice and get seduced by brands that get raved about by popular peers and celebrities, in different contexts, across multiple platforms, in engaging snippets of information – like a Snap (on Snapchat), as a prop on Instagram or a skin on Fortnite, being unboxed on YouTube, discussed on Discord or as part of a meme on TikTok, and so on.

Robert Kozinets (2021) talks about the emergence of ‘Algorithmic branding through platform assemblages’. He thinks that marketers who understand the opportunity will seek to ‘use engagement practices as well as algorithmic activation, amplification, customization and connectivity to drive consumers deeper into the brand spiral, entangling them in networks of brand-related desire’.

Transforming physical brand manifestations

Over in the physical world, retail brands react by consolidating stores and transforming flagship locations to become stages where customers are engaged in ways not possible online (PWC, 2021). This ‘IRL’ (in-real-life) engagement is devised to create a desirable brand image and a relationship that leads to sales anywhere within the brand’s omnichannel web. It can also take the form of experiences that add new dimensions to the brand and yield new sources of income and bonding: LEGO producing movies, biking accessory brand Rapha creating cycling clubs (see below) or REI organizing hands-on tutorials in nature are some examples.

To ‘bring the brand’s dream to life’ is central to elevating a brand, as is posited below. And luxury brands have traditionally done so for the select few – be it having a saddle custom-made at the Hermès atelier, a private fashion show on the second floor of the Chanel boutique, or a bespoke fitting and even an overnight stay at the Maison Dior (see insert below).

What is different with the youngest generation is that they want to dip into a multitude of dreams, immediately, briefly and 'shareably' to feed their personal brand assemblage across social media platforms. This is where luxury brands have observed and then obliged this trend-setting consumer. Dresses become theirs for an Instagram minute out of the changing room at Gucci; showrooms are now staged specifically to be Instagram-friendly, and the most influential peers are invited to the fashion shows.

The development is part of what is described as the 'democratization' of luxury. Furnishings company RH (formerly Restoration Hardware) invites people to slumber in its living rooms; Tiffany's makes experiencing 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' possible at their flagship store's café. And part of the payout – beyond the affordable appetizers in luxury – is that it all feeds into social media. The posts generated add to that branded message spiral which is expected to bind senders and their followers emotionally to the brand and make them long to consume 'for real' – once the means are available.

But, of course, Gen Z is not the only or the first generation to post images of their dreams on social media. Millennials were called the 'selfie generation' before them and over 70 per cent of those aged 30 to 60 years use at least one social media platform regularly (Statista, 2019).

Emerging technologies adopted by any (age) group and the resulting changes in their consumption behaviours should serve as inspiration to explore how these behaviours might spread and how they might serve to make the brand more meaningful. It's just that the youngest often play with the latest innovations and joining them holds the potential to keep a brand young.

Demanding environmental sustainability, social equality and transparency!

If being 'tech savvy' (or 'tech addicted') is portrayed as the top trait of Gen Z, then being deeply concerned about protecting nature and creating a socially just environment must be close behind. Images of Greta Thunberg speaking at 'Fridays for Future' rallies come to mind or teens organizing protests to show that Black Lives Matter. They declare themselves 'gender fluid' through their clothing or choice of restroom

and violate traditional beauty norms by celebrating their acne zits with sparkles rather than trying to suppress them with creams. Companies that claim to do good get favourable attention, but news about missteps spreads equally fast among the ‘communaholics’ and requires quick corrective action (Francis and Hoeffel, 2018).

On the luxury front, second-hand platforms are highly popular. Reuse saves the environment and the vintage pieces are perfect for the kind of high-low fashion mix from which they curate a uniquely ‘me’ style (Danziger, 2019). Eating big steaks, wearing fur, owning fat cars (at least the combustion engine type) or donning diamonds (at least the mined type) are big no-no’s. ‘Eat the Rich!’ We are told that Gen Z prefers experiences and access over ownership and socialism over capitalism (Jones, 2021).

Or are they?

On the other hand, Gen Z is also a key driver behind the growth of ultra-fast-fashion, where garments are made to last but a few wears (not years) before falling apart (Nguyen, 2021). And those acne sparkles are one-use plastic film – how can that be?

Quite simply, ‘generations’ are not composed of identical clones. Greta Thunberg and the Bling Cling Girls – a K-Pop dance troupe – are both labelled ‘Gen Z influencers’, but they couldn’t exhibit more different personalities and behaviours. And the reasons behind those behaviours are usually more complex than the trend-tellers or survey results capture.

Going against the grain might be more a trait of the young, rather than the character of a generation. Many Boomers certainly evolved from being free-spirited hippies to becoming dedicated capitalists. The ‘no to ownership’ attitudes might have more to do with Gen Z-ers being ‘CARLYs’ – people who ‘Can’t Afford Real Life Yet’ – rather than not wanting to do some of those things (Schott, 2021).

Humans with different DNA and backgrounds

The need for a more differentiated view applies even more when seen globally. Even at the macro level, the differences in circumstances are vast.

Consider the economic and socio-cultural differences between Gen Z-ers in China and the UK, for example. In China, the youngest generation is described as the richest and most pampered yet – at least for the dominant Han majority (over 90 per cent according to the 2020 census) living in the cities. They have grown up in a time of sustained, fast economic progress and growing national power and pride. They get to spend 15 per cent of the household budget they depend on and have a predilection for luxury items, according to a 2019 global survey (Bloomberg, 2019).

Compare that to the UK where Gen Z grow up with more siblings and as a radically more diverse cohort than their Chinese peers (or parents) but also in the context of several severe economic and political crises, the most recent being Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. The generation-to-generation income progression has reversed for the first time in 100 years as the first of them entered the workforce in 2017 (Edwards, 2017). The economic situation not being as rosy, it might be no surprise that they get to only spend 4 per cent of the household budget, according to that same survey.

And while both young populations lean heavily on tech, and the platforms and infrastructures at their disposal are similar, the freedoms afforded are markedly different when it comes to sharing political opinions, for example (Wang, 2020).

The key lies in harnessing shared dreams – across generations

So, what is a luxury marketer to do with all this techno-cultural complexity and ambiguity? What is the key to ensuring a brand stays relevant and desirable? 'Cherchez-le-rêve!' (Seek the dream!)

Brands elevate themselves by becoming a shared dream – or myth, as Joseph Campbell defines it (1991). Humans are dreaming about a pristine nature, or about a society where all are equal or young or wise or beautiful, or about having super-human powers – or some combination thereof.

The young might be particularly creative in this regard and the technologies they shape and embrace might enable them to manifest ideas in new ways. But the hard work to capture those aspirations and harness those tools that grow the attraction of the dream that is the luxury brand is that of the owner. For we expect luxury to seduce and guide us, not to mimic and sell.

Dream-do-dare – a framework to understand how modern prestige brands create meaning

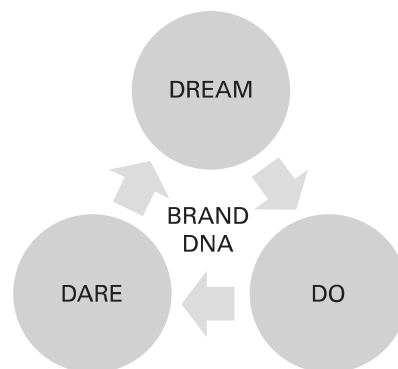
How then can brands elevate themselves above the rest and accrue value and meaning beyond the material? How can they be experienced as peerless by an audience over-exposed to advertisements and lend prestige without being perceived as pretentious?

Based on empirical study, own practice and in-depth interviews with other practitioners, Schaefer and Kuehlwein (2021) summarize the actions that drive the sustained desirability and pricing power of modern luxury brands as follows: ‘They dream, do and dare’ (Figure 2.1).

Starting with a dream that unites brand mission and myth

The brand dream is where the previously described soulful ‘aura’ of luxury meets emotional and (post-) rational reasons to buy ‘into’ the brand. Brand stories mined from the brand’s ‘DNA’ – history, culture, business model, product development and so forth – are elevated to take on mythical proportions. The brand’s mission is determined,

Figure 2.1 The three phases of brand elevation



SOURCE Schaefer and Kuehlwein (2021)

reaching beyond the money and material for a reason for being, a higher calling that seduces customers, employees, suppliers and other key stakeholders alike.

Of note is that this starting point of luxury brand creation is centred on the brand and emphasizes the ethereal, where ordinary brands usually start with the rational: consumer needs.

Thus, the story of Chanel, for example, centres on the myth of the ever-rebellious, creative free spirit that was Coco Chanel. A woman who liked to dress in men's clothes to tease her many and mostly married but always high-society lovers. It forms a meta-story that also serves the 'luxury education' mentioned above through more literal recounting in books, films and expositions and, more importantly, that serves as a guide in expressing the brand across all touch-points and in reinterpreting and evolving it into the future.

The internal mission statement of Chanel is purported to be about 'defining style and creating desire, now and forever'. With this understanding of the brand myth and mission, we can understand seemingly bewildering but 'legendary' and trend-setting moves by the then high-priest of the brand, Karl Lagerfeld, fitting his models in tweed jackets and bikinis (1993) or sports sneakers (2000) or having them stage a fantasy feminist protest (2014). The company buying up ever rarer flower fields in Grasse, France (latest in 2021) is an example of the business steps taken to secure both mission and myth. The high-altitude fields are said to yield the rare jasmine that is characteristic of the seductive fragrance of that fifth vial Coco supposedly chose to become the first perfume of the brand (Gaillard, 2021).

Does a powerful brand myth require a long history and be steeped in traditions? No. Tesla, the e-car brand, was dreamed up by Elon Musk in 2008. Initially, it attracted an elite Hollywood and Silicon Valley crowd through now-legendary pronouncements by Musk about how to 'change the way the world uses energy', 'spread [...] humanity to other planets' (Schaffer, 2015; Mosher, 2018) and by spectacular stunts like sending one of the cars onto a trip into the galaxy. The brand has since reached down with popular models (priced at \$40–60k) to live up to its gospel while also staying aspirational, for example by promising a new version of its roadster at the top end (rumoured to start at \$200k).

Does having a brand mission force a brand down to dream-busting reason? No. Chanel has made making us dream part of its mission. And Hermès provides the example that one of the most venerable luxury brands can gain new relevance and audiences by extending its myth and mission: Hermès is all about preserving and spreading the joy of craftsmanship – ‘*les joies de l’atelier*’. And its little daughter – ‘Petit h’ – sitting under the atelier’s table, so the legend goes, extends this joy by reimagining the precious scraps into beautiful toys, accessories or *objets d’art* (Schaefer and Kuehlwein, 2015). What a magical, yet mission-driven way to approach what could also be described as ‘upcycling’.

Always do rather than declare: living the mission and myth

The easiest way to recognize a pretender is by their ‘luxury’ label. True luxury is not proclaimed, it is felt by its beholder.

Certainly, the product has to live up to the dream through all the detail in design, use, ritual and rhyme. Particularly in today’s social media-powered world, any deviation from the brand’s promise will be called out and disappointments will be shared quickly and broadly. But this does not mean that a luxury product must be perfect and please everyone in every way. Rather, the brand proposition needs to be perfect in ‘its own way’ and stay true to itself. Here, again, the luxury brand is expected to delight by teaching, inspiring and making our taste rather than ‘deliver on expectations’ as ordinary brands do.

Ferraris are famously difficult, uncomfortable, uneconomical and even unsafe to drive – at least for the average driver on normal roads in normal traffic. But then, being a ‘daily driver’ – even a fast, luxuriously equipped one – is not the Ferrari dream. In a similar fashion, the ‘falcon wing’ doors on the Tesla Model X SUV create a lineage with iconic supercars like the 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SL, while also manifesting the futuristic promise of the brand. The feature would be questionable if convenience, cost, maintenance or safety were primary concerns (Lambert, 2017) – just like shooting one of the cars into outer space would.

This does not mean that luxury brands ignore that modernity has ‘made man God’, putting the individual at the centre of everything, as philosopher Luc Ferry argues (2002). But rather than following the popular credo of ‘customer is king’, the luxury brand ensures product and experience are ‘fit for the Gods’.

A big part of experiencing luxury comes not just from experiencing the unique object or service but from sensing the dedication to the dream by the people behind the brand.

At Hermès, artistic director Pierre-Alexis Dumas is certain the customer ‘feels the presence of the person who crafted the object, while [...] the object brings him back to his own sensitivity, because it gives him pleasure through his senses’ (Anaya, 2014). The company lets this feeling radiate from the inside out by making the atelier and its artisans the source of its manifestations, be it in the form of tours of the archives and workshops (in person, virtual, in books or on film), through personalization or bespoke services, audacious designs crafted for special clients or auctioned at charity events during the ‘Festival des Métiers’ (craft fair) touring the globe. Meanwhile at ‘Petit h’, Dumas’s cousin Pascale Moussard showcases the ‘Alibaba cave’ of Hermès manufacturing scraps which she and her artisan associates reimagine into ingenious and precious creations (Hermès, 2022). A bracelet woven from scrap silk by Petit h is priced relatively modestly, yet the distinguished provenance thus created imbues it with the power to convey sophistication or even social standing.

The same applies for *The Economist*, a uniquely created product worthy of the intellectually discriminating reader. Here, the ‘Do’ is journalism executed in ways that often go against the grain of common news media; the choice of topics is serious, and the articles are authoritative and take mostly a long form. The language is an idiosyncratic mix of high-brow-yet-witty British. One of the details proving an authenticity that comes from within the organization is the absence of a ‘byline’ stating the author(s) of an article. It is an expression of the organization’s belief – maintained for some 175 years – that it is the backroom collaboration between its journalists resulting in a coherent and consistent voice that provides a unique product (*The Economist*, 2013). There is no place for superficial or sensational, ego-centric journalism in *The Economist*’s world – and for that, a price needs to be paid.

Dare to inspire disciples and create desire

Daring is the way in which modern luxury brands interact with the world. They are courageous and confident leaders, inspired by and inspiring their targets – above all influential super-fans or the ‘ueber-target’.

At the most literal level, the provocation comes in the form of deeds or communications that surprise and shock, not because you are desperate for attention but rather because you have arrived, are emancipated and simply ‘can’. Recall Coco showing up in a man’s outfit, Karl putting models in sneakers or Gisele Bündchen playing a photo model, mom... and mistress (?) in an ad for Chanel N° 5? And this after Gisele had led a ‘faux feminist protest’ at the Paris Chanel fashion show a week earlier (Gibson, 2014) and N° 5 had mainstream audiences puzzled by choosing Brad Pitt as a spokesperson for the women’s fragrance. That said, to the initiated Chanel connoisseur and ueber-target, these will feel exciting, if not intuitively right.

The same applies to the late Virgil Abloh sending psychedelic, half-animated, half-human travellers on a virtual and somewhat psychedelic trip around the world for Louis Vuitton during the Covid-19 pandemic. To the initiated, it is a provocative, yet appropriate spin on the mythical journey the brand has sent us on through the years.

A direct and traditional dare by luxury brands is gatekeeping through high prices or by playing ‘hard to get’ through limiting quantities or access.

A more modern dare – in the sense of being more acceptable to a culture that prides itself in rejecting blatant discrimination – is the balancing of access that is based on more than money or celebrity. The above-mentioned Louis Vuitton Men’s Summer ‘21 tour is a good example. Granted, the tour also had some exclusive in-person elements, but the main shows could be accessed live by any dedicated fan ‘in the know’, while everybody else could watch outtakes diffused – many by those fans – on social media later.

Increasingly, access and prestige are gained by ‘knowing’, ‘getting’ and ‘living’ the brand intellectually or aesthetically as much as or more than by being able to afford it.

True luxury doesn't pay influencers, it makes 'ueber-targets' rave

A brand and its 'ueber-target' are in a symbiotic relationship. The ueber-target is the brand's muse, inspiring its products and actions, but it also represents people who are in love with the brand and yearn to pass their knowledge and passion for it on to others. They help the brand 'radiate from the inside out' (Schaefer and Kuehlwein, 2015).

In contrast to paid 'influencers' or 'celebrities', the ueber-target will readily spread the gospel without getting compensated – at least not in cold cash. True luxury brands have the power to seduce and feed their ueber-target with creations the latter might have inspired, through limited-edition collaborations with partners they admire or by cultivating the kind of connoisseur talk and rituals the ueber-target likes to use to distinguish themselves from the rest.

This doesn't mean that luxury brands do not or should not hire celebrities, brand ambassadors or social media influencers to deliver specific communication messages in a timed and controlled way to get things started or fan the flames. But when it comes to presenting a brand as truly desirable, few messages can top the authentic and enthusiastic testimonial of fans who are also people or groups admired by the larger target audience.

The ueber-target helps the brand balance distance and proximity, longing and belonging, which is essential for luxury brands that want to grow but not feel too accessible. If active or 'activated' on social media, the ueber-target's behavioural profiles can also be used as filters to target events, and conversations can be promoted to those most likely to engage and act. The objective is to create a virtuous cycle with fans, feeding high-potential future fans while also feeding back new ideas to the brand.

At Berluti, the premium shoe brand owned by LVMH, select customers and gentlemen tastemakers get invited to 'Swann Club' soirées at which they enjoy good food and drink and... a lesson on how to tie and polish their shoes properly – sometimes by Olga Berluti herself. Apparently, Italian linen, a good dose of champagne and a full moon help shine those precious shoes. Most importantly, perhaps, those who have the privilege of attending are equipped with the mythic knowledge and some social media footage to initiate those they find worthy of being let in on the secrets.

Over at Dior, another LVMH brand, an uber-target magnet of sorts has been created in the iconic *Maison* that is Dior at 30 rue Montaigne, Paris. The ‘hotel particulier’ that Dior loved so much has been extended and transformed into a brand experience firework that is partly accessible to most – the store, the museum, the café – at least by day (Holevas, 2022). The after-hours or the upper floors, however, are reserved for very special guests who can roam around at their leisure, be fitted with elegant couture to wear for a drink or dinner, play, shop and even sleep at the place. All while being tended to by an army of discreet valets, concierges and couturiers in case of need. In other words, these chosen few get to live the Dior dream. And they will return the favour – and enjoy the experience even more – by letting everyone who has not had the privilege know about it. This is how branded aspiration spreads (Cavanagh, 2022).

An equally lifestyle-related but recent and down-to-the-road example is the high-end bike apparel brand Rapha. Founded in 2004 in London, it was inspired by the gritty but suave world of road bike racing back in the 1960s. Rapha features a mix of high-performing apparel with a modern-vintage aesthetic and a uniquely high price point to match. Style and price are two ingredients of an imaginary ‘velvet rope’ drawn, separating those who are ‘in’ from those who are ‘out’ – just like the physical rope and bouncer in front of an exclusive club, but more subtle and sophisticated. Definitely ‘in’ are Rapha’s uber-target, the ‘gentleman cyclist’. Bikers who are athletic and cultured, who love to combine physicality with worldliness and do things full-on, but in style and with an *esprit de corps*. Those admitted are Rapha’s strategic target: road bikers who are willing and able to spend not only on the functionality but also the looks of their gear and outfits. Core among this target are upper-middle-class men with an urge to rekindle their youthful self, athletically and aesthetically. ‘Out’ are those who do not care for biking but also those who see it solely as a sports activity rather than an expression of lifestyle.

The brand creates an intricate web of degrees of access based on merit and money alike, to allow new members in while preserving the desirability to the hard-core pros – the ‘Raphia’. Beyond the gear,

bikers can buy more fully into the brand philosophy, symbols and rituals: the motto is *ex duris gloria* ('glory through suffering') and it can be practised through a paid membership in the 'Rapha Cycling Club' which regularly meets up in shop-clubhouses and at races around the world. The various sub-tribes can be recognized by exclusive caps on their handlebars and on their heads and a custom of pushing struggling comrades over the hill (Richardson, 2017).

The 'other bike riders' comment on all of this, and the associated 'eyewatering prices', as eccentric at best and subversively elitist at worst (Chandler, 2021). When asked to comment, 'Rapha' mostly show themselves above what they consider envious chatter.

A final note on execution and style: it's substance

Beyond the dreaming, the doing and the daring, luxury brands need to pay close attention to how they execute within this framework: their style, attitude and tone.

The dream forms a guiding narrative, but it has to be retold and creatively transformed and evolved again and again to stay relevant and fresh. Luxury brands can only hold social and cultural significance as long as they maintain resonance and significance – beyond their history. And that is an ongoing exercise in style.

Chapter summary

This chapter discussed how luxury evolves with society in its role as socio-cultural signs and with the needs of humanity in its role of satisfying hedonistic desires. Luxury also responds to technological, ecological and other developments that surround and power it. The constant is that luxury is in the business of creating meaning that is desirable and that goes beyond the material.

A framework was presented for building modern luxury brands that are responsive to their environments in their own, unique way, which is being perceived as peerless and priceless. It starts with a dream which can be shared and desired. The doing – manifestations of the dream through products and experiences – is perceived as

iconic and mythical, offering customers soulful transformations of their selves. But the brands cannot let the dream or its icons become outdated or stale. They need to constantly dare to be different and distinctive, inspired by and dedicated to an inner circle, whose actions radiate out and create a longing among the broader target audience to belong. In sum, modern luxury brands dream, do and dare.

Key questions to ask

- What is a brand's reason for being – beyond quality, enjoyment, and a sign of riches? How does it satisfy intellectually, ideologically and spiritually?
- What is the meta story that guides saying, being and doing? Is there a myth that is 'flexible in its manifestations, triggering ecstasy, but coherent'?
- What are the brand's icons? How does it elevate and evolve the product, the associated coaching and experiences to keep them fresh and remain socially and culturally relevant?
- What tribes are/can be attracted through shared passion and aesthetic? What is their motivation? How does a brand ignite them to spread the word?

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