

Looking at luxury: consuming luxury fashion in global cities

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Introduction

This chapter explores the luxury fashion industry¹, an empirically important but theoretically neglected area of scholarship and one with a pronounced geography that requires scrutiny. In conceptual terms, our research lies in recent debates about global economic austerity (Foster and Magdoff, 2009; McNally, 2009; Pollin, 2005), the second Gilded Age (Piketty, 2014; Short, 2013), and the future of consumption under conditions of precarity and polarisation. It is also one of the first studies to explore luxury fashion within broader geographical scholarship on retailing, consumption and space. Empirically, the chapter has three key foci. First, the chapter focuses on the remarkable resilience and growth of the luxury market in the wake of global recession and the slow-down in consumer spending, looking specifically at the dramatic geographical expansion of luxury retailers into emerging markets. With an estimated worth of \$263 billion in 2007, the luxury brand market increased by 31 per cent from 2004 to 2009 and is predicted to grow by 71 per cent in the next five years (Tynan et al., 2010). Second, the chapter explores the ways in which luxury fashion houses maintain aura and grow their markets whilst retaining brand value and signature under increasingly complex global conditions. We argue that the luxury fashion market is a clear illustration of the powers of aesthetic capitalism in the contemporary era (Gasparina, 2009) in which luxury is increasingly traded in symbolic terms rather than being a sector defined by high skilled and artisanal craft production and by a fixed

geographical manufacturing identity. Third, the chapter reveals how global luxury brands build and fix their value spatially, and addresses the role that location, labels, architecture and design play in the making of luxury markets. We argue that a key element of luxury retailer's competitive strength lies in their selectively located flagship stores which act as the spatial manifestation of aura, power and exclusivity. Flagship stores are global spaces of desire, places for the display and consumption of hyper-visible opulence and an important vehicle for the enhancement of brand's symbolic capital. The global flagship store is a spatial tactic employed to affirm the geographical presence of a brand and to endorse the auratic qualities of luxury in an expanding and highly competitive global market.

The growth of luxury

In one of the longest and deepest periods of global recession, which has seen unemployment rise, GDP figures in the USA and Western Europe plummet, and retail stores and sales stagnate, luxury retailing and consumption has not been exempt from market vulnerability. In 2009, at the heart of the global financial crisis, the world's three largest luxury consumer markets (Europe, the United States and Japan) showed negative growth rates (Zhang and Kim, 2013) with a generalised reduction in demand of luxury goods from Western consumers (Roper et al., 2011). However, as western economies began to emerge from the financial crisis and show continued signs of growth from 2011 onwards, the demand for luxury goods was fuelled once again (Kapferer, 2012). The rate of expansion has been driven by a variety of factors, including increasing disquiet over the economic, environmental and social impacts of throwaway fashion, a desire for more responsible investment purchasing, and renewed interest in the creative

capacities of experiential retail spaces. In addition, the development of luxury fashion retailing can be viewed as symptomatic of the second Gilded Age (or second Belle Époque) in which the increased polarisation of wealth, and the subsequent rise of the ‘one percent’ (Piketty, 2014), has resulted in an increase in the number of high-net-worth individuals (HNWI) with the emotional desire and economic capital for luxury brand consumption (Bourdieu, 1979; Capgemini, 2013). The luxury fashion market is thus significant not only in terms of its value but also in terms of its rate of growth which ‘has significantly outpaced that of other consumer goods categories over recent decades’ (Fionda and Moore, 2009, p. 347) and is predicted to continue to rise. The UK luxury fashion sector, for example, is forecast to almost double in size from £6.6 billion to £12.2 billion between 2012-2017 (Ledbury Research and Walpole, 2013). At a finer level of granularity, a number of luxury fashion houses are continuing to grow in spite of the difficult economic climate – Burberry for example have seen global revenues triple (2006-13) and opened their largest Asian flagship store in April 2014, using store openings as a way of raising brand awareness among Chinese customers (Sharman and Robinson, 2014) and the French fashion house Yves Saint Laurent reported a 59 per cent increase in annual sales during 2013 (Butler, 2013).

One of the key reasons for the dramatic and sustained growth of the world’s largest luxury fashion conglomerates (Hermes, Kering, Richemont and LVMH have, for example, all grown ten-fold in the past two decades) is geographic expansion in a range of emerging markets, but particularly in China. In 2012, China was the world’s second largest market for luxury fashion (Zhan and He, 2012) and it is predicted that in 2015, China will account for approximately 20 percent (\$27 billion) of global sales in luxury goods (Astom et al., 2011). The appetite for luxury consumption is also apparent in the emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China (the so-called BRIC economies)

and more generally in Asia and the Middle East (McKinsey & Co. 2013, Shukla, 2012; Tynan et al., 2010) alongside increased demand from 'smaller emerging markets such as Malaysia, Egypt, Thailand and Turkey' (Shukla, 2012, p. 577). Increased personal wealth in emerging markets is fuelling an exponential rise in the demand for luxury items (Roper et al., 2011, p. 377). The resurgence in the acquisition activity of luxury brands by investment firms in Asia and the Middle East, and by luxury conglomerates such as LVMH and Richemont since 2011, is further testament to the buoyancy of the sector and to the apparent immunity of high-end branded products to the more deleterious effects of global crisis. This speaks to the continued polarisation of wealth in the second Gilded Age with the increase of HNWI's, and a growing middle class in emerging markets such as China, able to buy into the luxury fashion market (Zhan and He, 2012). It is this demand and growth in emerging markets that has maintained and developed the demand for luxury goods and enabled the continued expansion of the industry (Kiessling et al., 2009). As the global mosaic of HNWI's and luxury consumers shifts, luxury retailers are responding to growing demand for their products in emerging markets through dramatic international store-expansion strategies. It is predicted that 85 percent of all new luxury retail stores will be opening in emerging markets over the coming decade (Shukla, 2012, p. 576). Strong growth figures are particularly reported in China which offers enormous opportunities for global luxury brands and is predicted to become the world's largest luxury market by the end of 2013, worth £16 billion (McKinsey, 2013). The Chinese luxury sector continued to grow in spite of the global recession and is now the the second largest luxury consumer market after Japan (Zhan and He, 2012, p.1452). Women's luxury apparel, for example, experienced a 10 per cent increase in revenue between 2012-13, valued at 6 Rmb billion in 2013 (Bain and Co., 2013). Rapid urbanisation and growing wealth outside China's largest cities is driving

the emergence of new geographic markets for luxury in China and global brands such as Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Coach and Burberry are all expanding into third tier Chinese cities in order to take advantage of continued rising demand (Kapferer, 2012). It is predicted that smaller urban areas, such as Wuxi and Qingdao, will soon ‘become large enough to justify the presence of stores catering to them’ and ‘by 2015, consumption in such cities will approach today’s levels in Hangzhou and Nanjing—now two of China’s most developed luxury-goods markets’ (Astom et al., 2011, p. 4). Chinese customers are expected to buy in excess of 44 per cent of the world’s luxury goods by 2020 (CLSA Asia Pacific) and are key drivers in global luxury markets. It has been argued that high GDP in emerging middle class markets has increased the demand for luxury goods (Kapferer, 2012). Particularly in China, middle class consumers are being targeted as key consumers for whom luxury products are seen as aspirational commodities, a key means through which to increase social status via their associations with affluent, cosmopolitan Western lifestyles given the relaxing of social mores that previously sanctioned excessive displays of wealth (Zhan and He, 2012, p. 1453; Zhang and Kim, 2013). The targeting of luxury beyond the spaces of the super-rich has been readily apparent in America, Europe and Asia as well as in emerging economies in the BRICS and Middle East (Atwal and Williams, 2009; Kiessling et al., 2009) and has resulted in a trend of middle-market consumers trading up and reaching out for products that meet their aspirational needs (Atwal and Williams, 2009, p. 339). Luxury brands are recognised globally as being icons signalling a certain level of achievement and success and luxury fashion firms are key players in orchestrating this tiering of the luxury fashion market across space. In a sluggish world economy, both high end and more affordable ‘premium luxury’ markets are growing apace. We are thus witnessing what has been termed the ‘luxurification of society’ (Silverstein and Fiske, 2003) or the

‘democratisation of luxury’ (Atwal and Williams, 2009) as once exclusive luxury goods have become increasingly accessible (Roper et al., 2011). Quite how luxury firms can continue to be exceptional in spite of the regularity of the brand and the rapidity of their global expansion and penetration is a key conceptual question to which we now turn.

The growing complexity of the geographies of luxury retail

Within this complex tapestry of global retail investment and variegated consumption practice, other less discernible transformations in luxury markets are at work. In particular, there has been a notable global shift in the geographies of luxury production, with a number of fashion houses out-sourcing production to off-shore locations including China in the case of Burberry and Prada (Bloutin Artinfo, 2011). The example of Gucci is instructive here. The Italian heritage of the brand was formerly secured and promoted by the ‘Made in Italy’ appellation. Since the 1990s production has been met through increasingly complex supply chains including the off-shoring and outsourcing of production. This resulted in Gucci shifting their marketing message away from the primacy of the geographical origin of production towards the ‘context of consumption’ (Tokatli, 2013, p. 253) by appropriating ‘the place image of Los Angeles (without actually being located there)’ (p. 239). This was an adept move that enabled Gucci to maintain their luxury credentials and aura by blurring the lines between country of origin (or manufacture) and brand origin – which ‘can be thought of as the country a brand is associated with by its target consumers regardless of where it is manufactured’ (Shukla, 2011, p. 243). Such developments begin to obfuscate the boundary lines between luxury and mass markets and problematise the definition of luxury products which traditionally created and maintained exclusivity and value through transparent

‘Made In’ labelling, craft production, quality and scarcity. There are also tensions between the continued expansion and growth of luxury retailers and the premise of luxury brands being exclusive and rare (Kapferer, 2012). In order to construct themselves as exceptional and exclusive, whilst simultaneously catering for the demands of more inclusive and larger markets, luxury firms are conjoining the creative and commercial elements of their business and are emphasising the symbolic and immaterial qualities of their brand. Brands become repositories of meaning, a means of conveying distinction and value (Bourdieu, 1984; Simmel, 1904). Drawing on devices and techniques that suggest metonymy, luxury labels have created an economy of qualities whereby a finish, logotype or print evokes the essence of the brand. By employing the cult of the creative designer, liaising with celebrity architects and artists and constructing themselves as art, luxury brands have successfully maintained their creative and distinctive aura whilst expanding geographically by de-emphasizing country of origin, a skilful obfuscation of the places and means of production in what amounts to a strategy of super-commodity fetishism. Here we see how the luxury strategy is increasingly one of social and symbolic constructionism. As Kapferer (2012, p. 452) argues, the ‘rarity of ingredients or craft has been replaced by qualitative rarity... Today, brands in the luxury sector are actually selling symbolic and magic power to the masses’. Central to the evolution of the luxury market are the ways in which retailers actively put geography to work in their creation of value. Key to this business strategy is the role of the flagship store which stands as a highly prominent spatial manifestation of the brand. One way of achieving a strong geographical presence, in the wake of increased global markets and complex geographical expansion, is through the symbolic and authoritative presence of the flagship store. It is to this that we now turn.

Flagship stores: scaling fashion's luxury spaces

The retailscape of the twenty first century is suffused with a number of innovative, coalescent elements that compete for consumption. The flagship store acts as the material expression of the brand and offers a place of seduction and desire. For the retailer, a flagship store serves to showcase the entire brand story to the consumer under one roof and to make use of all of the tools available to highlight the brand statement and philosophy. The luxury flagship store's origins can be traced back to Paris' Couture and Ready to Wear Ateliers, which were multi-level buildings (consisting of offices, workshops and a shop on the ground floor). These 'Maisons de Mode' acted as the creative hearts and brains of the brands (Barreneche, 2008) in which collections would be both produced and consumed (Nobbs et al., 2012; Tungate, 2008). As the number of luxury fashion producers increased, this format spread from Paris to the cities of London, New York and Milan' (Nobbs et al., 2012).

In the last decade, as this store format has trickled down to the middle and mass market, luxury brands have evolved to cater for today's ever discerning customer (Tungate, 2008) by creating differentiated branded experience (Nobbs et al., 2012). This has ensued the development of the 'uber' or 'mega-flagship', in which key dimensions of stores are enhanced to become larger, improved and more memorable (Green, 2011; Nobbs et al., 2012). Examples of these top level flagship stores include Louis Vuitton's 'Global Maisons' and Prada's 'epicentre' stores (Passariello and Dodes, 2007). 'These stores are characterised by their large scale, cutting edge architecture, offering of cultural events' (Nobbs et al., 2012, p. 923) and, increasingly, a technologically-mediated spectacular consumption experience.

Situated in prestigious retail sites within global cities², flagship stores represent a key means through which luxury fashion houses internationalise (Ferne et al., 1997). Their location in luxury enclaves serves to increase exclusivity and prestige (Doherty and Moore, 2007), these luxurious streets of style 'form communities of affluence which appear to support and feed-off each other in terms of their sense of exclusivity and style' (Nobbs et al., 2012, p. 931). These clusters of luxury stores are quite literally 'economies of icons' (Sternberg 1999) where brands are enshrined in exclusive spaces, thus allowing 'the brand to re-enforce its image communication through establishing a physical presence in a prestige shopping location' (Jackson, 2004, p. 177).

The flagship store is a key (and much neglected) site for the constitution and representation of contemporary consumption. A magical space of possibility where culture and commerce merge and meld, the flagship store is the physical manifestation of the soul and signature of the brand. Flagship stores act as powerful spatial landscapes that set the stage in the contemporary city for the performance of everyday life. They serve to develop the global reputation and presence of the brand, to leverage brand status and awareness and act a means of communicating and enhancing the image and personality of a luxury retailer's brand identity (Nobbs et al., 2012, p. 921). Once placed in its flagship setting, a brand draws meaning from architectural form. These forms are indexical symbols of the world of art. The flagship brand store becomes an 'autonomous presence' (Habraken 1998, p. 233) contributing to the brand's persona 'at least as much through connotation as it does explicitly' (Kozinets et al., 2002, p. 28).

The flagship store is often referred to as 'the brand cathedral' as it acts as an emblem of visible and tangible power of the label, paralleling the ways in which the cathedral is seen as the geographical emblem of the power of the church (Cervellon and Coudriet,

2013, p. 874). Flagships clearly demonstrate power and prestige through their status as visitor attractions that elevate and enhance the eminence of the city in which they are located (Nobbs et al., 2012) and become tourist destinations that are commonly frequented by 'non-traditional customers of the brand' (Nobbs et al., 2012, p. 923). Flagship stores are founded on significant financial investment and are considered crucial to a brand's marketing communication process and reputation. The intention of the stores is to maintain and embody the image and symbolic capital of the brand, rather than generate profit directly (Doherty and Moore, 2007; Kozinets, 2002), with stores commonly not being required to show a typical return on investment. Flagship stores are used as a key entry-to-market strategy in emerging markets in the early stages of luxury retailer's business development and as a method of gaining direct entry into, and demonstrating commitment to, foreign markets (Doherty and Moore, 2007).

Flagships are intended to impose themselves powerfully onto the exclusive streetscapes in which they are located. Brand names are embossed on store fronts, buildings and canopies to tangibly and visibly superimpose the brand on the urban landscape. Similarly, flags displaying company logos hang authoritatively from the store fronts, a stark mechanism through which to quite literally brand the city. The brand flags allude to the notion of expedition and colonisation, suggesting that the brand has physically and metaphorically marked its territorial claim on the exclusive retailscape. The territorial claim of the flagship is reproduced further through the imposing nature of the size of flagship stores which are intentionally larger than their non-flagship counterparts to serve 'as a physical manifestation of their premier status' (Nobbs et al., 2012, p. 932). The inclusion of 'unproductive space' (Nobbs et al., 2012, p. 932) in prime retail locations emphasises the excessive wealth and prestige of the brand and therefore their luxurious and exclusive characteristics.

The art of designing a luxury store is an exercise in communication, in making concrete the imaginative energy and creative power of artists and designers. In part this is achieved through architecture and visual design and display which both embodies and builds the brand. Exclusivity, exceptionality and prestige are reflected through the positioning of flagship stores ‘in historic structures or landmark buildings’ (Nobbs et al., 2012, p. 926) and through the blurring of art, architecture and retail in elaborate store spaces ‘which themselves are conceived of as works of art’ (Dion and Arnould, 2011, p. 511), increasingly designed by star artists and architects commissioned by luxury retailers. Notable examples include Renzo Piano who designed for Hermès, Frank Gehry for Louis Vuitton and John Pawson for Calvin Klein (Crewe, 2010; Doherty and Moore, 2007, p. 280). Casting one’s eye over the dramatic fashionscapes of world cities reveals the profound ways through which fashion retail and architectural design are combining to aestheticise, project, and (re)present the city, drawing particularly on materiality, colour, and sensory geographies in their development of a global luxury strategy. The architect Rem Koolhaas for Prada has argued, somewhat controversially, that global expansion via spectacular flagship stores can be employed as a means of stretching, bending, and perhaps permanently redefining the brand. When the flagship is recast as an epicentre store it can become a device that renews rather than dilutes the brand by counteracting and destabilising any received notion of what Prada is, does, or will become. The epicentre store acts as a conceptual window, a space of anticipation, spectacle, and desire. Next-generation flagship stores have the potential to be simultaneously perceptual and physical, symbolic and material. Both have the capacity to communicate in non-dialogic ways. Progressive architecture and iconic fashion houses combine to shape the metropolis socially and spatially (Celant, 2003; Schleifer, 2007). As cities become adorned with fashion signs, symbols, and logos, retail

architecture is rebranding urban space (Quinn, 2002, p. 29); the spectral nature of fashion is exposed through the exterior built form and interior retail spaces. Architecture and fashion have converged to aestheticise urban space via dazzling displays, staged performances, fantastic spectacles, and dramatised city skylines. Flagship fashion stores iconicise the city not merely through the surface features of glamour and glitz but via their shared understanding of the affective power of space, form, materiality, and colour (Antonelli, 2007).

Chanel is an interesting example of how the elements of colour, material, and light fuse to capture the essence of the brand and quite literally project in onto the cityscape. Coco Chanel long recognised the affective and symbolic affordances enshrined in colour. From the ‘little black dress’ that has become a fashion classic, to her use of the black sans serif logotype throughout her store and product designs, Chanel understood well the timeless aesthetic appeal of achromaticity. The Chanel Store in New York, designed by Peter Marino, reveals the sensual and captivating power of colour and light. Whilst the exterior resembles a white cube, the interior surfaces are uniformly finished in high black gloss and have hundreds of tiny back-lit perforations randomly cut into the surface. The effect is magical and enchanting. The visual collision of white light and black gloss is a tantalising example of the achromatic chic and monochromatic materiality that has characterised both fashion and architecture for many decades (Ojeda and Mccown, 2004). In Marino’s Chanel store in Tokyo, Japan, the interplay between white and black, light and dark is again revealed to dramatic effect through the use of technology, colour, and textures. Through a fusion of ceramics, glass, and iron, the store reveals an exterior surface that is illuminated by 700 000 LED backlights. Built as part of the building’s skin, dynamic videoscreens enable luxury brand building in its most literal form (Crewe, 2010). Chanel can project an infinite

number of corporate images and texts onto the streets of the city. This dramatic use of mediatecture through cladding buildings with visual, branded screens changes not only the aesthetic of the city but also the way in which buildings occupy space. The building itself, through new technological architectures and sensory stimuli, becomes a representational feature of both architect and brand. It is the materialisation of luxury.

Shop windows

Alongside architectural prowess, another key instrument through which retailers communicate strategy is through their store fronts and store window displays (Sen et al., 2002, p. 277). Store windows communicate between the interior and the exterior of the store and bring dreams and fantasy into tangible view. The signs, symbols and products displayed in flagship store windows ‘play a key role in defining global fashion culture and in charting its discursive space’ (Shinkle, 2008, p. 1). As Bingham (2005) argues ‘glass is a solid liquid, a magical paradox, which links the real world outside the world of luxury inside. The displays behind it are magical too – far more than its individual parts’. The symbolic power of the window design can be spectacular and is designed ‘to reflect the essence of what the store represents, its product range and symbolism’ (Pereira et al., 2010, p. 2). Flagship stores have highly design-focused and luxurious shop fronts that intentionally exude style, sophistication, exclusivity and luxury. This is exemplified by the flagship luxury stores on London’s Bond Street where the colours white, black and gold are a key motif and recurrent theme. Black and white have long been key signifiers of fashion, taste and style and gold is iconic of luxury, expense and prestige. Store fronts and windows exude elegance and exclusivity through the communication of the store interior and brand essence to the public space of the street

outside. The Louis Vuitton store in Roppongi, Tokyo for example is constructed of more than 20 000 glass tubes that are expertly arranged to form a vast pixelated screen which transmits changing images of the Louis Vuitton logo and motifs. Similarly, the Louis Vuitton store front in Seoul is blanketed by a translucent mesh over its façade with the intention of mimicking the fabric that is used to cover the iconic Louis Vuitton travel chests (Curtis and Watson, 2007). It is through such mechanisms that shop fronts become melded as part of the architectural and artistic structure of the flagship store. Seducing the street outside through imagery and advertising, the glass shop window brings dreams and fantasy into reality by linking the ‘real’ world outside to the world of luxury within (Bingham 2005). The emotional and affective charge of the window design can be engaging and powerful as ‘the pane of glass separating the object of desire from the shopper forms an imaginary screen not unlike the mirror, a surface for receiving and reflecting’ (Oswald, 1992), tantalising the consumer with the possibilities of purchase. Window displays produce a sense that there is something more, some more intense experience or a wider horizon to be found. Store windows act as a powerful spatial landscape that sets the stage in the contemporary city for the performance of everyday life, acting as theatres of signs and symbols in which representation is not the opposite of materiality but rather its alter-ego, a space that both constitutes and reflects commerce and culture, transaction and imagination.

Gateways to luxury

The luxury flagship window expresses worlds of excitement, luxury and indulgence that are intended to be highly visual and inviting. However, in contrast to the high visibility of the shop windows, and the products displayed there, is the relative (in)visibility of

price tags. Hiding the prices of products in shop windows is a common tactic employed by luxury retailers to invest both the products and the associated brand with an air of exclusivity and expense. This offers entry into a secret world of privilege and exclusivity for those for whom the price of goods for sale is not a concern. The invisibility of product prices in shop windows is a way of simultaneously flaunting the products for sale in store whilst providing an invisible barrier to entry. It elevates the products further into a beyond-market status, valuable, priceless. Similarly, the selective and exclusive entry into luxury retail spaces is physically, as well as symbolically, significant. Although flagship stores are located on the public space of the street, they are highly securitised, patrolled and surveilled. This is no more readily apparent than by the doorways of luxury retailers which are always closed, symbolising the gateway ‘between the mundane (the street) and the sacred (the brand universe)’ (Cervellon and Coudriet, 2013, p. 875). These gateways are guarded by uniformed door staff who play a shifting role between doorman and bouncer: welcoming ‘desirable’ customers into the store, whilst simultaneously intimidating others by their mere presence. And yet this is a kind of servile labour that one might not associate with luxury: their job is long and boring and consists largely of standing, waiting, doing nothing, looking the part. Like the prominent goods with no price tags, here are highly visible workers who remain largely invisible to consumers – door staff, butlers, the servants to the retail brand.

If granted access into the store through its physical and symbolic gateways, the notions of exclusivity, rarity and expense are emphasised further throughout the retailing tactics employed to encase the products for sale with auratic like qualities. This is achieved through the display of products as ‘treasures’ displayed behind glass, in sleek cabinets, placed delicately on pedestals and lit directly – echoing the artistic tradition of exhibition space. Just as in a museum, distance is maintained between the

viewer and the object (Dion and Arnould, 2011) – touching is strictly forbidden. This creation of spaces of display is an additional means by which luxury brands legitimize their power (Cervellon and Coudriet, 2013, p. 880) and emphasise the sacredness of the products and ultimately the brand. The rarefied positioning of goods is further endorsed by sales assistants that act as brand ambassadors (Cervellon and Coudriet, 2013, p. 869) and touch products with precaution and care as part of a carefully choreographed ‘selling ceremony’ (Cervellon and Coudriet, 2013, p. 869) which is designed to confer the superiority of the sales person over the customer, the product over its price. It is through such rituals of careful commodity handling that a form of symbolic dominance is intended to be enacted over the consumer making efforts to invoke awe in both the product and shopping experience.

Experiential retailing

The presentation of products through mechanisms typically derived from museums and art galleries, and the sacralisation rituals performed by sales assistants, not only assists in maintaining exclusivity and sacredness, but also creates a consumption experience that is ultimately just as important as the creation and display of rare and expertly crafted products. Consumers in flagship stores can expect to be met with a consumption experience intended to epitomise the company ethos and immerse the consumer in a complete branded experience (Kozinets, 2002), thus imprinting the consumer experience, not just the product (Fionda and Moore, 2009). It is in this way that luxury retailers expand the notion of luxury as being above and beyond ownership to encompass the sensory experience of luxury (Roper et al., 2011). This is no more apparent than in the flagship store where the highest levels of investment correlate with

the highest levels of experience, interaction, performance and spectacle (Fionda and Moore, 2009).

At one level, this translates into a form of experiential service where the consumer is both indulged and engaged with the consumption experience. For example, in Cartier's Paris flagship store customers can design their own made to order perfumes (Nobbs et al., 2012) and in the Louis Vuitton flagship in Tokyo customers can join a private club which allows them to browse products whilst sipping champagne (Bingham, 2005). At another level, this manifests itself as a form of immersive experiential retailing that extends to create an all-encompassing brand lifestyle experience far beyond the mere purchase of fashion items. For example, the flagship Chanel store in Tokyo has its own restaurant that is intended to evoke the elegance of Coco Chanel, and the spirit of the Chanel brand, through the delicate white, cream and black colour palette and the use of Chanel's iconic tweed for its interior furnishings (Atwal and Williams, 2009). At the Dolce & Gabbana flagship store in London there is a traditional Sicilian barber where male customers can have a shave and a haircut, whilst Kenzo in Paris offer a massage service (Nobbs et al., 2012). These offerings are designed to create luxury, hedonistic, pleasurable, multisensory consumption experiences which are 'affect-rich' (Dion and Arnould, 2011, p. 503) and enable consumers to 'interact with and touch the brand' (Nobbs et al., 2012, p. 926).

That luxury shopping is spectacle, theatre, performance and performativity is nowhere more apparent than in the Burberry flagship store at 121 Regent Street, London. Opened in 2012, this is a space that is intentionally experiential: it brings the runway to the store, the catwalk to the shop. The store is tactile, visual, aural, immersive. The consumer is drawn in and whirled around along grand staircases where the wooden interior design co-exists and coalesces with the most innovative virtual worlds, products

reflected and reflecting, interiors melting into exteriors. Mannequins bear gifts, products are packages, an opulent covering for the unknown commodities inside that lie hidden, enticing, waiting to be discovered. Boxes and bags, draped in ribbon and rained upon by cascading gold leaves are redolent, enticing. The sheer scale of the store and its architecture reveal its place within this city of signs. Crucially, Burberry have transformed and enlivened conventional in-store structures and strategies through their use of digital technologies. In addition to hosting live concerts by the Kaiser Chiefs and Jake Bugg for example at their flagship Regent Street store, Burberry developed a 'Runway to Reality' in-store event that included the live-streaming of its Spring Womenswear Collection across a number of digital platforms. Burberry Regent Street has used disruptive digital technologies to create an immersive multi-sensory environment that bridges the online-offline experience: RFID (radio-frequency identification) chips inside garments bring product information to consumers in innovative ways as the chips trigger RFID-enabled mirrors to become digital screens which in turn display information about production, craft and catwalk footage. At set times a choreographed 'digital rain storm' is synchronised across the store's 50 speakers and 100 digital screens, starting as a gentle shower and building into a downpour with a climactic thunder crack shown on every screen and echoing in every space, simulating the iconic London downpour and exposing customers to an immersive sensory brand experience.

Conclusions

Collectively, these examples of experiential tactics employed by flagship stores demonstrate the importance of the physical and symbolic space of the store to luxury

retailing. In flagship stores, the expertly designed and architecturally impressive shop spaces, sacralised product displays, carefully manufactured service encounters, and consumption experiences, collectively create a powerful stage for the creation and reproduction of the brand. Flagship store designs are as much about creation and art as about sales and persuasion; their effect on the brand and the city is one of communication as much as it is one of commerce.

Flagships, we argue, are a symbolically efficacious form of branding. These physical exemplars of brand power expressed and embedded in the flagship store are difficult to replicate on a virtual platform online (Jackson, 2008; Okonkwo, 2009). Therefore, despite the rise of extensive online retailing, the flagship store remains as an important medium for communicating brand messages, asserting retailer dominance and maintaining ‘auratic power’ (Cervellon and Coudriet, 2013, p. 869) in an ever increasing virtual retailscape. In contrast to many new economy prophets that imagined physical stores to become a ‘dead weight’ (Gerbert, Schneider and Birch, 1999), the global flagship stores discussed here reveal the enduring power and potency of the material retail form, created as seamless steps into a new retail era that has the capacity to recast luxury in line with shifting consumption practices. The maintenance of their auratic power is increasingly important as luxury retailers continue to compete in global markets, particularly in emerging economies and in new luxury markets where the symbolic resonance of the brand may not yet be well established. It is in these conditions of global expansion and competition that luxury retailers must maintain their brand dominance and enchantment.

In this chapter we have argued that brand aura, value and signature is fixed and manifested spatially by flagship stores – which act as physical beacons, embassies and embodiments of brands, in which luxury is increasingly defined and appropriated in

symbolic terms rather than merely being a sector defined by high skilled and artisanal craft production. We have argued that the flagship store is a tactic employed to give geographical presence and a physical sense of exclusion, power and rarity in an increasingly expanding and inclusive luxury market. At the micro-scale the flagship asserts brand dominance and symbolic sacralised power through exclusive shop spaces, selling rituals and experiential retailing. At the macro scale flagships act as global markers of brand strength and commitment to new markets through asserting their dominance in an increasingly globalised luxury marketplace. The flagship store can be seen therefore as a tactic employed by luxury retailers to give a strong geographical presence and a physical sense of exclusion, power and rarity in an increasingly expanding and inclusive luxury market. The flagship store acts as the material expression of the brand that offers a place of seduction and desire. Store spaces act as powerful signifiers, windows on fantastic worlds. Flagship stores function as micro-economies of icons where brands are enshrined in exclusive spaces.

More broadly we suggest that a close interrogation of luxury flagship stores opens up a space to explore critically how new representational worlds are brought into being and offer new ways to understand how creative activity can be rooted in (and reflective of) broader social, economic and cultural concerns. Luxury fashion and its complex geographies act as an early warning system for major cultural transformations. This requires that we need to better understand the means and mechanisms for sustaining luxury brands. This in turn depends on exploring more critical approaches that engage and question the desires and demands for commodities with a high level of intangible value so that we can more fully understand their affective capacities and emotional reach.

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Notes

¹ We define luxury fashion as commodities that are intended to be worn and displayed on the body i.e. clothing and accessories (including shoes, bags, watches and jewellery), that are affiliated with famous designers and fashion houses that place an emphasis on uniqueness, exclusivity and the high desirability of their products. Key examples of which include Prada, Gucci, Hermes, Chanel, Burberry, Fendi and Cartier.

² Bond Street/Sloane Street (London); 5th Avenue/Madison Avenue (New York); Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honore/Avenue Montaigne (Paris' Triangle D'Or); Via Manzoni/Via Montenapoleone (Milan); Harumi Dori (Ginza)/Aoyama Dori (Tokyo); Queen Street/Canton Road (Hong Kong).