

COLUMNS

The unfamiliar face of women in new luxury

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By **Jasmine Bina**

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Every brand is a conversation. It is worth asking why millennials are willing to have conversations with certain brands over others why some brands feel like they are talking with us while others seem to just be talking at us or, even worse, to themselves.

I loosely defined some of these engaging brands as "new luxury" in a [previous article](#). They are brands that engender such fierce loyalty that millennial consumers are willing to disregard all conventional luxury lifestyle markers such as access, price point and heritage to identify with them. They are, oftentimes, the same sought-after brands that are challenging traditional luxury market share.

New luxury forces a reaction. For me and my female millennial peers in the United States, those reactions are very telling, and I believe they are the clues that lead us to the future of the industry.

What is fascinating is how quickly those reactions and conversations occur, be they love or apathy or resentment at first sight.

It is our adaptive unconscious at work. As Daniel Wagner and, later, author Malcolm Gladwell, have pointed out, our adaptive unconscious processes a massive amount of situational, emotional and intellectual information, dictating how we react in a situation. It is also part of what draws or repels us to a brand that we are newly exposed to, and it all happens in a split-second.

Amidst tremendous choice and fragmentation in the market, you have that single split-second to engage a consumer. Yet what some old luxury brands fail to understand is that millennials are not wandering aimlessly in a jumbled chaos of marketing noise and static.

Instead, we have gotten very good at scanning the landscape and picking up the subtle signals of the brands that are willing to speak to us directly.

That means louder messages do not work, but specific messages do. We do not respond to the loudest signal. We

respond to the signals that resonate with our own wavelength.

There is one particular signal that unpacks the information that U.S. millennial women are unconsciously filtering during the luxury purchase cycle: the identity and portrayal of the female persona.

In my work, I have seen three interesting themes emerge in this regard. Let us decode them.

False power of mystery

The sly minx. The cunning seductress. Keira Knightley **motoring off** in the last possible moment before the *Coco Mademoiselle* film turns into a steamy love scene. This is the woman that always gets away, never quite revealing who she is, dashing in and out of frame but gone before the man can catch her. She is an enigma, and old luxury modalities tell us very clearly that a woman's power lies in her sense of mystery.

This is perhaps one of the greatest fallacies of our time. This particular image of mystery is, in fact, disempowering in its nature. Mystery is confused with independence, but I would argue that they are not synonymous.

One year during winter break in college, I bought a stack of Harlequin novels from the local thrift store and read them back to back in my tiny one-bedroom apartment, avoiding my studies before final exams.

Harlequin novels, for those who are not familiar, are short paperback romance novels, usually published from the 1960s onward, with images of men ravishing women against a dramatic sunset or mountain range backdrop. They are the kind of book a 1970s housewife might have picked up from the register kiosk at the grocery store a predecessor to the wildly popular and salacious mystery novels of the 1980s.

The storyline in these books was typically the same.

A man and a woman somehow come into each other's lives and do not like each other at first. Through some grand misunderstanding, he wrongs her and she is deeply hurt, but she can never directly express herself or her unhappiness. Instead, she remains a riddle to him and their discord grows until some event forces them to confront each other and he suddenly realizes what was in front of him all of the time: a kind woman who could melt his frozen heart.

These novels always made me feel uneasy, but at the time I did not understand why. It was the same fallacy about mystery that pervades luxury marketing today.

Mystery, is in fact, a glorified form of silencing.

Sure, playful mystery may have its role in the very natural act of courtship, but to portray the female figure as one who can never assert her own voice, never speak up and declare who she is or what she wants, is outdated and incompatible with modern audiences. It is understood that sexuality, especially, is to be present but not acknowledged.

Oscar Wilde once said, "Everything in the world is about sex, except sex. Sex is about power."

Mystery in the luxury context might look like independence, but it safely separates the female figure from her true sexual power.

I will add that this image as we see it all around us today is fundamentally no different than a mysterious Elizabeth Taylor vanishing behind closed doors for the ubiquitous White Diamonds ad so many of my millennial peers and I saw growing up as children. An "intriguing" fragrance for its time, and yet an identical theme still being repurposed for all kinds of brands 25 years later.

Empty gestures of irreverence

One might assume that if two-dimensional depictions of mystery no longer ring true, then the opposite might be more appropriate. Perhaps an acknowledgement of the social frameworks and systems that women are tied to would be a step in the right direction.

On paper that makes sense. In reality, it still misses the mark.

Even I, a woman who is keenly aware of those same ill-fitting social institutions, feel dispassionate when I see Natalie Portman being **helicoptered out of her own wedding** for Miss Dior or Lily-Rose Depp **angrily waving a flag** at an ambiguous anarchist cause for Chanel.

I applaud brands such as these that address both the dichotomies that women face and their aptitude for overcoming them, but this is only half the narrative.

Old luxury brands push the agenda that the female persona is the same as it has been for generations, only now with more angst and irreverence. That leaves a great opportunity untouched.

When Margaret Qualley **surges through hallways with kinetic dance** for Kenzo World, we see something new happening. Whatever angst or irreverence drives her out of the ballroom is quickly channeled into a very raw, very sincere stream of personal self-expression.

She is at the same time both strong and vulnerable, both feminine and masculine, both creative and destructive. It is not about the struggle, it is about the thrill of self-expression, which is the ultimate definition of style for millennials.

What makes this reflection of the female form captivating while others fail to engage is that it goes beyond the external forces that define women today.

Instead, it celebrates what belies the struggle in the first place: a woman's fluid, never-ending identity. This is not even necessarily an **original** motif, as W magazine's Kyle Munzenrieder has **pointed out**. Just the right one at the right time for the right audience.

Not every brand needs to tell that same story, but every brand, luxury or non-luxury, does need to focus on an outcome-based narrative. Who is Lily-Rose protesting? Where is Natalie's helicopter taking her to? What exactly is the outcome of these narratives, and why are they being told in the first place? We understand the struggle, but without the vision, these stories can feel limiting and detached.

This is something that premium brands have an easier time getting right.

Without the same pressure to appeal so far outside of their core audience and with no old luxury notions to resist, brands such as Supreme and Shinola create brotherhoods and sisterhoods around larger beliefs. Beliefs and personas that people can easily self-identify with because they dare to be specific and elicit honest emotion.

When love is no longer enough

Love and luxury are the archetype of classical pairings. Love itself is a luxurious experience, and to partake in luxury is to venerate the act of love in all its forms. But love, just like everything else, is changing.

A **recent study** led by psychologist Eli J. Finkel points out how marriage in the U.S. has drastically evolved over the past few decades.

The purpose of marriage has shifted from helping people meet basic economic and communal needs in the late 1700s to 1850s, to helping meet needs of intimacy, passion and general stereotypes of love through 1965, to today, where successful marriages are now borne of autonomy, personal growth and a couple's ability to help each other realize their individual potential.

That is a very meaningful shift that we, as a population, have failed to articulate for ourselves.

We still measure our relationships by midcentury metrics of love, when it seems that as a whole, millennials have moved up to a new level of emotional need in their partnerships.

When we use old markers to measure new needs, we will always be left wanting.

I think it is safe to say that as a general public, we hold steadfastly to the belief that love is what makes a good marriage work. We believe love is the ultimate goal, and while it may be fundamentally important, we have silently and unknowingly outgrown it as our utmost truth.

The study calls this new horizon the "Suffocation Model." Just as when climbing a mountain, the air gets thinner and the challenge becomes harder, but the reward is greater than it was ever before. Modern relationships that sit at the top of this mountain are significantly more rewarding than those in the generations before them.

As logical as it is, it can be hard to accept, and not without good reason. "This emphasis on growth through marriage was rare throughout American history, but it is a defining feature of today's self-expressive era. Building a marriage that facilitates both partners' growth is difficult, but the payoffs are immense."

Of all the themes I have mentioned, I believe this is the most difficult for any brand to internalize and portray. When so many of us are not even aware of what love means anymore, how can a brand attempt to redefine it?

This is one of the greatest branding opportunities I see in the landscape, and the future of luxury may very well be shaped by it.

Life limiting art

The female identity in luxury has torn open into something much bigger and much more varied than we have seen before. Women occupy more spaces, move more comfortably between those spaces, and are edging into new territories still.

But as we all know, American women remain uneasy in their roles. Many fail to find socially acceptable balance on the razor's edge between stereotypes of overbearing executive or pushover boss, Stepford wife or harried working mom, playful tease or unwanted prude.

"A brand is an extension of one's self: psychologically, in terms of how you want the world to see you, or what you want the world to believe you are," **said brand psychology author Jonathan Gabay**. "But deeper than that: what you believe you are, through that brand."

FOR MILLENNIAL women, images of the struggle are no longer enough. We need a narrative that will make those polarities irrelevant, and luxury has a chance to define what that new ideal looks like.

After all, this is an industry that understands people's deepest desires and makes them a reality right now. It only seems fitting that luxury should lead the charge.

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1 thought on "The unfamiliar face of women in new luxury"

1. Eva Meijer says:

January 24, 2017 at 1:37 am

Great insights, Jasmine!

Agree that many of today's big luxury brands still seem to be circling around ideas that were more attractive in the past.

Although it's not easy to capture these new concepts of luxury you refer to (it's all still very young and evolving as we speak), it will be interesting to see how they will develop and if they can keep their narrative – and products – relevant.

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