

Constructions of Luxury in Digital Visual Culture

Brands, Social Identities, and the Plurality of Uniqueness

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Articles

Introduction

Luxury is a contextual notion that evades a single definition and is generally connected to the socio-historical and socio-cultural discourses in which it develops (Ko et al.). As such, what is considered as luxury can be a very subjective experience, and emerges as a “consumer- and culture-dependent construct” (Turunen, 105). The twentieth century witnessed an incredible revolution, as far as the idea of luxury was concerned. While luxury had historically been the domain of the wealthy, consumer capitalist imperatives created stratified and democratised notions of luxury, with different types of corresponding products created to meet the needs of different consumers; this made luxury ‘accessible’ for all (Chevalier and Mazzalovo). In the twenty-first century, luxury has also been undergoing a process of digital re-definition, in terms not only of how to own it, but also of what it means to own it for identity and display (Tungate). In our contemporary landscape, luxury has evolved into a multi-faceted concept, which moulds and adapts to circumstance and experience: it is built upon intersecting notions of innovation and tradition, accessibility and excess, individuality and collectivity, authenticity and artificiality.

As the perception of luxury, especially in a media context, relies on a multisensory experience, the contemporary marketing of luxury goods often employs design elements that “boost perceived luxuriousness” (Turunen, 105). In order to achieve this, simplicity and pleasurable aesthetics are commonly merged with extravagance and over-the-top iconography. As Calefato suggests, “luxury is an aesthetic, economic and cultural model” that seeks to “explain and justify degrees of possession, forms of consumption, and features of taste” (12). Contemporary notions of luxury, whether connected to cars, clothes, accessories, food, or other goods—including holiday experiences—pursue spheres of exceptionality, opulence, and uniqueness, as well as more immaterial socio-cultural ideas of well-being and ‘satisfaction’. The construction of a luxury brand relies first and foremost on the “perception that consumers hold of brands” in general (Romaniuk and Huang, 547). Storytelling is a very important part of constructing luxury brands (Atkinson and Kang). A ‘brand story’ is often an artificial construction of suggested experiences and multiple multisensorial codes—visual and beyond—that are assimilated by consumers as being the foundations of luxury.

In the twenty-first century, luxury has become intrinsically more connected to notions of display that are inseparable from online platforms and social media in particular. Therefore, there exists a need to reinvestigate the idea of luxury and its dissemination in today's digital world. Taking this notion as a point of departure, this article provides a preliminary exploration of the construction of luxury in visual culture—with a focus on social media platforms such as Instagram—as connected to culturally informed projections of desirability and aspirational value. This inevitably raises questions over the artificial nature of curated online personas via practices of visual and digital storytelling, especially as projected ideas of luxuriousness become the focus of attention.

Visual Culture and the Realms of Luxury

As the term openly suggests, 'visual culture' refers to specific examples of our cultural expression that rely on images as a means of communication (Dikovitskaya). Visual culture is a very broad term that encompasses forms of narrative and expression that touch on different aspects of life. The most prominent exponents of the visual culture umbrella have historically been art, fashion, photography, film, television, comics, and advertising. More recently, examples such as video games and social media have also joined the visual culture family, and aided the development of what has become known as 'digital visual culture': an area drawing attention to the intersection of digital media, technology, and the visual arts (Bentowska-Kafel and Gardiner; Knochel).

Although visual culture emphasises images, it is also important to recognise the interplay between images and words—the latter also known as 'copy'—as a foundational way to communicate meaning and ideas. This is particularly evident in examples of visual culture such as advertising, where the play between words and image is often essential for rendering the message. Within this, one can see how the representation and communication of luxury is profoundly entangled with the broader aspects of visual culture (Armitage; Sikarskie). The 'meaning' of images is not universal; while many may recognise what something is just by looking at it, its 'meaning'—what it represents, what it stands for, and how it will 'speak' to 'people'—will change according to context and situation (Howells and Negreiros). Decoding the meaning of visual images will be dependent on a number of evolving factors, including gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, historical and geopolitical context

The contextual nature of visual images already creates a clear conceptual affinity with the idea of luxury, which is dependent on perceptions, projection, and cultural construction. The terms 'visual' and 'luxury' are profoundly entangled, and operate in similar and interconnected ways. The very concept of luxury is dependent on representations of value and experience that change historically, culturally, socially, and economically. Discussing the decoding of luxury images, Armitage suggests that

meaning is relative to and dependent upon structures of the visual connected with forms of cultural life, such as making a painting or the indulgence of eyeing a Cartier watch Visual terms and discourses are never unbiased but are bound to cultural systems of understanding, practices and routines. (7)

The great majority of luxury brands rely on particular aesthetic representations and significant visual images that communicate the experience, value, and importance of the item in question. The interpretation that is necessary for any visual product is also at the core of our understanding of luxury. As such, both are negotiable, contestable, evaluative, and subject to fellow agreement. "The powerful meanings of luxury", as Armitage puts it, are based on the significant impact of the visual:

not only is visual culture significant for the comprehension and direction of luxury", but our conceptions of the visual are caught up and inherent in today's luxury discourses and

Therefore, to consider luxury is to interpret its visual narratives. Those narratives are inevitably entangled with culture and lifestyle.

The construction of luxury is based on both 'real' and 'imaginary' attributes and ideas that are promoted to potential consumers in many ways. The interaction between 'real' and 'imaginary' luxury—and the emergence of the two, as the final 'product'—is what is known as the three "realms of luxury" (Roberts and Armitage, 1). The 'first realm' of luxury refers to the tangible object or place that exists in the world: what the item of luxury is, where it is located, where it is sold, and so forth. The 'second realm' of luxury refers to all the imaginary connections and evocations that are rendered in order to conceptualise the experience of luxury—feelings, aspirations, daydreaming, and associations with ideas of worth and value (Roberts and Armitage). Finally, the 'third realm' of luxury refers to the interaction of the first two, so that luxury itself—or the conception thereof, in context—is a mixture of both 'real' and 'imaginary' characteristics; that is, in simple terms, the 'full package' of how the luxury item works, both materially and immaterially (Roberts and Armitage). The third realm of luxury is connected to ideas of authenticity, which are often tacitly communicated through specific socio-culturally inscribed codes. Luxury in the third realm exists through the construction of images and narratives that can be sold as both desirable and achievable, and offers brands "the opportunity to leverage consumers' imaginations to extend the demand for luxury goods and services" (Roberts and Armitage, 2).

At the heart of capturing the third realm of luxury, and therefore of harnessing the imagination of the potential consumer, lies visual culture: all the strategies of image and meaning representations that populate our cultural everyday. The third realm of luxury is commodified according to different 'types' of luxury consumers, including different socio-economic possibilities and backgrounds (Roberts and Armitage). The third realm of luxury is the realm of narrative, where luxury businesses and brands construct the desire to own and experience for the consumers, by blending real objects with imaginary spaces (Brody). The third realm is, arguably, more than anything else, the realm of advertising and marketing. Every time luxury is represented and rendered, it brings with it artificially-coded constructions of objects and experiences and inevitably creates 'categories' of people (Wang et al.). As notions of luxury are intrinsically connected to identity, by representing luxury we are also representing how people see themselves, and how they want to be seen by others.

Digital Luxuries and Fashioning the Self

The relationship between luxury items and luxury consumers in our contemporary twenty-first century context must be understood as being an interplay not only of product and quality, but also of identity-building and methods of proliferation, including the uses of digital technologies. It is important to bear in mind that, as Kluge contends, the marketing of luxury goods is potentially built on a paradox: "the more desirable the brand becomes, the more it sells, but the more it sells, the less desirable it becomes" (Kluge, 1). The preoccupation between sales growth and exclusiveness is mirrored in the ongoing debates on whether the Internet is a suitable medium for the sales and proliferation of luxury goods. On the surface, "a luxury brand's fragile concept of exclusiveness is seemingly incompatible with the ubiquitous accessibility provided by the mass medium internet" (Kluge, 2). This worry is often known as the "Internet dilemma" of luxury brands and goods. That superficial notion, however, is not met with the outcomes of practice. There is ample evidence to say that the Internet—and the various platforms it affords—has become "imperative to luxury marketers" (Kluge, 2). In terms of actual buying, Websites have become a primary source of purchases for luxury goods. In the twenty-first century, where 'quickness', accessibility, choice—and a general cultural dislike for in-person interaction—have emerged as significant factors, the Website allows luxury goods shoppers to make their purchases in the most efficient of ways. As Kluge puts

it: "to the affluent clientele", the opportunity to shop online has become "the second most important feature of a luxury brand website", with the most important feature being "product browsing" (2).

While accessibility and greater (often global) reach are definitely significant advantages of online platforms and technologies, the digital context still creates a unique set of constraints for the development of luxury experiences. An obvious facet is the disappearance of the physical aspect of the luxury shop location, where the tangible experience of luxury goods (feel, smell, etc.) is inevitably removed from the buying process (Khan et al.). The material aspects of an object—which often define the luxuriousness value of products—highly contribute to the luxury brand being perceived as more authentic (Goldstein and Carpenter). Therefore, the intangible and physically elusive nature of digital interfaces bestows upon the online luxury buying experience a distinct level of artificiality. If the experience of physical 'craftsmanship' is part of how the luxury brands sells, then the digital frameworks may appear far removed from it (Lin and Ku). Nonetheless, while digital luxury experiences are obviously different from their more traditional, offline counterparts, they still rely on their own constructed notions to communicate the idea of exclusivity (Hennings and Wiedmann). The digital context primarily depends on the exploitation of pleasurable images, and the employment of active storytelling around the luxury goods: both from the brand itself and from those who have already purchased it, if one considers the context of social media in particular. The platforms that present luxury goods (from Websites to social media) must provide high production values—high-quality images, striking colours, clear definition, and so forth—as this is an expectation of the association with luxury. Phrases like "luxury webosphere" have been coined to refer to specifically constructed digital contexts that facilitate the buying process for luxury goods (Batat, 4).

Indeed, the social media context is particularly privileged as the ideal space for the continuous sharing and evocation of luxury images. As Batat argues, "because social media increase the visibility of perceived luxurious images", the luxury experiences derived from online services have highlighted even more greatly "the role of luxury products in conspicuous consumption" (xiv). Conspicuous consumption refers to the acquisition of goods and services for the specific purpose of displaying one's wealth and/or shaping one's social status. The employment of digital technologies has entailed a 'digital transformation' for luxury brands in the twenty-first century, where the experience of pleasurable images—and the ability to 'share' them—lies at the centre of the luxury experience itself. A notable shift has taken place, where luxury brands have capitalised on different sectors of online spaces, with different tastes and financial abilities in mind, to cater to different consumers at the same time (Elgeballi and Zaazou). New strategies, with different uses of digital assets—from Websites to social media platforms—have had to be developed to meet the needs of a changing market. As von Wachenfeld suggests, the luxury market has truly been "mediatized in both its production and consumption", from fashion shows to the retailing of particular items, through "digital practices of the fashioning of the self" (100).

While there are many ways in which luxury has capitalised on a variety of online media, including the presence of visually stunning Websites, social media platforms arguably provide the most evocative visual representation of luxury (Bonilla-Quijada et al.). As such, social media are also a fruitful conduit for the third realm of luxury. Indeed, social media are the ideal advertising and marketing venue for luxury, both overtly (as in actual adverts) and covertly (through the sharing of users' experiences). Social media platforms such as Instagram, in particular, provide a particular view on 'digital luxuries' and their sitting in the third realm. Social media highlight the importance of 'pleasurable images' in constructing ideas of luxury, both real and imagined, and connected to evocations of both material and immaterial aspects. As Roberts and Armitage put it,

digital luxury involves an imaginary element of relevance, ... [which exposes] how the interaction between real places of luxury such as retail stores can promote imaginary luxury, and how imaginary luxury, including that simulated by digital technologies, influences the real places of luxury. (2)

The example of Instagram is especially useful here, as although this platform arguably relies on images in the form of both stills and reels it also draws strength from the narrative that accompanies them to personalise objects and experiences in a perceived tangible way.

Recently, digital media have been at the centre of re-imaginings and re-constructions not only of what luxury 'is', but also of how it is marketed at different moments in time (Kumar). Like other social media platforms, Instagram has enabled its users to document their personal stories using words, images, and short videos. Storytelling is a very important part of luxury narratives, based as they are on experience and 'feelings'. As Stokes and Price contend, "social media is used to construct identity through visual branding, wherein individuals utilise imagery designed to attract followers and maintain careful curation of an online persona" (159). Platforms such as Instagram can also successfully function as additional user-run marketing venues for luxury brands. Sharing pictures of perceived luxury goods, with the appropriate hashtags used, enhances the appeal of luxury brands to the broader market. This is a form of 'free marketing' and 'free advertising' which is based in storytelling and experience from 'actual' customers. The practice of 'self-building' lies at the heart of this online luxury marketing success. Here, "brand exposure in social media" has become "an interesting marketing space" for the luxury industry (von Wachenfeldt, 99). The enhancement of luxury goods online is particularly visible through the interactions of luxury brands with so-called 'influencers' and 'self-styled fashionistas' (Jin and Ryu). These individuals—often counting a large number of 'followers'—are instrumental to the construction of luxury value via storytelling, especially for younger demographics.

A considerable innovation in approaches to luxury, and how marketing and brands of luxury goods are conducted in social media and online cultures, has been the recognition that consumers value tacit notions of plurality in an effort to gain a sense of personal uniqueness. That is to say that, while luxury may be targeting 'the masses', in certain ways, it still needs to offer flexibility of identification and choice (Xi et al.; Debenedetti et al.). This often creates a tension between notions of autonomy and conformity: feeling unique, while also wanting to fit in, through co-existing ideas of prestige and membership (Pourazad et al.). Online users channel the idea of choice in order to "display independence" and "a distinction from the social prescription" (Song, Lee, and Kim, 102). This is, culturally and anthropologically speaking, part of how human beings have developed as part of communities. The plurality of the online consumer group must be reflected in the multifaceted ways in which luxury is represented, marketed, and sold. As Song, Lee, and Kim put it, when using social media "individuals want to present themselves in a favourable perspective and project to others their image implicitly or explicitly" (102). The possession and display of luxury goods is particularly effective for this process, by accentuating how the individual can "control the reflected impression" (Song, Lee, and Kim, 102).

The celebrity discourse of luxury is also very clearly established on social media. Celebrities commonly share pictures of the interiors of their homes, their cars, their clothes and jewellery, and their holidays, often in connection to specific brands (Cuomo et al.). The practices of both celebrities and influencers draw attention to the relationships between brands and intersecting notions of uniqueness, plurality, and aspirational value (Stokes and Price). Luxury is at the centre of the narrative, acting as an identifying quality for both differences and aspirations. This engagement with visual storytelling inevitably brings to the surface preoccupations with artificiality that are perhaps intrinsic to the curation of visual images and personas on social media. Celebrity and influencer narratives on social media are often constructed on "lush visuals" (Armitage, 177), where luxury ranges from expensive and fashionable commodities to relaxation, 'cosiness', and the feeling of home. Social media platforms allow for individuals to become a "luxury authority" (Armitage, 177), often working tacitly with luxury experiences and brands.

Even though the context is different from traditional luxury narratives, online platforms still construct the idea of luxury based on perceived notions of uniqueness and distinction (in terms of

fame, lifestyle, vanity, and so on). The posting and sharing of 'luxury images' online goes beyond accessories such as clothes and shoes, of course, and extends to tourism and dining experiences (Michael and Fusté-Forné). Luxury food images, in particular, are connected to the building of self and identities, reliant as they are on perceived matters of taste (Lupton). Luxury food images can be broadly categorised "according to experiential (hedonism, altruism and passion collecting) and symbolic (social status, uniqueness, self-esteem and self-presentation) benefits" (Atwal et al., 454). For instance, on Instagram, hashtags such as 'foodporn' and 'luxury food' continue to garner a great number of followers and shares. While the food in question may not traditionally be perceived as 'luxury', what is luxurious is the experience of one's pleasure, and the beauty of the image shared (Atwal et al.). And naturally, traditional notions of 'luxury food'—especially from high-profile restaurants—still also apply when relevant to the context of the experience in question. The desire to share not only food experiences, but luxury food experiences in particular, draws attention to cycles of consumer behaviour that are driven by a mixture of "self-importance, ordinary conversation, and extraordinary amplification" (Atwal et al., 455). This amalgamation of accessibility and exclusivity is at the heart of the online luxury experience, and pivotal to the construction of social identities as connected to luxury goods.

Concluding Remarks

Although the notion of luxury is a continually changing idea, there is certainly no doubting the fact that, in our contemporary era, luxury brands rely on specific socio-cultural and contextual constructions to establish their appeal. And while the concept of luxury may indeed have been historically characterised by elusiveness and exclusiveness, in the twenty-first century it has shifted from a singular elitist phenomenon to a framework of pluralistic individuality as part of visual culture storytelling. This has been predominantly driven by technological developments, particularly social media, and the rising level of consumer empowerment in the marketplace (Creevey et al.). In view of this, different strategies have been used to convey the luxury buying experience online, drawing strength from the media that the digital platform provides, both in terms of browsing and purchasing (Athwal et al.). This article has explored how, although there is an undeniable materiality to the idea of luxury, there is also a socio-cultural and socio-economic pull that relies on both popular and unpopular notions of desirability, individuality, and, broadly speaking, our sense of self (Kapferer and Bastien, p. 1). Luxury brands rely on artificially constructed ideas of both membership and exclusivity, which inevitably highlight the consumers of luxury brands as belonging to a particularly stratified sector, where ubiquitous and co-existing notions of uniqueness and plurality drive the sharing choices of consumers (Godey et al.). The shared ideologies that are intrinsic to social media have allowed both a representational and a marketing shift to take place. Here, luxury brands, luxury objects, and luxury experiences are perceived as part of visual storytelling practices that are not only entangled with the performance of identity, but that have also become highly democratised in the digital space.

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