CHAPTER 11

Step by Step Application of the Framework

Abstract Having studied several examples, historic and contemporary, of luxury fashion brands that have isolated specific elements in the cultural landscape and introduced them into innovative design that changed the course of fashion history, it is time to review the steps one can follow in applying the Transmedia Fashion Production framework to enrich the creative work in a luxury fashion brand. This reinforces the idea that luxury brands are as much culture producers as they are culture supporters. The latter has been the only aspect that has been discussed in the academic literature prior to the current study. Additional details reveal that culture-based creative strategy results in highly desirable content, which, in turn, yields unwavering consumption.

Keywords Luxury fashion · Luxury brands · Culture production · Culture consumption · Creative innovation

Cultural Intelligence for Luxury Fashion Brands: Culture Comes First

The January 2020 report on high-end cultural and creative sectors by Bain & Co. outlined an entire section on the social and cultural contributions of luxury brands to the European economies. The analysts defined three areas in which luxury brands are fundamental to driving prosperity to several European economic centers, “production clusters and
city ecosystems.”¹ These are: the development, preservation, and innovation of talent; investments in cultural patronage initiatives; and promotion of European values and lifestyle throughout the globe. These are indeed areas in which all luxury fashion brands invest heavily. They perceive their own heritage as deeply entwined with that of the surrounding culture (in their respective geographic region), the greater ecosystem, which is directly linked to questions about social consciousness and sustainability, and the human capital associated with it.² Investing in partnerships with local organizations and governments ensures everyone’s wellbeing, including the brand’s own. Finally, the analysts correctly note, even though not in these exact words, luxury brands are producers of material culture whose footprint encompasses almost the entire world. “While promoting their own brands and products worldwide,” the report maintains, “European high-end and luxury brands inevitably display, celebrate and elevate the values, culture and lifestyle of their own home countries, reaching beyond their direct target customer.”³ The content and communications luxury brands produce is exactly what we defined as material culture in Chapter 5. While this report’s focus is European brands, the same reach is feasible in the context of brands other than European (i.e., American, Asian, African, Australian, etc.).⁴

Therefore, as a typical treatment of the relationship between luxury brands and culture, this report limits our understanding of this relationship to a one-sided view of it. It only takes into account a nation’s official culture, the type of culture that has already made it into a museum, cultural institution, or list of national monuments. Equally limiting, and typical of several reports on luxury brands and their performance, is the authors’ attempt to define a luxury brand’s aura. This refers, the reader is informed, to the “combination of perceived cultural and creative authenticity, exclusivity, and emotional content associated with the brand, heritage and quality of high-end and luxury products and services.”⁵ Yet, “creative authenticity” is left unexplained for the rest of the report.

Our discussion evolved on the premise that culture is an everchanging setting that is dynamically shaped by people’s actions, which are the outcome of creative and analytical thought, and extends beyond the built environment. In free societies, culture constantly expands. It results in manifestations perceived by the head, heart, and body. This, along with the augmented methodology of material culture, namely first and second stage analysis, intellectual analysis and transmedia consumption/production models, enabled a solid definition of creativity as
the activation of several types of intelligence (verbal-linguistic; logical-mathematical; visual-spatial; musical; bodily kinesthetic; interpersonal; intrapersonal) across time, through a transmedia processing of noticeable information inputs that correspond to fourteen separate domains of human life.

To illustrate how this works from a designer’s perspective, the discussion included an in-depth analysis of the creative differentiation of the luxury fashion houses of Charles James, Yeohlee, Rodarte, Schiaparelli, Prada, and Gucci. The consistency with which the designers searched for cultural signals through identifiable nodes on the transmedia consumption model elucidated the idea of creative authenticity. In other words, creative authenticity is the result of consistency, constancy, and authority all of which are maintained by the designer’s ability to translate new cultural inputs within the limits of the brand’s own codes.

The examples of two additional luxury fashion brands, Hermès and Chanel, enriched the discussion by showcasing how certain brands have managed to make the leap from depending on the designer’s cultural interpretation and individual creativity to setting up enhanced in-house processes that enable new creative expressions that incorporate signals from external culture as well as protocols developed internally over the years.

Any luxury brand can replicate what Hermès and Chanel have already set in place by following a few steps that have been outlined below (Step 1–4). These chart the process of applying the proposed frameworks in broad strokes, considering that the details and depth for each brand vary depending on its specific conditions.

**Step 1**

Therefore to consciously develop a refined creative strategy a brand should test how well it has responded to its cultural environment. Depending on how long the brand has been into existence this task can be long and cumbersome. It would be helpful to look back at regular intervals. For example, a brand that has existed for thirty years can be dissected five years at a time while one that has existed for a hundred years can be dissected in increments of ten years at a time. It all depends on the type and volume of material culture produced by the brand in the course of its existence.
Information should be collected about specific products that were launched at specific dates and matched with the corresponding financial performance, if possible.

If there has been only one designer, details about this person should be gathered. What were some other works that were completed for other brands? What was his/her design philosophy? Who were the peers that influenced him/her the most? How was the designer responding to his/her cultural environment? The transmedia consumption model will help organize the information around the various nodes. If there had been several designers, the same process must be repeated for each one of them. If the brand has already been operating with a system that supports collective creativity rather than relying on an individual designer, then the brand transmedia model should be used to organize the information around the various nodes.

**Step 2**

The information collected consists of fragments of material culture, product details (materials, techniques, traits, etc.), communications features, and groups or environments associated with the product. The challenge is not so much collecting the information that exists within the brand but rather connecting this to the broader contemporaneous environment while also making the links between aspects of the brand and general aspects of the external material culture that shaped the product (or brand communications or environments). For this stage of the assessment, the intellectual analysis framework will incite new lines of thought. This task may vary in difficulty from brand to brand depending on how well outlined the creative department is within each brand. It also requires a person or team who are familiar with the types of material culture that have been defined on the various nodes of the transmedia model. In other words, if the brand has been prolific and several nodes have been activated in the process, area experts may be required to be part of the analysis team (i.e., a scientist, visual arts expert, cultural anthropologist, brand historian, fashion studies scholar, etc.).

**Step 3**

The goal is to systematically go through this type of qualitative and quantitative information and, once this is organized on the transmedia
model, to match it with the financial results that each one of these products achieved within a specific competitive environment. What is likely to happen is that brand executives will realize that products that performed particularly well were the ones responding to larger cultural changes that the creative direction of the brand had the foresight to anticipate through the product’s design.

**Step 4**

A number of similar instances will help brand executives define a brand-specific luxury code that can be applied to future product collections. The question that follows is whether the brand’s creative team is able to tap into the external cultural environment to pick up signals that refer to oncoming change as opposed to signals that refer to current (or even worse) past change. Simply put, even a well-defined brand-specific luxury code that speaks to the creative authenticity of the brand will not bring about innovation by itself. It needs to be infused with cultural intelligence that describes the tiniest bits of future in the now.

To sum up, in this work, it is maintained that luxury fashion brands that remain popular and profitable are those whose creative strategy is directly based on cultural intelligence which the brands’ creative teams transform into product design elements. Ultimately, these change consumer behavior. The wearability of Yeohlee’s garments across seasons and time zones, for example, is what gave her clients the confidence to defy existing norms on professional dressing and experiment with items that could carry them through a variety of activities and social networks. Needless to say, athleisure has gained a great following precisely because consumers had long wished for this versatile and comfortable type of dressing. Athleisure is not necessarily sustainable however, which is why Yeohlee and her zero waste methodology is still way ahead of how the rest of the fashion industry operates.

**Culture-Based Creative Strategy Results in Highly Desirable Content**

The success that Karl Lagerfeld achieved for Chanel ignited curiosity in people, who, over the years, have wished to learn more about how this highly skilled, exceptionally imaginative, and hard-working designer came up with the ideas that catapulted the house of Chanel to global success.
and soaring profits. To listen to his interviews online or read others in print leave the researcher with an absolute certainty. Lagerfeld was extremely curious about how people think and behave. He satisfied his curiosity through a voracious appetite for reading, so much so that he launched his own imprint, LSD (that stands for Lagerfeld Steidl Druckerei) in collaboration with legendary German publishing house STEIDL. He opened his own bookstore, 7L, on the left bank of Paris, a passion project and opportunity to bring together other creatives who have a similar love for the printed word. He also loved observing the world in search of beauty and did so through his camera’s lens. This is not to say that he had not been a controversial figure. A man of strong opinions, Lagerfeld often expressed his judgments of people or situations without thinking about the consequences. But in the context of our discussion this is irrelevant. The idea that remains pertinent to our analysis is that a designer is not a genius who works in isolation trying to come up with imaginative forms. On the contrary, the more tapped in the world around them, the more successful in observing culture and in bringing to the surface, through their designs, that which describes people’s inner desire and that which would otherwise remain hidden.

The numbers that support Chanel’s financial success were revealed for the first time in 2018, after 108 years of secrecy. “We realized it was time to put the facts on the table as to exactly who we are: a $10 billion company with very strong financials, plus all the means and ammunition at our disposal to remain independent,” Philippe Blondiaux, Chanel’s chief financial officer, reported to The New York Times for an article that was published in June of 2018. “We recognize that we are often a subject of much speculation and that people don’t have facts to hand, leading to the circulation of false or misleading information. It was time to let the strength of our balance sheet speak for itself.”

At the time this article was published, Gucci, which had already entered its renaissance under Michele’s creative helm, had noted $6.2 billion euros in sales. While LVMH, parent company of Louis Vuitton, a brand that has continuously gained favor with accessible and aspirational luxury consumers, does not report sales by brand, analysts believe that Louis Vuitton’s sales are somewhere between $8 and $10 billion euros. These numbers bring some scale into the picture when trying to visualize Chanel’s footprint in the world of luxury fashion brands. What we retain is that Chanel is the only luxury fashion brand that manages something that seems impossible, namely, to remain at the pinnacle of luxury. Chanel
has rendered the ephemeral of fashion into the everlasting of luxury via a creative strategy that seems to break through today’s norms the way Coco had wanted her brand to appear irreverent at the beginning of the twentieth century. Additionally, Chanel follows the Luxury Business Model as defined in Fig. 10.3.

Hermès, the second example to support this chapter’s thesis, has been at the forefront of creativity since Jean-Louis Dumas became the Chairman of the Hermès group and the Artistic Director in the late 1970s. His son, Pierre-Alexis, as well as several commentators have noted that Jean-Louis was a person who was gifted both as a creative and an analytical business thinker. The combination of the two reminds us of Sternberg’s definition of holistic intelligence (Chapter 7), a mix of analytical, emotional, and cultural intelligence that is critical for a luxury brand’s long-term success. “The paradox of a luxury brand is that it needs to engender a strong emotional link with its customers, while at the same time being managed as a very complex business,” Michel Gutsatz maintains in his research that offers a thorough examination of successful luxury brands and their management teams.10

Fifteen years have already passed since Pierre-Alexis was appointed Artistic Director at Hermès, a role that has allowed him to reflect on how he can maintain the essence of what the brand has stood for since its inception. It has also inspired him to help it evolve. While his own academic training at Brown University was in visual arts, Pierre-Alexis learned about the fashion business first by working in textile design for other brands and later in managing Hermès branches overseas. Today, he is in charge of augmenting the creative vision Hermès offers to its customers by adding several lifestyle extensions, all of which are based in traditional crafts. In his words, he is building the “superior idea of the house of Hermès.”11 Two ideas are constant and prominent in the interviews Pierre-Alexis has given over the years. The first is that he considers carefully the talent he appoints in the various creative teams that are in charge of the various product lines (for example, beauty versus men’s fashion, etc.). He sets the vision for the year’s collections but allows the teams to innovate by granting them creative freedom. In essence, this enriches the creative work done in house by allowing it multiple opportunities to examine culture through a united spirit of collaboration. Finally, he regularly visits galleries, an activity for which he blocks time out of his
busy schedule, so that he becomes familiar with the topics that contemporary artists treat in their works. This is his way of bringing cultural intelligence back into the creative studios of Hermès.12

**A Method That Yields Unwavering Consumption**

As spectacular as Lagerfeld’s visions had always been in staging Chanel’s catwalk shows during Paris fashion week, there was one that stood out. For the F/W 2014 show, Lagerfeld transformed the Grand Palais into a giant supermarket and instructed his models to move through the well-stocked aisles as if they were shopping—not merely going down the aisle as is the industry norm. The supermarket shelves featured Chanel-branded real food, such as Chanel bread, Chanel eggs (Le 9 de Chanel), Chanel smoked salmon, Chanel carbonated water, Chanel soft drinks, Chanel sauces, Chanel marmalade, Chanel ham, etc. Reading about the over-the-top branding on paper is tiring. Yet, looking at the images of the show the opposite effect is achieved. One cannot help but notice the excellence of design and execution as well as the creative thought that went into each one of these packaged types of foods. Even the shopping basket, usually a nondescript plastic container painted in loud colors, featured Chanel’s signature bag chain. The models, clad in Chanel outfits, playfully engaged in leisurely shopping. And when the show was over, the audience was allowed onto the stage to “loot” this Chanel-dream of a supermarket.13

Consumption is an aspect of modern culture that has inspired many artistic works—mainly to oppose it and poke fun at it. The great department stores of the late nineteenth century in Paris, London, and New York, ushered a new era in architecture and helped women break out of the social norms that had them restricted in the privacy of their home. The architecturally innovative arcades and multistory department stores emphasized the concept of strolling in public, albeit reputable. Moreover, they were stocked with material wonders that were part of the new industrial world. The more industrial production methods advanced in the twentieth century the greater the number of goods that flooded the markets. The impulse to shop has been growing since at an exceedingly fast rate throughout the twentieth century. Today, technologically enabled Millenial consumers are training retailers to deliver to them customized goods as instant gratification.
Artists have observed these rapid changes and their impact on social relations, especially when consumption relates to luxury branded goods. Japanese artist Takashi Murakami even coined the term “super flat” to describe how uninteresting Japanese culture has become because of everyone’s desire to buy the exact same product that features a well recognizable luxury logo. From Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, to Andreas Gursky and Tom Sachs, artists have offered their unique entertaining approach to describing how ridiculously obsessed we all are with consuming products for their symbolic value.

Was Lagerfeld envisioning a plausible future? It depends. Today, due to the consequences of COVID-19, the pandemic that forced several economies into deep recession, it is hard to visualize how quickly consumers will pick up their earlier consumption habits, especially if they are not part of the top 5% of the population, who, according to several news media, are getting wealthier during the pandemic.

Antoni Tudisco is an award-winning contemporary designer from Hamburg, Germany. He works primarily in 3D illustration and goes by the handle @antonitudisco on Instagram. Tudisco has produced a series of digital 3D illustrations that picture large building complexes in the shape of luxury fashion brands’ logos. On his gallery, there is a surreal picture of a building in the shape of the Nike logo, precariously balancing the lower part of the swoosh on the rounded tip of a green hilltop. Hypebeast, “the leading online destination for men’s contemporary fashion and streetwear,” called another one of Tudisco’s pieces in the shape of the LV logo “apocalyptic.” There is of course a third one in the shape of Chanel’s interlocking Cs. Is Tudisco picking up on the public’s general obsession with these three brands in particular? Is the future of luxury fashion some sort of augmented reality where brands design more than products, services, and experiences? Is it possible that they will soon be designing many aspects of our life? It sounds like a probable scenario, especially when considering that the strongest of luxury fashion brands have already transformed themselves into lifestyle brands by launching brand extensions that address several aspects of our life (for example furnishings, restaurants, transportation, etc.) During the COVID-19 pandemic, these very luxury brands offered a material response, producing supplies that the governments were unable to secure (hand sanitizer manufactured at LVMH perfume making facilities; $20M donation to Parisian public hospitals by Hermès; $10M donation to global pandemic relief efforts by Ralph Lauren). Had the market not been
interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the utopian environment of luxury branded neighborhoods would not have seemed farfetched at all. The symbolic value of luxury fashion brands and their innovative approach to new product launches increase consumers’ desire to participate in their branded world. Consumption seems to rest on well-applied imagination. If consumers’ desire for more branded life experiences continues to match their overconsumption of creative brands, then these brands may break out of the Transmedia Model of Production to contain culture rather than be shaped by it (Fig. 11.1).

![Fig. 11.1 The future of luxury fashion brands: branded contemporary culture (Source Author’s creation)](image-url)
Notes

1. European Cultural and Creative Industries Alliance and Bain & Co. *The Contribution of the High-End Cultural and Creative Sectors to the European Economy*, January 2020, p. 26.
2. Ibid., p. 28.
3. Ibid., p. 29.
4. A great example of a brand that is changing perception of the Made in China descriptor is Shang Xia, a Chinese luxury fashion brand backed by Hermès. The brand offers high quality products based on traditional Asian crafts with a contemporary aesthetic. See *Business of Fashion*. https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/tags/organisations/shang-xia.
5. European Cultural and Creative Industries Alliance and Bain & Co. *The Contribution of the High-End Cultural and Creative Sectors to the European Economy*, January 2020, p. 8.
6. For example, the amount of information I collected on Chanel (after Karl Lagerfeld had been hired) by looking at one publication only, the Vogue Archives, rendered about 1600 results. I could have replicated the search by looking at Harper’s Bazaar, but it would not add anything to my argument. A brand, however, should try to locate all traces of material culture that still survive in public collections, the market, in print and on other media.
7. D’Arsey du Petit Thouars. “Inside Karl Lagerfeld’s Bookstore in Paris.” *Refinery29.com*, December 17, 2013. https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2013/12/58744/karl-lagerfeld-bookstore.
8. Elizabeth Paton. “Chanel Publishes Annual Results for the First Time in 108 Years.” *The New York Times*, June 21, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/21/business/chanel-earnings-luxury-annual-report.html.
9. Ibid.
10. Michel Gitsatz and Gilles Auguste. *Luxury Talent Management*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 16.
11. Robert Murphy. “Hermès’s Pierre-Alexis Dumas Juggles Its Legacy with a New Vision for the Luxury Goods Empire.” *Harper's Bazaar.com*, January 9, 2013. https://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/designers/g2456/hermes-pierre-alexis-dumas-profile-0213/?slide=1.
12. Ibid.
13. Emily Popp. “Chanel’s Fashion Show Took Place in a Supermarket—See the Pics!” *Eonline.com*, March 4, 2014. https://www.eonline.com/de/news/517341/chanel-s-fashion-show-took-place-in-a-supermarket-see-the-pics.
14. Morgan Falconer and Mary Chou. “Murakami, Takashi.” *Grove Art Online*, 31 July 2002. Accessed May 1, 2020. https://www-oxfordartonline.com.libproxy.newschool.edu/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000097680.
15. An excellent overview of the idea of consumption in art is presented in Christoph Grunenberg and Max Hollein, eds. *Shopping: A Century of Art and Consumer Culture*. Stuttgart and Berlin: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002. Without having studied Lagerfeld’s personal library, I am convinced he was aware of this book and definitely aware of Andreas Gursky’s 2001 diptych photograph *99 Cent II* because the visual similarities between Gursky’s photograph and Chanel’s giant supermarket at the Grand Palais are uncanny. Christoph Grunenberg and Max Hollein, eds. *Shopping: A Century of Art and Consumer Culture*. Stuttgart and Berlin: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002, pp. 214–15.

16. Jack Kelly. “Billionaires Are Getting Richer During the Covid-19 Pandemic While Most Americans Suffer.” *Forbes.com*, April 27, 2020. https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2020/04/27/billionaires-are-getting-richer-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-while-most-americans-suffer/#2c36cbd54804.

17. @hypebeast, February 29, 2020.

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