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Abstract

Through an ethnographic study of how consumers perceive and experience Louis Vuitton flagship stores, we show that luxury stores are becoming hybrid institutions, embodying elements of both art galleries and museums, within a context of exclusivity emblematic of luxury. We create the term “M(Art)World” to capture the essence of this aesthetically oriented strategy. Participants take note of the company’s sleekly elegant architecture, interior design, and adroit use of lighting that are modelled after those of museums housing world-class exhibits. The store’s merchandise is artisanal, often produced in collaboration with artists. Objects for sale are displayed alongside actual art, rendering both products equivalent. Employees function as curators, offering guidance and knowledge, as well as goods for sale. We analyze how luxury consumers experience and evaluate the ways in which luxury stores operate as contemporary art institutions, and extrapolate those insights into managerial implications for other retail venues.

Keywords: Luxury; Luxury brand aesthetics; Retail brand aesthetization; Consumer perceptions; Art; Artists; Corporate art patron; Museums; Louis Vuitton

Introduction

The tenuous, uneasy yet inherently symbiotic relationship between culture and commerce has long been a research concern in the social sciences, and more recently, in the study of marketing and consumer behaviour (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010). By overtly embracing art as an integral element of its commercial core, the luxury industry giant Louis Vuitton has reinvented itself as a hybrid institution, part luxury fashion store and part museum gallery, creating what we term a “M(Art)World”—a market that contains art within its very identity. Through our ethnographic study of consumer experiences in Louis Vuitton flagship stores in Hong Kong, we argue that in the international market for contemporary art, deals are made and prices set in constant interaction with a cultural sphere involving aesthetic judgement and social recognition. LV intentionally elides art and commerce, with each reinforcing the other’s intrinsic value.

According to Kapferer and Bastien (2009), art is the aesthetic and social guarantor of luxury: truly a marriage of culture and luxury. The view by consumers of LV as an art world, despite its obvious commercial orientation, underscores the importance of how stores like LV have evolved strategically into M(art)Worlds. In this paper, we elucidate how consumers process artistic presence and presentation at LV stores, as they negotiate the new phenomenon of a hybridized brand.

In the past, luxury stores and museums co-existed in most major cities. Traditionally, non-profit organizations such as museums were considered “product-oriented” (Griffin 2003), while for-profit entities, such as stores and commercial art galleries, were seen as “market- and consumer-oriented” (Crane 1987; Joy 1998). Museums connote the “art world” (Becker...
consumer culture increasingly becomes a visual culture, the movement towards aestheticization becomes ever stronger.

The rise of aesthetic consumption

In the nineteenth century, department stores used visual merchandizing to transform products into desirable and expressive commodity signs (Featherstone 1991; Parker 2003). Merchants of the day created exquisite palaces of consumption (Parker 2003), featuring glass skylights that flooded stores with natural light. Weather permitting, consumers could finally see objects clearly: a new era in consumerism was born, setting the stage, as it were, for today’s luxury stores, which now mesmerize consumers throughout the industrialized world (Benjamin 1927/2002). Over time, department stores began to incorporate signs of luxury to attract affluent consumers; customers came to expect sensory stimulation when they shopped. Today, the critical difference between department stores that make ordinary goods look extraordinary, and actual luxury brand stores, is that, in the former, the sign value of an object becomes more important than its aesthetic value. “Ordinary, everyday commodities (e.g., pots), reflected in their opulent surroundings, became signs of wealth and affluence” (Parker 2003: 363). In actual luxury stores, aesthetics reign supreme.

Moreover, luxury retail stores are designed to do more than promote sales—they must also promote their brand, by selling “the dream,” or “the experience,” with consumer perceptions of the brand’s quality and of the store image playing a significant role in this promotion (Martineau 1958). Puccinelli et al. (2009) describe atmospheres as both the tangible and intangible aspects of retail stores that strongly affect customers’ experiences (Bitner 1992; Mehrabian and Russell 1974). Three sets of consumer cues have been identified: design, ambient cues, and social cues (Baker and Cameron 1996). Consumers are aware of the multitude of variables that comprise the built environment; such awareness drives their approach and avoidance behaviour (Mehrabian and Russell 1974).

Focusing on consumer experience allows researchers to better understand how consumers use various store elements, both to create their own identity, and to pursue communal projects (Arnould 2005). The sociological literature (e.g., Ritzer 1999), emphasizes the top-down orchestration of the experiences consumers have within retail spaces, which ultimately reduces consumer agency to powerful symbolic forces within such spaces. The move to make cultural showcases while simultaneously selling the brand is highlighted by Sherry’s (1998) study of Niketown, and by Penaloza’s (1999) visual ethnography of NikeTown. Both authors explore the contours of the spectacle; they argue that rather than paralyzing consumers overwhelmed by its features, such spectacles have instead enabled consumers to co-create the performance.

Recent studies focus on the ludic aspects of consumption spectacles. Kozinets et al. (2002), portray the ESPN Zone as an exemplar of the multisensory dimensions and multiple mythotypes used in such spaces. The three distinguishing features of themed flagship stores they identify relate to the ownership of the store by the manufacturer, the sale of only the company
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