

# Being Transformed by Luxury Fashion Brands' Art Foundations

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## **Being Transformed by Luxury Fashion Brands' Art Foundations**

This paper investigates luxury fashion brands' art foundations as a potential venue to provide consumers with transformative experiences: in particular, *Fondation Louis Vuitton* and *Fondazione Prada*. Consumers are asking brands for more authentic experiences, to stand for specific values, and to permeate their businesses with those values (Gilmore & Pine, 2009; McKinnon, 2017). Transformative experiences are considered more meaningful, they could strengthen the consumer-brand relationship (Mermiri, 2009), and dedicated non-commercial venues, and the proximity with the arts might facilitate them (Arnould & Price, 1993; Kozinets, 2002). Through participant observation and focus groups, this paper investigates if luxury fashion brands' art foundations are a potential venue for transformative experiences. Results suggest that, providing that certain changes would be implemented, luxury fashion brands' art foundations could be a transformative experience for their public.

*Keywords: Transformative Experience, Value Co-creation, Luxury Fashion Brands.*

*Track: Relationship Marketing*

## **1. Introduction**

It is with regards to brand experiences, and recalling a concept defined by Bryman (1999), that Atwal and Williams (2009) described the Disneyfication of the postmodern society, as the transformation of everyday life in a theme park. Most of the brands which have provided, or are providing, experiences to their consumers are attempting to capitalise on the paradigm that by experiencing a brand people are happier to spend time and money in its proximity (or places) (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Jansen-Verbeke, 1991). However, consumers are changing their habits, and are starting to question the authenticity and the truthfulness of these brands' offers: "where it once seemed unique and authentic, it now seems ubiquitous and inauthentic" (Gilmore & Pine, 2009, p. 5). Hence, in the continual progression of marketing studies over the years, authenticity, co-creation, and transformation, have become concepts deemed pivotal for brands to stay relevant to the consumer (Beverland, 2005; Malthouse, Calder, Kim, & Vandenbosch, 2016; Miller & Mills, 2012; Tynan, McKechnie, & Chhuon, 2010). In particular, these concepts need to be considered in view of satisfying those consumers that are seeking to develop a deep relationship with the brand (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018; Tynan et al., 2010).

## **2. Luxury Fashion Brands Experiences**

Customers are striving to buy more than products (Dunn, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2011). They require luxurious environments which are comprehensive of an entire range of leisure offers (Jacobs, 2013). More importantly, the line which divides the shopping experience with the research for cultural offers is gradually becoming thin and blurred (Moss, 2007; Templeton, 2017), which is why brands are increasingly associating with the arts, also in the commercial environment (Crewe, 2016). Furthermore, the process which leads a person to decide the kinds of experiences to live (Colton, 1987) is increasingly influenced by the need which people have for other people's attention (Derber, 2000; Hodalska, 2017).

A number of elements which can be identified as being the characteristics of the luxury fashion purchase, such as relating to self-image and self-perception, appearance, social inclusion, and self-acceptance (Banister & Hogg, 2004), are also influencing the decision-making process regarding experiences to live (Hodalska, 2017). Leisure activities and tourist destinations are also often chosen based on the symbolism and the meaning attached to them, and on the effect which is generated on another's perceptions (Colton, 1987).

In the spirit of providing an authentic experience to the consumer, art exhibitions and cultural initiatives inside the store are familiar strategies applied by luxury fashion brands. Scholars consider the proximity of a brand with art as a way of being perceived as more luxurious and authentic (Chailan, 2018; Gilmore & Pine, 2009; Hansen-Hansen, 2014; Zorloni, 2016). This relationship between different forms of art and business is called ‘artification’ (Masè & Cedrola, 2017). Moreover, by dedicating part of a brand’s flagship store to cultural and artistic experiences and by hiring experts and educated personnel, the association between the brand and the cultural values should be more straightforward in the customers’ minds (Amatulli & Guido, 2012).

Nevertheless, the logic of the market which is permeating the modern society, and the constant intertwining of artistic and commercial environments, are undermining also the authenticity of the artistic offer (Kozinets, 2002). Furthermore, if artification is not coherent with the brand identity, there is the risk of deteriorating the situation and of losing credibility (Jelinek, 2018). The exhibition of art within a commercial venue has become increasingly frequent; thus, the artistic offer provided by brands might start to be perceived as progressively less authentic (Kozinets, 2002).

This perceived lack of authenticity might impair the cultural value conveyed by the art to the brand, especially considering that also fast-fashion and high-street brands have started to implement artistic collaboration in their strategies (Carù, Ostillio, & Leone, 2017). Hence, art foundations might be the right alternative strategy for luxury fashion brands to maintain the authentic cultural value of their artistic offer.

### **3. Transformative Experiences**

Providing authentic experiences is pivotal to develop brand trust and brand love, which are initial components to build consumer loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Transformative experiences are considered to be more authentic and meaningful, and as a consequence of facilitating a stronger bond with the consumer (Gilmore & Pine, 2009).

Here a transformative experience of the self is considered any kind of experience that might profoundly influence a person’s perception in a long-lasting way (Mermiri, 2009). In particular, are deemed transformative all those experiences which might increase self-consciousness, self-awareness, and self-confidence; might lead people to a sense of achievement, “self-renewal, personal growth and self-discovery” (Arnould & Price, 1993); or

might precede a behavioural metamorphosis by shifting a person's sentiment towards a situation, a belief, or another person (Kozinets, 2002).

Transformation through an experience might be acquired when the business is offering, together with the product or service, a meaning in which the consumer can identify (Mermiri, 2009). Once the experience is perceived as meaningful, it might lead the consumer to an inner change, and consequently, to a transformation. This derives from the idea that by providing meaning, consumers might satisfy the need of self-actualisation suggested by Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943).

Hitherto, brands' attempts at providing transformative experiences are mainly related to the co-design of the product, or the co-creation of promotional content. With reference to the first, different brands have begun to invite consumers to participate in the exclusive process of designing a product or a service (Carù & Cova, 2007). Co-design and co-creation experiences can be considered mainly as transformative because of the profound effect which participating in these projects might have on the consumer (Borgerson, Schroeder, & Wu, 2014; Carù & Cova, 2007; Harmeling, Moffett, Arnold, & Carlson, 2017; Trotto & Hummels, 2013).

However, it is important to highlight that luxury fashion brands, by implementing strategies of co-design, might undermine the characteristics of their product, thus they should seek alternative strategies – and that is how it should remain (Fuchs, Prandelli, & Schreier, 2010; Tynan et al., 2010).

There are specific factors which have been identified by scholars as facilitators of transformative experiences. Looking at these factors, luxury fashion brands' art foundations might be a good alternative, and a productive venue to provide transformative experiences and avoiding the risk to undermine the luxury product. Arnould and Price (1993) identified three characteristics which might easily alter an ordinary experience into a transformative experience: the experience should take place outside commercial boundaries, should foster interpersonal exchange, and should be facilitated by an 'expert'. Similar aspects such as the idea of a non-commercial environment, and the opportunity to share the experience with other people, are factors that also Kozinets (2002) identified as potential facilitators of a transformation, when analysing the "Burning Man" event. Finally, the author suggested that a correlation between the experience and the arts might be an additional facilitator (Kozinets, 2002).

Consumers are continuing to be involved in any sort of initiatives with the final scope for the brand of strengthening a bond of trust and loyalty. In the luxury context, co-design is inadmissible because of the specific characteristics of the luxury product (Fuchs et al., 2010),

whereas value co-creation is an affordable and effective practice (Tynan et al., 2010). Hence, transformative experiences might be the key for luxury fashion brands to differentiate themselves from their competitors. To facilitate a transformation, the experience should require a level of interaction with a purpose; should happen outside a commercial environment; should be lived with a group of people who share common interests; should involve emotions more than the sense of ownership; and it should happen in the proximity to the arts. Based on these characteristics which can all be recognised as descriptive of luxury fashion brands art foundations, the question that this paper aims to answer is: are luxury fashion brands' art foundations transformative?

#### **4. Methodology**

Art foundations owned by luxury fashion brands were analysed through secondary research, and a sufficient number of shared characteristics to allow a comparison was identified only in *Fondation Louis Vuitton* and *Fondazione Prada*.

Participant observation was utilised to collect data. The two foundations selected were observed for two years, from September 2015 to April 2017. Moreover, in the attempt of minimised biases and the potential subjectivity of participant observation, two focus groups were organised: to collect peoples' impressions and feelings which emerged by visiting the foundations; and to validate or refute the observations made. Focus groups were implemented with the "mystery shopper" technique; a method utilised in marketing and service evaluations (Wilson, 1998), customer satisfaction (Jacob, Schiffino, & Biard, 2016), and to evaluate people's experiences in museums (Kirchberg, 2000).

Hence, five participants were asked to visit *Fondazione Prada* in Milan, and five other to visit *Fondation Louis Vuitton* in Paris, as "mystery shoppers" (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001; Krueger & Casey, 2014). Guidelines containing a list of tasks to achieve were delivered by email to all the participants (Douglas, 2015; Leeds, 1992; Wiele, Hesselink, & Iwaarden, 2005).

Field notes, and focus groups transcriptions where all analysed applying the Template Analysis method (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley, & King, 2015). This paper is focusing on the emerged theme labelled "impact", and its subthemes: New Knowledge and Personal Growth; Impressions on the Overall Experience.

#### **5. Findings and Discussion**

One of the main elements which might trigger a transformative experience is the acquisition of new knowledge. Participants involved in the study were asked, among other tasks, to collect information with regards to an artist or a specific piece of art of their choice. Participants admitted to having asked for information only because it was required by their tasks; however, most of them stated that being able to understand a piece of art due to the explanations retrieved, made them feel good. Some of the participants were really satisfied by understanding contemporary art installations, which most of them have always disliked, or considered too complicated: “We asked information about that (a specific installation), and the girl (attendant) answered perfectly [...] So, there was a lot of history behind that. So cool... the fact that someone explains to you exactly what you are looking at changes everything.” (FLV4 from Fondation Louis Vuitton focus group).

It is possible to establish that all of the participants during the visit, or during the focus group, have learnt something new; and also that some of them through this experience have acquired a sense of renewal, or increased self-awareness, all elements which define an experience as transformative. From both focus groups, and the observation exercise, emerged that not all people are used to, or know that, it is possible to ask for information during a museum visit. Hence, it could be argued that the transformation which the participants have lived has happened only because they were ‘forced’ to ask for information in the exercise. “I asked info to an attendant, and near me, I see a guy who is listening to the answer I’m receiving, even if he is not approaching the attendant or me. In the room after, I see the same guy, he is now asking another attendant for information” (Field notes from Fondazione Prada observation).

As a consequence, it is not possible to conclude that the simple act of visiting the foundations brings people to live a transformation. From the primary research emerged that discussing the visit with others, and asking for information, generated new knowledge and awareness which cannot be guaranteed in other circumstances. This lead to consider that if the foundations want to maximise the chances for a person to live a transformative experience while visiting the foundations, they would be advised to organise more specific activities to encourage discussions, or to generate curiosity towards their exhibitions and collections. Public engagement activities implemented by many museums often allow reaching this result (Belfiore, 2002; Hoey, Zutis, Leuty, & Mihailidis, 2010; Kay, 2000; Phinney, Moody, & Small, 2014).

When the participants were asked if they had an opinion regarding the brands’ owners of the foundations visited, and if this has changed after their visit, the answer was no to both

questions. Moreover, for those not inclined towards the art, the experience left them indifferent or did not change the opinion they had of contemporary art. During the discussion regarding *Fondation Louis Vuitton*, FLV5 stated that even if his overall opinion on the arts and museums has not changed, by interacting with some artworks and by being able to understand a piece of contemporary art due to the explanation received, he felt the experience as very pleasant and significant. He now feels more inclined to consider that contemporary art is not ridiculous, as he once thought. After having understood a specific installation, FLV5 has admitted to having looked at the other installations differently. This can be categorised as a significant transformation derived from the acquisition of new knowledge.

FLV5 has also spontaneously admitted that before visiting the foundation, as reported by all the participants, he was expecting to see a fashion exhibition or at least something dedicated to the brand and its history. Discovering that this was not the case, left him with the curiosity to know why a fashion brand needs to invest such an amount of resources in the arts, instead of creating something dedicated to the fashion brand, a thought shared by FLV4, FLV2, and FLV3. However, when the participants were asked if they were aware of the existence of fashion exhibitions hosted by famous museums, their answer was negative. Hence, is not by changing the reasons to be of the foundations, that people could be less confused with regards to their nature, but a different communication could change their perceptions. Probably, the foundations' target audience is well aware of their scope. Although, by considering the foundations' desire of being recognised as cultural institutions, and the inclusive nature which a museum should display, to be well known by a small elite should not be the desired state for an art foundation.

## **6. Conclusions**

This paper aimed to investigate luxury fashion brands' art foundations as a potential venue for luxury fashion brands to provide transformative experiences; with a specific focus on *Fondation Louis Vuitton* and *Fondazione Prada*. The data analysed mainly are confirming the idea that art foundations could be productive venues to provide transformative experiences, although there are elements which appeared as in need of some improvements.

The main findings which have emerged from the participant observation and the two focus groups can be summarised as follows:

- Preconceptions are not a limitation or strength to the possibility of living a transformative experience. There are no characteristics which allow determining if a person is more



likely to be transformed than another by living a specific experience. Most of the participants were not interested in contemporary art, or luxury purchases, or the fashion brands; nonetheless, they lived a transformative experience.

- The participants liked to understand the art, especially contemporary art which they considered very elitist, but they prefer a quick and immediate way to access information. Generally, they do not like to ask for information or read too long explanations.
- Discussing the experience with other people who have lived it generates a deep and positive effect.

By forcing the participants to leave their comfort zone, and to complete specific tasks which differ from their standard way of behaving, they all have lived a transformative experience. Transformation is not about changing ideas with regards to the art or starting to love museums. It is all regarding the acquisition of new knowledge, or discovering an unknown side of the self, or increasing the self-esteem, by challenging the self. Considering that people who were not interested in the arts had this strong reaction because the visit included some challenges and an involving discussion, lead to conclude that, through a well-planned engagement strategy the effect on art-enthusiasts and people interested in cultural challenges could be even stronger.

This research contributes to knowledge by investigating luxury fashion brands' art foundations as a brand experience, and from the public perspective. Moreover, this research opens a conversation with regards to transformative experiences in the fashion industry, in the luxury sector, and as marketing strategies.

The suggestions presented to increase the opportunities to provide transformative experiences through luxury fashion brands' art foundations have also managerial implications. Indeed, these suggestions might be a marketing tool for brands, and their foundations, which could easily be implemented in their strategies.

This paper refers to a small part of a larger project.

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