

WOMEN

PORTUGAL

THE LANGUAGE OF LUXURY



ANALYSIS



Speak, Luxury

From luxury brands' illustrious heritage, Misha Pinkhasov* parses what will translate luxury into the future.

Luxury has been called the first social network. Luxury's obscure and exotic syntax linked people across continents long before the digital era. Maharajahs in Rolls Royces, Shanghai swells in Savile Row suits, American heiresses in Parisian couture, and everyone in Cartier, moving around a tight network of private clubs and Ritz hotels, aboard Cunard ships and wood-paneled express trains. Strangers sharing a nod of recognition, if only for each other's belongings.

In Marie-Antoinette's day or under the Tsar, few people outside this rarified club would have heard the names Breguet or Fabergé. But in the age of *The Social Network*, almost everyone speaks the language of luxury. Like the two-story Louis Vuitton suitcase that stood on Moscow's Red Square, luxury brands are now larger than life, towering over the public domain through advertising and product placement.

That is because, like Groupe LVMH with 70 brands and 120,000 employees, luxury is now a business of industrial scale. Luxury brands no longer comprise small workshops that live on aristocratic patronage alone. Multinational firms with large infrastructures, traded on stock markets, driven by the growth imperative, rely on a broad base of consumers that once would have been outside their model. Following the explosion of new wealth since the dot-com boom of the 1990s, many have climbed down from their pedestals into the "masstige" realm of high-volume goods that require Coca-Cola levels of visibility and thirst.

Luxury is no longer niche. It has gone viral across global franchises from James Bond to Kim Kardashian, covered by media like the magazine you are reading now. But, connected through a more exclusive realm where one must pay to play—Soho House, Quintessentially, NetJets, Art Basel—the well-to-do in Seoul and São Paulo, London, Lisbon and Luanda still have more in common with each other than with the villagers and working classes in their own communities. And that is a problem.

Because luxury brands' pursuit of new markets comes just as new challenges tear at luxury's old turf. Populist reactions and counter-reactions, like the ones stirred by Brexit and Trump, narrowly avoided in France and pressuring even the Saudi royals, hold as hostile to the migrant worker as to the exotic oligarch forever absent from his high-priced pied-à-terre bought through a confidential account. Stolen jobs, stolen homes, stolen funds—and the pandering, profiteering politicians that allow it.

Luxury, bound up with notions of identity, status and justice, is the most emotional and the most political of product categories. Luxury inspires both desire and disgust. Though little-known by the public, Breguet and Fabergé still had to flee revolutions and associations with royal excess. As luxury brands pursue customers across new geographic and demographic lines, they must become fluent in a language that unites people across age, class and culture in order to avoid the pitfalls and make full use of their opportunities in uncertain times.

Do luxury brands exist only to cater to the whims of the privileged? Or do they have something more to offer?

The language that brands often use to describe themselves—heritage, quality, rarity, exclusivity—only offers us an outline of luxury after the fact. None of them explains the source from which luxury arises. And that is important: luxury is not a qualifier, it is an outcome. Like peace, love, health and happiness, luxury is the consequence of doing millions of tiny things right. But aim for it, and you will miss it.

“**A** person hoping to become a poet must have the capacity of thinking of several things at a time”, wrote Vladimir Nabokov in *Speak, Memory*. Luxury is to product what poetry is to storytelling. And, like the poet, the luxury maker is part craftsman, part philosopher, balancing the practical (function, form) with the ethereal (emotion, symbolism). Like poetry, luxury defines and interprets a sensorial essence that raises the useful into the artful.

Art for art’s sake is a fairly modern concept. The vast majority of what we label “art” in the world’s museums consists of opulent tools made for the world’s kings, clerics and merchants. Pharaohs’ funerary totems at the Louvre. Illuminated manuscripts at the Hermitage. Aristocratic portraits at the Uffizi. Baroque furniture at the V&A. Embroidered gowns at the Met. Museums themselves began as luxuries: private collections and curiosity cabinets. We retain luxury because it is exceptional. It starts with simple heirlooms—mother’s earrings, grandfather’s snuffboxes—forming a bond between generations. With time, the most exquisite examples become cultural patrimony, too valuable to be used, recording the values of the past and shaping those of the future.

That illustrates an important point: it’s a mistake to think that luxury is something non-essential. Whether you revere it or reject it, if luxury were truly unnecessary, it would have disappeared long ago. Instead, it persists across time and culture to offer what Catherine da Silveira, who teaches luxury at Lisbon’s Nova School of Business and Economics, describes as “substance and status”—sometimes in surprising forms.

The austere, ancient Spartans considered heroic death in battle a luxury worthy of a leisure class devoted to developing the body in the gymnasium and the mind in the political arena. Art and craftsmanship were relegated to slaves. The Soviet Union replaced capitalist inequality with forced egalitarianism. But foreign fashions showed one’s access to the West, a luxury reserved for only the staunchest Communists. These days, financially, socially and ecologically conscious hipsters and millennials eschew materialism. But they luxuriate in the flow of hearts that follows from flaunting heavily styled snapshots of their sustainably-sourced daily lives, their politics, even their frugality and insecurities.

Also do not confuse luxury’s history with its legacy. Luxury is written in the future tense; it is how innovation enters the marketplace. The famed trunk makers that survive from the 19th Century—Vuitton,

Moynat and Goyard—point to their original methods as evidence of deep credentials. But this heritage springs from innovation rather than tradition.

Their experiments with lightweight and resilient materials and methods of construction gave mobility to Victorian lifestyles loaded down with dickies, petticoats and formal protocols. They untethered sophisticated travelers the way Apple smartphones and laptops do for digital nomads today. Electricity, plumbing, telephones and appliances all came into our homes through manor houses and palace hotels. Well-heeled passengers aboard Pan Am Clippers led to holiday makers flying Easyjet, and personal video screens made their way from First Class to the back of the plane.

Luxury makers have also been social innovators participating in the progressive movements of their time. As Socialist revolution and workers’ uprisings marked the end of the Gilded Age in the early 20th Century, Madeleine Vionnet’s employees enjoyed paid time off and medical care for their families. This, as Henry Ford—considered a generous employer by the standards of the day—refused his workers bathroom breaks and ordered armed guards to fire on demonstrators who wanted higher pay.

As women marched for the right to vote, Vionnet, like Coco Chanel, undid their constricted, hourglass forms for a flowing, Greek-goddess silhouette that spoke of freedom, power and femininity all at once. In the 1960s, Yves Saint Laurent feminized the codes of men’s power-dressing as women asserted not just freedom, but also equality. And he showed them on white, black and Asian models standing shoulder-to-shoulder, equals as European powers left their former colonies and African-Americans demanded their rights.

The craftsmen and couturiers of the past were iconoclasts rather than traditionalists. They embraced change brought by new ideas. They created designs and products that served as practical tools

for a modernising society and catalysts for emerging values. By wrapping radical change in the comfort of couture, they made it safe for the upper classes, which made it desirable for the masses. Why? Not for political reasons, but because exceptional product demands exceptional thinking. Luxury houses and their customers are taste makers who set the pace for others. Luxury is about leadership.

That opportunity still exists. In fact, it may be bigger than ever. Consumerism and citizenship are converging. More and more customers see spending as a way to put their values into action. In 2016, a consumer survey by GlobeScan found that 40% of aspirational consumers preferred brands that demonstrate “a clear purpose and act in the best interests of society”. Yet 50% of them couldn’t name a single brand that does so. Even though they’re willing to pay up to twice as much for responsible products.

Brands that do combine power and purpose develop communities of fervent followers. Patagonia, the California-based outerwear company, sees a direct link between protecting the environment and demand for their apparel. They produce nature documentaries. They run a “Do not buy...” campaign against their own merchandise, as well as repair and recycling programs and even product exchanges between customers. Anything to kill a sale.

“I know it sounds crazy”, says Patagonia’s founder Yvon Chouinard, “but every time I have made a decision that is best for the planet, I have made money. Our customers know that—and they want to be part of that environmental commitment”.

Are corporate citizens the new social network?

Today’s younger customers—digital natives—speak individuality, transparency and activism as a mother tongue. But these are foreign languages to brands used to cultivating mystique, discretion and aloofness through complete control of their image and distribution. Informed and empowered via social media and peer-to-peer commerce, consumers are shifting that power towards themselves. And they’re more interested in and loyal to their personal brands than to the brands they buy.

They’re once again shifting the parameters of luxury. From things to experiences. From ownership to stewardship. From wealth to well-being. From quantity to quality. Luckily, these are all things that luxury does well. What’s more, luxury is an innately optimistic proposition—something to look forward to. That is a strong starting point.

However, leadership is ultimately about building cultures. And that will be difficult in luxury brands’ muddled current state. “Luxury” is a term so appealing, so overused that it appears on everything from cookie-cutter apartments in New York City, to chocolate-chip cookies at Tesco. Beyond the word, the look of luxury is imitated by cheap-chic brands, allowing them to challenge genuine luxury goods for market share. It’s become hard to distinguish luxury from an ambitious facsimile.

And let’s be honest: luxury brands often play a part in this themselves. Kenzo, Balmain, Versace, Lanvin and Stella McCartney are just a few of the luxury brands who’ve collaborated with H&M. Even as luxury brands complain about fast-fashion, they chase relevance, novelty and youthfulness,

through a rotation of co-brandings, capsule collections and new designers so fast that it is now the norm.

But “normal” really is the antonym of luxury: just a high-priced, high-quality commodity. The rarity of luxury is not only in its scarce supply. It is also in how infrequently we experience it.

By definition, luxury must be both best in quality and extra-ordinary—literally out of the ordinary—because luxury is most acutely felt in contrast to what’s normal in our lives. That’s what customers are looking for when they say they’re spending more on experiences: emotions, knowledge, memories.

Travel is an experience, of course. Spas and restaurants definitely. Shopping as well. But it doesn’t end there. Experience is both a verb and a noun. Physical product is an experience too. We experience the excitement of a fragrance. We experience the grace of a dress. We experience the intellectual engagement of an intricate watch. We feel attractive, glamorous, significant: out of the ordinary. It transforms us and teaches us, both about the craft and about ourselves.

Brands that view experience mostly in terms of customer service and engagement are missing the point of luxury, if not abandoning their duty to it completely. The same social networks that empower individuals are giving rise to new brands ready to do the poet’s job of raising the useful into the artful. So an illustrious past will not be enough to carry a luxury brand into the future. But today’s actions will be tomorrow’s heritage. ●

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