

Jan 1st, 12:00 AM

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Alyson VanderPloeg
Central Michigan University, vande3aj@cmich.edu

Seung-Eun Lee
Central Michigan University, lee6s@cmich.edu

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VanderPloeg, Alyson and Lee, Seung-Eun, "The Role of the Creative Director in Sustaining the Luxury Fashion Brand" (2017).
International Textile and Apparel Association (ITAA) Annual Conference Proceedings. 160.
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/itaa_proceedings/2017/posters/160

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The Role of the Creative Director in Sustaining the Luxury Fashion Brand

Alyson VanderPloeg and Seung-Eun Lee
Central Michigan University, USA

Keywords: brand, creative, director, fashion, luxury

Background

Luxury fashion is becoming more commercialized and globalized as many luxury brands have reached out to newer markets to remain competitive in an industry highly involved in mass distribution, short-term product life cycles, online retailing, and marketing communications. The modern nature of the industry places considerable responsibility on creative directors, who are now producing multiple ready-to-wear and haute couture collections as well as pre-collections, including resort and pre-fall. There appear to be conflicting opinions among the luxury industry's most well-respected creative directors regarding this emerging, fast-paced nature. For example, Raf Simons, prior to his departure from Dior in 2015, openly discussed his desire to focus more on his own brand and personal interests outside of his career as well as the nature of the industry, which he felt takes a toll on creative directors. Giorgio Armani has also expressed concern regarding the fast pace, stating that it has the potential to diminish quality and appreciation for true luxury products and haute couture artworks.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to discuss the changing nature of roles and responsibilities of creative directors in sustaining the success of their luxury brand. The study was based on Kapferer and Bastien's (2012) model, or "luxury brand compass," which addresses four components creative directors must incorporate into their branding strategies to achieve continuous success: (a) brand roots and heritage; (b) a sense of prestige that defines the social status of loyal consumers; (c) creative modernization that enhances brand and product relevance; and (d) a limited amount of accessibility that helps build brand awareness. The model includes the important cultural aspects of the brand the founder develops as well as the creative director's key responsibilities related to modernization. "More roots" and "more trends" act as the opposing horizontal poles of the model while "more status" and "accessibility" comprise the vertical set of poles. These components integrate to create the entire luxury brand identity and promote its success in the marketplace.

Discussion and Implications

In the modern luxury fashion industry, the persona of the brand's creative director plays an important role in upholding the brand's value and image. Creative directors have power in their positions, due to their artistic talents, visions, and abilities, to personify their brands. However, creative directors' personas and aesthetics should not stray from the brand's culture or the founder's vision; otherwise, loyal clients may begin to question the brand. Issues have arisen when creative directors have indulged more in their own design aesthetics than in the brand's aesthetics, thus violating the brand's intrinsic codes and values. Some of these creative directors have proven to drastically increase their brand's sales, but have tarnished the brand's value and

reputation in the long run; this is evident in the case of Saint Laurent under Hedi Slimane and during Tom Ford's reign at Gucci. It is important for creative directors to stay committed to the brand's roots while also reinventing original designs and iconic products to maintain their relevance in the contemporary marketplace.

The concept of artification involves the identification and qualification of designers as artists; their creations are not just products but are works of art. Artification keeps the brand's heritage alive in the increasingly profitable, commercialized luxury goods industry by focusing on authentic craftsmanship, exclusivity, and high status. By representing the founder as an artist, the creative director validates the brand's symbolic authority, quality, and high prices that greatly exceed the brand's functional value. By nature, art does not serve a functional purpose and cannot lose value over time. If an emphasis is placed on the artistic importance of the founder's talents and the creative director's reinterpretations, the timelessness of the brand will be reinforced. For example, the interior of Chanel's jewelry boutique in Place Vendôme represents a modern version of the home Coco Chanel would have lived in today and was inspired by her preserved art deco apartment.

With the influence of the Internet, creative directors now have the responsibility to keep up with the latest technologies and forms of digital communication. Despite the importance of exclusivity to the nature of luxury fashion and due to the increasing prevalence of e-commerce and social media, more consumers, particularly millennials, expect creative directors to reach them from new avenues. While this expectation adds to creative directors' responsibilities, the replacement of traditional runway shows with digital presentations may reduce the strain on creative directors' schedules and budgets. Creative directors are beginning to interact more directly with customers rather than with journalists and retailers; several brands, such as Tom Ford and Burberry, are rebelling against the traditional Fashion Week schedule and introducing season-free collections that are immediately placed in stores after their release. Creative directors are also beginning to revolve their schedules around store openings, such as Valentino, which relocated one of its couture shows from Rome to Paris in celebration of its new boutique there, and Max Mara, which displayed its 2015 resort collection in its recently opened London flagship store.

In summary, the findings of this study show recent examples of creative directors who have successfully managed four components of Kapferer and Bastien's (2012) model. We also addressed issues creative directors face while attempting to balance luxury status with modernization and accessibility. In addition, specific strategies that creative directors have employed in response to the increasingly fast-paced and technology-influenced industry were discussed. The results of this study highlight examples of strategies creative directors use that have proven to be either successful or unsuccessful, providing an extensive guide for creative directors, brand managers, and marketers. Because there is limited scholarly research regarding the role of creative directors of luxury brands, the present study attempts to fill this gap.

Reference

Kapferer, J. N., & Bastien, V. (2012). *The luxury strategy: Break the rules of marketing to build luxury brands*. London, United Kingdom: Kogan Page.