

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

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Brands are becoming metaphors for value systems

By A LUXURY DAILY COLUMNIST

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Individuals have long deployed fashion and luxury brands as a way of expressing their identity.

Owning items of luxury is associated with ideas of being wealthy or successful, suggesting a personal sense of significance.

Sporting the latest trendy brands is a way of signaling to others and oneself of being cool.

But there are further nuances brands are adopted by certain social groups as a form of codification.

Dress down or up

There is the uniform. Whether it be the shoe you chose the Balenciaga Triple S or an ethical Veja trainer, the jewelry you wear do you show your good taste via a Cartier Love bracelet, or your edge with Y/Project embellished ball earrings signature items signal to those around you for what you stand.

Brands, and which products from which range and what stage in the seasonal cycle you adopt them, are used to make a declaration of oneself to others.

Social media now serves as an amplification tool to broadcast a personal statement.

Accordingly, the value we put on the brands we use as extensions of ourselves becomes more important because it is so much more visible than it used to be.

The re-emergence of heavily branded fashion from Balenciaga to Off-White is a byproduct of this.

What these products represent has suppressed the saturated conversation around experiences.

Now we see a focus on how brands deliver a meaning in the products they present to the customer.

The search for purpose has underpinned movement up Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs for society as a whole.

Perhaps due to the proliferation of the more progressive affluent, stemming from the fusion of tech money and entertainment, or maybe due to the sense of civic duty people have in a shockingly polarized geo-political world, this

desire for deeper meaning is emerging.

Brands are becoming metaphors for value systems.

Shop value

In the past, luxury brands had a system of communication based on three pillars. First, the brand's history, including the storied past of their founders. Next, the brand's craftsmanship.

Finally, the brand's arts/cultural alignment.

These were signs of pedigree.

However, there has been a fundamental change with consumers now buying into brands that are synonymous with the value system they want to communicate.

It could be an appreciation of the modern artisan think Loewe. Or a sensitivity that is inherent to Bottega Veneta. Maybe it is the practicality and capability of Rimowa. A signifier of the sophisticated alternative, Comme des Garçons. Or perhaps it is just about being portrayed as cutting edge such as ALYX.

Branded products become the building blocks of how people see someone and how they see themselves.

In the age of the designer as rockstar, the meaning of brands has become fluid.

Phoebe Philo's "Celine Woman" was altogether different to the woman who buys from Hedi Slimane's Celine collections.

Who cared about Balmain before Olivier Rousteing stepped foot in its atelier?

So, are you buying into the legacy of the brand or the story of the designer? This is the fashion industry's de facto form of innovation.

Fashion and luxury brands have a purpose: they represent ideas and this has always been the case.

However, the values of the modern fashion and luxury consumer particularly millennials are fundamentally different from other cohorts. They are a conscious generation, who think about who they are and want to be, and this political ideology is displayed in how they present themselves.

Brands enable them to tell their personal stories to themselves more than anyone else.

The feeling they get from buying, and the satisfaction they feel in joining "the club" the brand club of the group they want to affiliate with, drives their desire to purchase.

Brands are not just products with a certain design, made a certain way, with a certain logo. They are ideas to be enacted through a series of brand moves and experiences.

The brand's retail store becomes its embassy. Those brands that get this combination right are the winners.

More color

Gucci has come to stand for daring, fun, sexiness, chic excitement. It creates visible worlds around its products in the form of disruptive fashion shows, lush advertising campaigns and content-centric creative platforms.

Equally, Gucci is a brand with a consciousness. Its global campaign, Chime for Change "to convene, unite, and strengthen the voices speaking out for gender equality" was launched in 2013, long before the #MeToo movement took hold.

Gucci has visibly supported causes that matter to a broad cross-section of customers. This combination of simple-but-branded garments, a politically minded global activation, and an arresting visual output has won Gucci not only a wealth of new business, but also the admiration of a raft of other brands trying to follow in its wake.

At Off-White, the discussion that it produces is less about the clothes and more centered around the ideas of its creative director and founder, Virgil Abloh, who is also a designer for Louis Vuitton. His ubiquity as a designer, artist, DJ and creative collaborator has cut across the population.

If you have no interest in fashion, but inhabit the art world then that is okay Mr. Abloh has a show at the Gagosian Gallery.

Do you prefer Fabric for a night out or are you a member of Annabel's, the exclusive London club? Mr. Abloh's DJing at both.

What Mr. Abloh's brand says about his consumers is that they are comfortable in any situation. The product is largely simple but heavily branded. There is no subtlety in wearing it.

AS A BRAND leader, the focus should be not just on product, but how you express your brand and how you create a deep and meaningful relationship with your customers.

Brands will need to think deeply about who they are in contemporary culture and their codes will need to be interpreted for the new generation of fashion and luxury consumers.

This begins with a review and understanding of the brand's stance - its brand pillars today and for the foreseeable future, and how they cascade into an integrated brand communication system.

This means everything the brand does, every touch point, beginning with retail interactions, the Web site experience, campaigns, content programs and the like, will have to be examined. So too, perhaps pivotally, how to create a culture around your brand.

Never before has it been a more exciting or meaningful time for fashion and luxury brands.

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