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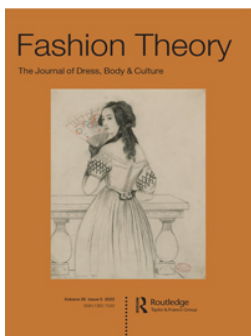
New Luxury Ideologies: A Shift From Building Cultural to Social Capital

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New Luxury Ideologies: A Shift From Building Cultural to Social Capital

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Abstract

This paper helps academics and practitioners understand the shift from traditional to new ideologies in luxury fashion. By tracing the workings of traditional luxury ideologies and unpacking the impact of digital and social media, the article explains why social capital has become a primary resource for brands and a core constituent of new luxury ideologies. It also unveils three traits of brands building social capital which might be of prime influence, and illustrates them in three case studies with luxury fashion brands Gucci, Noah and Pyer Moss. Academics can build on the findings with further theoretical development. We also raise

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than appreciate the consumption experi-
ence as one replete with conscious
"meaning," we must also acknowledge
the intense affective energies, physical
forces, mythical narratives and magic
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important implications for marketing practitioners, who can rely on
such for building stronger luxury brands.

Keywords: luxury ideologies, luxury branding, social capital,
fashion marketing

Introduction

Traditionally, the ideological composition of luxury fashion is rooted in
the field's projection of an aspirational lifestyle. This includes captivating
avant-garde artistry and symbolic imagery combined with the multi-
sensory experience of the retail store intended to envelop consumers into
a fantasy structure (Dion and Arnould 2011; Joy et al. 2014; Venkatesh
et al. 2010; Lonergan, Patterson, and Lichrou 2018). During the last dec-
ade in particular, luxury as an ideological concept has been going through
a transitional period, leading some to argue that it has been experiencing
"an identity crisis" (Andjelic 2015; Smith 2018). Commentaries in this
vein refer to the influence of streetwear brands such as Supreme, framing
esthetics of luxury, collaboration and changing consumer tastes and inter-
ests (i.e. sustainable futures) as predominant changemakers in the field.
Other socio-political and cultural events of the past 12 months such as
the Covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement have fur-
ther anesthetized the collective consciousness toward luxury as a concept
in its traditional form. Consumers are increasingly more conscious of the
agency they possess towards their consumption patterns. They now
expect brands to adopt the mantle of socio-cultural and political resour-
ces (Holt 2016; Mull 2020) which express a desired culture and its con-
stituent values, ideas and meanings around issues such as diversity and
inclusion, social justice, sustainable futures and community. These pre-
vailing issues, occurring as they are within a context of increasing techno-
logical advancement and digitization of social relationships and
communications, has resulted in the erosion of traditional ideologies of
luxury, and subsequent notions of privilege and "good taste."

For a post-millennial audience, consumption signals to others shared
values and taste. They often have personal relationships with fashion
brands, and expect them to share and advance their values and beliefs
and stand up for causes and issues they consider meaningful (García de
León 2016). Brands must now create value through inspiration, develop-
ing stories and enabling access to a moral and esthetic universe (BCG
and Highsnobiety 2020).

Through theory analysis and the development and analysis of three
luxury brand case studies (*Pyer Moss*, *Gucci* and *Noah*), this article
explores how brands are beginning to redefine luxury ideologies through
a move from cultural to social capital. The article is organized in the fol-
lowing way. First, it delineates the meaning and purpose of traditional

luxury ideologies, noting how they are primarily constructed and reaffirmed based on rare stocks of cultural capital, which in turn perpetuates the *illusio* (Bourdieu 1984) of the field. Second, it introduces the concept of "new" luxury ideologies, noting and articulating the ideological shift in value that has taken place from cultural to social capital. This has had wide implications for luxury brand and marketing communications. The chapter ends with stating three core traits of social capital. Thirdly, the article will test these theoretical findings with three brand case studies, starting with introducing the used methodology. The brands were chosen as case studies based on the strength of their brand communities, and intentional focus on creating social change. The three case studies are followed by interpretations developed within each case. Finally, interpretations are brought together in the findings, and the key contributions of this paper are articulated.

Luxury ideologies

Ideology

Consumption is ideological, and the behaviors and patterns of feeling enacted toward brands are shaped by ideologies. Ideologies are social construct(s) in the form of ideas, values, beliefs etc. that constitute a society or culture, and define for many what reality *is*. Importantly, this "reality" needs not be "real" but can also be imagined (Thompson, 1982). For where luxury is concerned, imagination is still a lived experience (Thrift 2010). Ideologies therefore shape the collective unconscious as the ideas, values and beliefs constitutive of such permeate popular culture texts like film, advertising and social media, as well as institutions, familial structures and economies. These various sociocultural sources act as vehicles for the "naturalizing" or "normalizing" of ideology (i.e. ideas about and perceptions of reality). Upon becoming naturalized, ingrained and taken for granted by the collective consciousness, ideologies shape collective behaviors, values and thought patterns in often ignored and unconscious ways (Sturkin and Cartwright 2001). Thus, when we live in a culture, we live in and have our existence shaped by its ideologies (Sturkin and Cartwright 2001).

Importantly, while ideologies can traditionally be seen as regulative,and defend dominant power structures (Miles and Miles 2004), they are primarily socially *constructed*, learned and therefore to a large extent ambivalent. In other words, ideologies are malleable, and their meanings open to interpretation and reconstruction. Branding, in this sense, is also an ideological process. As branding becomes an increasingly cultural process (Holt 2004), brands as foremost cultural "voices" can shape the immaterial structures of society through design and branding, and thus address wider socio-cultural issues and contribute to social well-being (Margolin and Margolin 2002). Brands and branding

has become an important cultural process by which old ideologies can be contested, challenged, and dismantled and new ideologies that favor community, equality and social progress can be expressed. Luxury fashion is one of the foremost terrains upon which we can observe this taking place.

Traditional luxury ideologies

Luxury fashion is traditionally conceptualized as a *field of restricted production* (Bourdieu 1985), prioritizing as it does "exclusivity, rarity and indulgence of products and experiences not accessible to everyone" (Jackson and Shaw 2006, 57). In the context of fashion and consumption, traditional luxury ideologies have triggered, seduced and hailed consumers to step into the commodity mirror, to engage with the lived experience of their imaginations, to occupy the ideal subject positions in pop culture texts, and to become the object of their desires (Goldman and Papson 1996; Williamson 1978). Constituted by important culturally embedded ideologies, luxury is framed by its aspirational and symbolic values such as identity, achievement and wealth (Nueno and Quelch 1998; Johnson and Vigneron 1999). The scarce, extraordinary qualities embodied by luxury are "meant to appeal to the high-end fashion consumer and other elite producers; they are a wink and a nod to each other's cultural competencies to appreciate coded avant-garde beauty" (Mears 2011, 29). The embodiment and expression of these values endows arbiters of taste with further cultural value and distinction (Bourdieu 1984, 1985) while those outside these parameters are unable, and not meant to, make sense of this unique esthetic (Mears 2011). Its ideologies are rooted in entrenched hierarchies and European elitism (Mull 2020).

We use the term "traditional" to refer to the avant-garde, artistic and coded ideologies of luxury that are premised largely on the acquisition, embodiment and performance of cultural capital, "a social relation…that includes the accumulated cultural knowledge that confers power and status" (Barker 2004, 37). Cultural capital constitutes a set of socially rare and distinctive attributes such as tastes, skills, tacit knowledge and styles of consumption and production, and is critical to understanding luxury's imaginary and coded narratives. Its embodiment "earns the respect of others through the consumption of objects that are ideationally difficult and so can only be consumed by those few who have acquired the ability to do so" (Holt 1998, 4).

Traditionally, luxury brands produce and harness such capital in the production of culturally valorized meanings in the process of circulation and consumption through which the work [of fashion] achieves cultural recognition (Bourdieu 1984). The ideologies constitutive of the field necessitate rarefied cultural capital to understand and consume (Mears 2008). Therefore, while artistic imagery pervades postmodern culture via the media, a manufactured rarity and elusiveness remains, which has

long been characteristic of luxury fashion (Parmentier and Fischer 2007). The enduring duality between accessibility and restriction evokes a captivating air of mystique that enshrouds the field, thereby perpetuating its cultural rarity and legitimating its avant-garde tastes (Bourdieu 1985; Holt 1998). Luxury fashion therefore enjoys a high degree of autonomy and relies on cultural intermediaries to animate images of idealized representations and lifestyles, imbuing them with meaning. This is demonstrated via the use of high culture references, lifestyle branding, advertising and collaborations with visual artists, creatives, influencers and celebrities.

Collaborations with visual artists have become commonplace in luxury branding. As art commands greater cultural value than commerce (McRobbie 2003), luxury fashion's appropriation of artistic ideologies including rarity, prestige and creativity (Dion and Arnould 2011; Joy et al. 2014) produces culturally coded and valorized experiences.

Traditional ideologies of luxury are producer-oriented rather than co-created with or inspired by the consumer in order to derive value from the generation of awe rather than community (Dion and Arnould 2011). Further, true to the ideology of luxury, the model life is a "commodity that is in scarce supply, and to which access is restricted by powerful agents" (Parmentier and Fischer 2007, 23). Within this market of limited supply, individuals compete, and a power dynamic thus exists between those who strive to consume this life and the gatekeepers who exert control over entry. Parmentier and Fischer (2007) observe that the barriers to entry in this case are negotiated based on economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1990).

New luxury ideologies

For some time now, luxury is said to be undergoing an "identity crisis" (Smith 2018). Advances in biotechnology are beginning to make material rarity obsolete, and social media, digital technology and the rise of streetwear have allowed consumers to redefine luxury, removing authority from a single source. In new luxury, authenticity and community-driven attributes are more important than rarity and upholding status and prestige.

Consumers are calling for "washing whiteness" out of the hierarchy of luxury through adjustments to corporate leadership, less exploitative supply chains and reevaluating who is included or excluded from the fashion system (Mull 2020). As many as 70% of consumers want brands to take a stand on social and political issues, and are more likely to purchase from brands that are assertive on causes that align with their values (Sproutsocial, 2020). Because of these changes in consumer culture, brands need to build a base of support through collaboration, community, and an ability to respond quickly, authentically and altruistically to social and political issues while involving their audiences in the

conversation (BCG and Highsnobiety 2020). Brands must now contextualize their values through action and communication.).

Social capital

We argue that the focus of luxury brands has thus shifted from building cultural capital to building social capital, defined as the characteristics of a society or community that encourages cooperation amongst members in the group to achieve a common goal with a focus on relationships, reciprocity and networks (Hau et al. 2013; Meek et al. 2019). Social value exists in the pattern of links between people in a group, their shared values, and their social trust (Watson and Papamarcos 2002; Meek et al. 2019). These connections, networks and affiliations are harnessed and applied toward the pursuit of a social goal. Social capital from a brand perspective is the "process by which brands engage in rich, diverse and frequent dialogue with constituents and the shared thinking and engagement that can spring from that dialogue, and the subsequent trust that flows from these interactions: trust between the constituents and the brand and between the constituents themselves" (Champniss and Vilà 2011, xvii). The bond between the consumer and the brand is strengthened as they interact with other members and brand enthusiasts.

The social capital perspective reveals how a brand should interact with everyone that surrounds it for its own benefit as well as the benefit of society (Champniss and Vilà 2011). This includes cultivating inclusion and equity and addressing systemic injustices in the fashion industry. Meanings therefore no longer reside as much in the brand as they do in the social links that result from using the brand (Champniss and Vilà 2011). The brands which are valued are mainly those which, through their linking value, permit and support social interaction of the communal type (Cova 1997). Consumers now purchase luxury as a way to convey a value system they share with like-minded consumers (BCG and Highsnobiety 2020). This value shift coincides with a shift in consumers' orientation from that of an information processor to communicator and identity seeker (Gabriel and Lang 2006). Consumers are thus not looking to luxury brands to define their experiences and existential journeys, but rather, they consider brands as resources with whose linking value they can narrate their own journeys (Cova 1997; Holt 2002). Once a form of de facto elitism, luxury is now more closely aligned with knowledge, access and inspiration. The paradigm is shifting from exclusivity to inclusivity.

In the past, luxury fashion brands insularly developed their brand identity, and pushed an aspirational lifestyle on the consumer through complex marketing initiatives (Holt 2016). Digital and social media have made this process collaborative.

Consumption has become an important social activity which enables individuals' creation and negotiation of social identity (Meek et al. 2019).

Luxury brands now use the influence of social platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, WeChat and Weibo to respond to and engage in conversations on race, social justice, gender and sexual identity. Social media is now the primary and foremost conduit for the contemporary generation's gathering, harnessing and expression of social capital (De Vries and Carlson, 2014).

Instagram in particular has catalyzed a new form of word-of-mouth which empowers brand audiences and communities to become creators, and for brands to respond to the values and ideologies of their consumer (Holt 2016). Social media is a critical tool in changing the narrative from the brand's point of view to that of the brand's community through the co-creation of brand stories (Vargo and Lusch, 2004. The sharing of brand-related stories and information reinforces the bond and the social solidarity of the members (Meek et al. 2019; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Social capital allows for the flow of conversation between members in the community and plays a significant role in cultivating users' sense of belonging (Meek et al. 2019; Meek 2016; Zhao et al. 2012). Within these branded communities, consumers are empowered to construct and narrate their quasi-biographical stories to others in the community, creating a sense of connection and further ingraining (and arguably hiding) the ideological content of the brand (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Schouten, Martin, and McAlexander 2012; Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009). This has moved the power from the luxury brand in dictating who the consumer should be or aspire to be.

Through the review of the above literature looking at social capital in a brand context, three core traits of brands building social capital were identified:

1. Values and vision: The brand has a clear vision, and values that reflect what their consumers believe in and care about. The significance of a shared brand vision is its ability to bring members together and encourage ongoing participation and a sense of belonging. Brands recognize the importance of combining emotion (as a result of matching brand value sets with individual value sets) with the power of narrative.
2. The pursuit of a social/political goal: The connections, networks and affiliations of a brand community are harnessed and applied toward the pursuit of a social goal.
3. Connection to Community: Brands harnessing social capital encourage dialogue and open discussion, are inclusive, build trust, and help audiences make sense of the myriad environmental and social challenges they face, as well as potential solutions (Champniss and Vilà 2011). They build a community that shares beliefs and norms with regard to the purpose of the community and reflects what they consider the brand represents.

These three core traits will be treated as a preliminary theory in regards to the use of social capital by luxury fashion brands. In order to confirm and further describe this theory, three case studies will be employed.

Methodology: case studies

The analysis of theory on luxury ideology clearly indicates a shift to social capital and also suggests three core traits of brands building social capital. Can we find these traits in the practice of luxury brands? And, if so, how do these brands go about building social capital? To answer these questions, a qualitative study into primary data (brand websites, content, blogs and Instagram) was used to analyze how three brands (Gucci, Noah and Pyer Moss) redefine traditional luxury ideologies through the use of social capital. The above suggested three traits of building social capital were employed as a theoretical framework for a thematic and descriptive analysis. We chose three brands in order to construct case studies and compare them, resulting in a qualitative and comparative case study approach (Yin 2017).

The brands were chosen based on the strength of their brand communities and intentional focus on creating social change. They thus qualify as typical cases (Baškarada 2014, 4). The brands chosen include Gucci, a luxury heritage brand and as Pyer Moss and Noah, emerging luxury brands. Each was chosen based on their Instagram following (Gucci, 48.9 m; Pyer Moss 399 K and Noah 437 K) and engagement rate, defined as the sum of the likes and comments received per post, divided by the number of followers (Gucci; 0.26; Pyer Moss 2.16% and Noah 6.63%).

Primarily methodological choices about the unit of analysis included researching the brands' websites, blog and Instagram content (text, images, Stories and video) over a period of three months (October 1, 2020 to January 1, 2021). These three months were chosen as they allow for analysis of recent phenomena. Moreover, a period of three months is regarded as a sufficient timeframe to determine patterns in online brand communication. For triangulation of primary data, recent media coverage (over the past six months) on the brands was used as secondary data.

The case studies were researched by two of the authors of this article. In close collaboration, they discussed preliminary findings and their interpretation of the three traits of brands building social capital (preliminary theory) in order to ensure construct validity. They also completed the cross-case comparison together.

The resulting case studies thus test and illustrate the preliminary theory. In the cross-case comparison, they also reveal additional data to nuance and complement the preliminary findings, and to allow for a more robust theory in the future.

Gucci

Introduction

Gucci is an iconic Italian luxury brand owned by the Kering Group. Under the vision of creative director Alessandro Michele, the House has redefined luxury for the twenty-first century. The brand's success is based on a revolution in the company's design, product, supply chain, retail strategy, and most notably Michele's approach to building community and social capital. This case identifies the three themes of social capital identified in the literature review.

Vision and values: creating a sense of belonging

Gucci's website and social media channels reflect Michele's vision to allow individuals to express themselves, and to create a sense of belonging, rather than creating the perception of exclusivity and scarcity. Brand content, imagery, partnerships and collaborations are no longer framed by creating aura and prestige but by building "a culture of purpose" including a call to their global community to unite in support of equity, inclusion and social justice, and stand in solidarity with marginalized communities, reflecting the sentiment and values of their Gen Z and Millennial consumers.

"Gucci was something you wanted to have aspirationally, but sometimes it was hard because you didn't always see yourself reflected in the stores or the advertisements" (Bobb 2019). The brand's 2020 Gucci's *Unconventional Beauty* advertising campaign, launched via Instagram in collaboration with *Vogue Italia*, featured Ellie Goldstein, an 18-year-old British model with Down Syndrome, plus-size body positivity advocate and model Enam Asiama and French model Jahmal Baptiste (Gucci Beauty 2020). The brand is also active in communicating and deconstructing a series of ideas that revolve around the concept of gender, thereby breaking binary norms. The F/W 2020 Men's collection entitled *Masculine, Plural*, commented on childhood, free from the constraints of social norms relating to the ideal of masculinity, and Michele's collaboration with muse Harry Styles—dressing the actor in a sheer black blouse, heeled boots and a pearl earring for the 2019 Met Gala—is a way for the brand to express its focus on gender fluidity. Moreover, led by Gucci's newly appointed global head of diversity, equity, and inclusion, Renée Tirado, the brand launched the Gucci Changemakers Impact Fund and Scholarship Program, geared toward students and non-profit organizations that build connections and opportunities for people of colour (Gucci Changemakers 2020).

Brands building social capital realize the importance of combining emotion (as a result of matching brand value sets with individual value sets) with the power of narrative, and encourage ongoing participation with their audience (Champniss and Vilà 2011). Delivering on his promise to "change how fashion shows are presented and consumed by the

masses" (Samaha 2020) in November 2020 Michele launched GucciFest, a digital showcase and film festival presenting a series of seven short movies co-directed by Michele and Hollywood auteur Gus Van Sant, while screening the collections of 15 emerging designers (Fury 2020). In the same month, the brand launched the #GucciModelChallenge, a high engagement TikTok challenge which saw their community search their wardrobes for a large selection of garments (Gucci or non-Gucci) to be Gucci runway ready (Gucci Model Challenge 2020).

The pursuit of a social/political goal: people and planet

Gucci Equilibrium is the brand's website designed to connect "People and Planet." When describing their vision around "People" the brand writes: "the combined differences are what allow us to thrive and we foster an environment that is respectful, inclusive and diverse, where everyone is considered equal. This also means making sure that the people who help create our collections are treated fairly along our supply chain" (Equilibrium.gucci.com 2020a). The brand's focus on "People" manifests in social media posts celebrating *Chime for Change*, an initiative which has raised $17 million to support global projects such as Equality Now and the Global Fund for Women that amplify the voices of activists and artists around the world who are fighting for gender equality and addressing gender-based violence (Chime for Change 2020). This work is documented in *The Chime For Change* zine.

The brand is also working to amplify Black communities and dismantle anti-Black racism. In October 2020, the brand invited A Vibe Called Tech, a UK-based firm renowned for nurturing Black talent, to take over the Gucci Equilibrium's Instagram account which highlighted the contributions of African culture and key historic events that shaped Black History from the 1950s to the present day (Gucci Equilibrium 2020a).

"Planet" is also unpacked by the brand: "we look at the world around us in a holistic way and believe that it is our duty to be sustainable, responsible and accountable in everything we do. We are dedicated to seriously reduce our footprint along our entire supply chain and embrace climate-smart strategies to help protect and restore nature for the future" (Equilibrium.gucci.com 2020b). This includes reducing their environmental footprint by 40% by 2025, decreasing greenhouse gas emissions by 50%, and attaining 100% traceability for their raw materials.

Gucci Equilibrium is united under the banner "To Gather Together" illustrating how the brand harnesses the connections and affiliations of their community toward the pursuit of these three pillars.

Connection to community: #Guccicommunity

A mix of storytelling, gamification and user-generated content has united the #GucciCommunity who illustrate an emotional presence in the brand relationship. The brand launched a player-made gaming collaboration

focused on sustainability with custom content created for the community of The Sims 4 (Equilibrium.gucci.com 2020c), as well as the *Gucci Sneaker Garage*, a mix of storytelling and gaming.

In November 2020 Gucci donated $500,000 to UNICEF USA to ensure equal access to the Covid-19 vaccine, and pledged to match up to $100,000 of funds raised from the #GucciCommunity during a special "21-day challenge" (Equilibrium.gucci.com 2020d).

The Gucci podcast is another site that unites their community, and includes interviews with leading voices such as Sinéad Burke, a writer, academic, teacher and disability advocate, and Jeremy O. Harris, an actor and playwright discussing activism, and the importance of giving marginalized voices space to live, breathe and grow (Gucci Podcast 2020). The brand also launched a partnership with #TheSexEd podcast which features guests including musician Mykki Blanco speaking about transitioning, and Michele himself discussing "Masculinity & Eroticism of Nature" (Gucci 2020a), aligned with the brand's vision to normalize an integrative, expansive approach to human sexuality (thesexed.com).

Although Gucci's price point remains aspirational and exclusionary in many ways, the brand's ideologies have shifted from creating an aura of prestige, classism and exclusivity to accessibility—finding ways for their audiences to see themselves in the brand. Through their branding and marketing initiatives they aim to unify a community of voices to join conversations around topics that are increasingly critical in today's world and foster an environment that is respectful, inclusive and diverse.

Noah

Introduction

Noah is a luxury fashion brand founded in 2015 by former Supreme creative director Brendon Babenzien and based in the SoHo district of New York City. While Supreme is a brand whose value is very much predicated on rarefied cultural capital, Noah has positioned itself as both a cultural and brand antithesis to the traditional model of luxury marketing and branding. Noah is a brand that disavows the individualistic sentiment that is a marker of identity for many brands, particularly in high end fashion, and instead foreground social and citizen activism reminiscent of United Colors of Benetton in the 90s. The three core traits of brands building social capital have been identified in Noah's brand and marketing communications.

Vision and values: anti-religion of human dignity

Noah's social capital ideologies manifest foremost in the brand's visual identity. The name "Noah" is interpreted here as a cultural reference to the religious myth of Noah and the Ark. As noted by Stern (1995), myths are culturally pervasive stories that capture and reflect peoples'

lived experiences. Naturally as culture changes, mythic narratives are shaped, altered and renewed to reflect the current cultural zeitgeist. The cultural narrative of Noah, emphasized by the religious connotations of the brand name and symbolism of the cross logo, positions the brand as a resource with which people can escape the "flood" of crass, mass consumerism and its requisite negative ecological and spiritual consequences.

> As a brand, Noah seeks to take a stand against many of the appalling practices of the fashion industry. Our clothes are made in countries, mills and factories where tradition, expertise and human dignity take precedence over the bottom line. We donate portions of our profits to causes we believe in. We speak out on issues we find important, and try to help give voice to the people and organizations we care about. We're interested in the endless ways people from all walks of life manifest this attitude. We invite you to join us, both in our flagship store and online, and tell us how you do it. (Noahny.com 2020a).

The pursuit of a social/political goal: opposition to Black Friday

Black Friday marks a day (or full week) at the end of November during which brands offer substantial reductions in their prices. The result has become a cultural phenomenon and arguably a frantic expression and celebration of late consumer capitalism ideologies. In November 2020, as with last year and the year before that, Noah has opposed this "blood sport" (Noah Clothing 2020a) commerciality, closed their website for 24 h and announced via their Instagram:

> So while we may still be encouraging people to take the day off from shopping in the ugly, commercial sense of what Black Friday represents, we hope that, if you're lucky enough to have some discretionary income, you'll consider supporting the shops and small businesses that we all want to see survive the crisis and bounce back in the coming year.

Such a stance positions the brand within a unique niche of brand marketing and a capitalist system more generally. We interpret Noah's opposition to Black Friday as a further attempt at accumulating and expressing the value of social capital—addressing and engaging with the dialogue of a prominent and widely celebrated cultural ritual and seeking to affect change through leadership, but also through fostering a wider collaborative network that encourages reciprocity, trust and a shared accomplishment of social goals.

Connection to community: Noah's blog

The brand confesses that "it's always hard for us to do press" and as such utilize a blog as a way to "communicate [the brand's] values and beliefs to our community" (Noahny.com 2020b). The blog is more of a communicative and participatory resource for the Noah brand community while disavowing more commercial modes of marketing communication such as "press," which arguably necessitates engagement with a commercial relation of sorts. From its blog, Noah engages further with cultural discourse around a variety of socio-cultural and political issues. For example, in the Pro-Choice Tee blogpost Noah argues the inherent political nature of owning a brand and the subsequent responsibility to act as a cultural resource that engages with important issues that affect people: "At Noah, we won't be silent about the political issues that affect us all, and we refuse to stand on the sidelines as abortion rights come under attack across the country. That's why we're joining the fight to protect choice." (Noahny.com 2020c). All proceeds from the Noah Pro-Choice t-shirt were donated to ACLU to help protect and support the pro-choice movement. Noah also posted a public apology during the Black Lives Matter movement in June 2020, stating "we must accept and admit our ignorance in order to come to a place where we can receive real knowledge about institutionalized racism in America and beyond'" (Noah Clothing 2020b). Further posts such as "Buy American" (2019), "We Are Drowning in Stuff" (2018) and "Consumer Power" (2019) all acknowledge the paradoxical nature of consumerism and progress the structure/agency debate that continues in consumer research.

> We all want change, but how badly do we want it? Are we willing to recognize that our consumer behaviour and buying habits are at the root of many of the problems we face today, whether they're environmental, political or social? We are all guilty of this, including all of us as individuals here at NOAH. We've all been raised in a consumer-based society. Are we willing to push back against the mass of people dictating what is cool and what isn't? Are we willing to redefine what makes a brand cool and face the social backlash of not fitting in? Obviously, the answer for us at NOAH is yes. (Noahny.com 2019)

Other directives toward which the brand has channeled its voice and influence are local and traditional production methods. Within its *Field Team* posts, Noah champions a different member of the wider community such as local craftspeople, farmers, ethically conscious brands, artists invoking social change etc.

As a brand, we argue that Noah embodies a shift from cultural to social capital and subsequently manifests this its various branding and marketing activities. As a brand that opposes the crass commercialism of its contemporaries, we argue that social capital is woven into the

fabric of the brand and expressed through authentic values that are channeled through participants in the community, with whom the brand collaborates to challenge cultural orthodoxies and progress toward the achievement of pertinent socio-cultural and political goals.

Pyer Moss

Introduction

Pyer Moss was founded in 2013 by Kerby Jean-Raymond with the aim to reinvent classic athletic gear and uniforms (cfda.com). Jean-Raymond describes his brand as an "art project" or "a timely social experiment" (Abad 2020) all while using collaboration with artists and brands as a tool to further the dialogue around seasonal themes.

Vision and values: American also

Kerby Jean-Raymond's vision for Pyer Moss is to "engage with the past, present and future of the black American experience through personal storytelling" (Business of Fashion 2020) and "change how we think about clothes and who gets to be a part of making that myth known as "American fashion"" (Friedman 2019).

Instead of playing into the traditional system of fashion, for Spring/Summer 2020 New York Fashion Week, Pyer Moss launched a runway tribute to Sister Rosetta Tharpe, a Black queer woman and pioneer of rock 'n roll (Euse 2019; Pyermoss.com 2020a). The show was held in Flatbush, Brooklyn—home to Jean-Raymond—at the King's Theater which was once deemed unsuitable for Black enjoyment as a result of white flight (Pyer Moss 2020a). The presentation was a celebration of Blackness and its indelible influence upon what America has long since claimed for its own as "rock n roll" (Pyermoss.com 2020a).

The brand's recent Instagram posts have been focused on the brand's trilogy of collections and film series entitled "American, Also" which challenges the exclusion of African Americans in many aspects of American culture (Pyer Moss 2020a) and includes films such as "Seven Mothers" a collaboration between Jean-Raymond and Director X that focuses on the complexities of the modern Black family, community, and celebration of women (Pyermoss.com 2020b).

The pursuit of a social/political goal: social justice

Pyer Moss uses its voice and platforms to challenge social narratives, evoke dialogue and pursue social justice. In November, 2020, Pyer Moss introduced *Exist to Resist* an initiative that includes drops of exclusive merchandise with all proceeds going to social justice organizations (Pyer Moss 2020b; Bobb 2020). In November 2020, in honor of International Transgender Day of Remembrance, the brand released a

limited-edition graphic T-shirt with proceeds donated to The Marsha P. Johnson Institute (Pyer Moss 2020c).

> A part of our role as creatives in this world is to observe and listen to those who are identifying and challenging the ills that plague our present and our future. The Marsha P. Johnson Institute stood out to us as an organization that is protecting and defending the basic human rights of Black transgender people and we see it as our job to support them and amplify their voices rather than speak for them. (De Leon 2020).

Rather than engaging with celebrities and influencers to create an aspirational and unattainable visual campaign, the brand's "Collection" visual campaigns feature customers and other members of the Pyer Moss community selected from an open casting call (Pyer Moss 2020d, 2020e). His campaigns also feature "modern-day cowboys; leaders, organizers and rebels who are working to make a change in their respective communities" including Ameena Matthews of Violence Interrupters and Dr. Nadia Lopez, Principal of Mott Hall Bridges Academy in Brooklyn, a school for underprivileged students exposed to new educational opportunities (Pyermoss.com 2020c).

Connection to community: "Your Friends in New York"

Pyer Moss is focused on collaboration, not to appropriate the identity and cultural capital of their partners but to expand their community and activism. In November 2020, the brand created "Your Friends in New York" (YFINY) in collaboration with luxury conglomerate Kering, a platform designed to empower the next generation of creatives (Your Friends in New York 2020). The platform will "merge fashion, music, art, philanthropy and wellness to form an ecosystem of creativity that reimagines how consumers discover and interact with brands" (Alston 2020).

In the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, Jean-Raymond used both his personal and Pyer Moss Instagram accounts to share messages he had received from medical professionals, including his sister, about the shortage of personal protective equipment (Pyer Moss 2020f). In response, Jean-Raymond converted the New York Pyer Moss office into a donation center. He later announced that the brand would set aside $50,000 to assist minority and women-owned small creative businesses who are currently in distress (Pyer Moss 2020g).

Pyer Moss continues to redefine itself every season with collections and runways that combine storytelling, activism, debate, theater, and social commentary.

Findings and cross-case comparison

The findings in all three case studies underline the changing ideologies of luxury brands, moving from building cultural capital to building social capital. Each one of the brands illustrates the three core traits of brands building social capital, albeit in its own way. By this, they confirm the preliminary theory and illustrate it.

Each of the brands has a clear vision and values based on challenging the current fashion system. In Noah's case, this is based on the condemnation of mass consumerism and its negative ecological and spiritual consequences, while for Gucci and Pyer Moss it is sending a message to people who are often excluded from the fashion world that they are seen. The brands' visions are actively shared with their community through branding and marketing initiatives that combine emotion (as a result of matching brand value sets with individual value sets) with the power of narrative. This includes new ways of showing collections (Pyer Moss at the King's Theater and the GucciFest digital film festival); the creation of content and seasonal campaigns (Pyer Moss' series "American, Also" which engages with the Black American experience); and democratic ways of engaging with the consumer via social media (Gucci's TikTok #GucciModelChallenge). Instead of relying on cultural intermediaries andcultural capital (the media, influencers and celebrities) to animate images of idealized representations and lifestyles, Gucci (with their *Unconventional Beauty* advertising campaign) and Pyer Moss chose open casting and untraditional models, while featuring people making change in their respective communities. This allows them to bring members of their community together whilst encouraging ongoing participation and a sense of belonging.

Moving from a focus on representing cultural capital, these brands have adopted a new cultural relevance, and are considered "cultural resources" (Holt 2002, 70) with which consumers can engage and participate in a myriad of socialization processes. It has been argued that brands do not belong to anyone in particular (Mears 2011; Arvidsson 2005) and instead, exist as meaningful cultural expressions/resources across a social consumption space (De Vries and Carlson, 2014). Each of the brands are pursuing a social/political goal, and the connections, networks and affiliations of a brand community are harnessed and applied toward this pursuit. They focus on honest cultural expressions, ideologies and interventions, and attempt to drive social conversation and enable social change. In Gucci's case this is illustrated via their *Gucci Equilibrium* site which is a brand-led, less confrontational and curated approach to their stance, while Pyer Moss' *Exist to Resist* initiative is focused on collaboration with social justice organizations to co-create values. Noah takes on both a leadership and provocateur role (closing their website for 24h in resistance to Black Friday), joining the

pro-choice fight and taking their consumer to task for the choices they make.

Evident in each case is the move from a brand-created identity bolstered by the collection of cultural capital to co-creating and collaborating with their community to challenge cultural orthodoxies. Brands no longer refer to a utilitarian value but rather connote a particular style of consumption and act as cultural "material" to be employed in the creation and expression of social relationships (Arvidsson 2005). The brands harness social capital by encouraging dialogue and open discussion, and help audiences make sense of the myriad environmental and social challenges they face, as well as potential solutions (Champniss and Vilà 2011). This is exhibited on Noah's blog from which they engage in cultural discourse around a variety of socio-cultural and political issues. Each of the brand's online communities "exhibited a consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions and moral responsibility" based on their affinity with the brand (Meek et al. 2019; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). The brands respond by donating to causes that their community cares about (UNICEF, ACLU and Covid-19) and use a mix of storytelling, gamification and user-generated content.

In the single cases, but also in the cross-case comparison, no one core trait of social capital stood out as the most crucial aspect of building social capital, but rather they were employed holistically, reinforcing each other to ensure a consistent brand story. Each of the traits also influenced and reinforced each other.For example each brand had to have a clear vision and values before pursuing and actively communicating a social/political stance. All brands rely on their community to share what they believe in and care about so that they can reflect this in their branding initiatives. In this vein, the *co-creation with the consumer* was unveiled to be an important part of building social capital which was not captured in the three traits employed as a theoretical framework (France et al. 2015). Co-creation allowed the brands to customize experiences, collaborations and partnerships based on what their audiences care about, and led to stronger relational bonds (Carlson et al. 2019). Additionally, in connecting with their community, a move toward *mea culpa* marketing/branding was identified as another trait (Khan 2020). In contrast to the carefully-curated aspirational image and cultural authority traditionally touted by luxury brands, each of the brands were transparent, issued apologies for the work they still needed to undertake around diversity and inclusion and admitted their shortcomings. These additional traits could be interesting to pursue further.

While there are many more instances of the brand as a cultural resource, we have identified these three as they offer a glimpse at the operationalization of core traits of building social capital. These three core traits should be researched more in depth to determine their relationship and nature of influencing each other. One major pitfall of the scope of this study is that the question, in how far cultural capital might

still be built within new luxury ideologies cannot be answered. What can be stated is that social capital has become more important. Further limitations of our study are methodological. The data gathering (only three months) and the situatedness of the case studies in Western consumption contexts. With regard to external validity, our findings cannot be confidently generalized, because the particularities of two of the cases are bound to be context-specific. Replication of this study with non-Western brands will help for further generalization.

Implications for practice, society, or research

The recent global political and social justice movements have further anesthetized the ideologies of luxury as a concept in its traditional form. Brand managers and communicators need to move their strategy from a focus on communicating exclusivity, aura and prestige to furthering (partial/more) inclusivity and must build social capital. Consumers now expect brands to stop touting European elitism and be working toward a social or political goal that aligns with the brand's vision and values. Consumers are not looking to luxury brands to define their experiences and existential journeys, but rather, they consider brands as cultural resources and authorities with whose linking value they can narrate their own journeys (Cova 1997; Holt 2002).

That said, luxury has always been, and still *is* defined by the idea of excess (Bataille and Piel 1967). However, as ideologies are renegotiated and changed, so too does the field's notion of excess. In comparing and analyzing these brands, we interpret the presence of excess as the "extra," "more than" or "surplus value" created by all three brands outside of the standard expectations and processes of brand management and marketing practice. These brands are excessive insofar as they have expanded their remit by engaging with important socio-cultural issues and movements and embedded their brand within a wider cultural context, beyond the more material, traditional and superficial definitions of excess within the traditional field of luxury.

More luxury brands must now adopt a similar conceptualization of excess in their branding and marketing. Brands need to embrace this cultural shift in luxury to focus on building and connecting with their community (finding where their consumers are), which in turn enhances dialogue and interactivity with consumers as opposed to solely brand messaging. Brand audiences are now proactive co-creators and expect brands to be transparent. In turn, co-creation and a move toward *mea culpa* marketing/branding could be additional traits to explore. Academics should increase their exploration of social capital, its attributes and different ways to build it particularly in relation to branding.

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