

Luxury Brands' Strategies for Balancing Brand Image and Mass Communication in the Digital Age: an Analysis Based on Social Media Communication Pathways

Yuhan Hou

*Institute of Visual Communication Design, Communication University of Kunming, Yunnan, China
hannah62406@outlook.com*

Abstract. In the current digital environment, social media has become the main link between luxury brand companies and the general public, changing the way brands interact with customers. Nevertheless, the distinctive brand characteristics which luxury brands depend on -the differences between them and mass-produced items-are weakened due to the broad-based and ordinary nature of these platforms, resulting in a loss of the intangible value of luxury brands. This research mainly investigates how luxury brands can keep their basic values in the context of widespread communication. Starting from the communication routes of social media, the present paper uses a case study method to deeply examine the different communication techniques employed by Chanel and Gucci on social media. It is concluded that luxury brands should not avoid using digital media channels for communication, but instead should have a moderate and delicate presence on social media. By relying on the fundamental brand values and skillfully narrating their brand stories on such platforms, while also maintaining an intentional air of mystery and keeping a certain distance from the common people, luxury brands can make use of the strength of social media for promotion without being controlled by the platform. Only in this manner can they preserve their intangible value. According to these results, this paper finally suggests some specific strategic advices.

Keywords: luxury brands, brand image, social media, mass communication

1. Introduction

This paper examines the effect of social media usage frequency on communication methods in different areas, particularly in the luxury field, leading to considerable modifications in the communication status of the industry. It is easy to observe these changes in the luxury sector. Prior to the development of information technology, luxury enterprises depended on the concept of uniqueness, individuality and offering emotional and creative values to keep their unique image. However, with the increase of social media users and the expansion of its functions, social media has become an important way to connect common people with luxury brands. Therefore, the luxury industry has established new trends, causing major luxury companies to adopt digital marketing techniques. The benefits like strong user participation and quick information dissemination help the

brands to communicate more efficiently with the general public. Nevertheless, the large amount of viewers, the equality among them and the fast spread on these platforms conflict with the high-end image which the luxury brands want to present. By attracting consumers, the brands may encounter the risk of losing their original values and decreasing their exclusivity [1]. This research is very important for the luxury brands to maintain their fundamental principles in mass communication, mainly comparing the communication features of social media with the special attributes of luxury products. For the research method, a case study is carried out to investigate the various communication channels and contents used by Chanel and Gucci. This can clearly show the different outcomes caused by these two strategies on the brands.

Thus, the main purpose of this research is to investigate suitable models for luxury brands to maintain a high-end image while communicating with a large audience on social media, so as to offer suggestions to the brands.

2. Background and concepts

2.1. Research background

Luxury brands have established stable reputations by integrating special designs, fine craftsmanship and excellent materials with their particular brand image and cultural meanings [1]. The luxury industry has always based on these basic principles, mainly depending on physical stores, fashion magazines and fashion circles as the communication channels. The digital revolution has changed this traditional way, and social media has given every consumer the opportunity to interact with the brands [2]. This transformation leads to a dilemma: on one hand, it is necessary for luxury brands to combine online and offline channels, using social media for digital advertising; on the other hand, too much publicity and wide participation may reduce the brand's mystery and exclusiveness, thus affecting its basic principles. This contradiction is the main problem for luxury brands in the digital communication.

2.2. Related concepts

2.2.1. Luxury goods and consumer motivation

Luxury goods are usually considered as unnecessary articles and are different from everyday necessities because of their rarity, individuality and value. A high price is an essential condition for luxury goods, which maintains the reputation of being exclusive and mysterious; good quality is related to the important part of luxury goods; and the scarcity forms the basis of the high price, making the owners feel unique and superior. Luxury goods spend much on expenses and enjoyment; although their practical use is not great, they pay more attention to their intangible value. Features of luxury goods involve: high prices, exquisite manufacturing, long histories, attractive appearances, singularity of scarcity, deep cultural significance and symbolic meanings [3]. Hence, the purchasing desires of customers are mainly from the psychological angle. People generally purchase luxury goods to show their economic strength and social position, satisfy their vanity and emphasize their superiority in wealth and position; or they may be affected by their social environment and follow the attitude that "if others possess it, I must have it too" [4]. Moreover, with the improvement of economic status, the habit of regarding luxury consumption as a kind of self-reward is becoming increasingly popular, especially among young people.

2.2.2. Core characteristics and basic pathways of social media communication

Social media is attractive due to its characteristics such as customized shopping, various kinds of programs, decentralization, high user participation and quick dissemination. Our company (providing Professional Generated Content) mainly presents its products on our official website which is advantageous in forming the intended corporate image. Moreover, User Generated Content, partly assisted by the company, is also often seen. People share videos of the gifts they have got, introduce their clothes and show their feelings which can be regarded as real word-of-mouth advertisements and influence other customers. Besides, we can take advantage of or collaborate with well-known persons, bloggers and influential individuals (Key Opinion Leaders/Key Opinion Consumers) to incorporate their views into our work or get their suggestions; these recommendations usually have a great influence on the purchasing intentions of their followers [5]. These three approaches are not completely separate but are associated and function together to influence the overall impression of the company on the social media sites.

3. Case study

3.1. Analysis of Chanel's social media communication strategy

On the official websites of the brand, the posts on platforms like Instagram and Weibo mainly contain short videos, artistic joint works, handicraft documentary films and backstage stories of fashion shows. The company emphasizes on the expression of story and aesthetics, and does not frequently participate in direct product promotion or price-oriented advertising.

Updates are not very often, but every record preserves the quality of a film making. In the social platform, the company always maintains its reputation and special environment. For cooperation with Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), Chanel usually picks famous actors from films, fashion models and influential persons in culture whose styles are in accordance with the company's principles. These partnerships stress the lasting connection and a proper match with the company's spirit instead of a quick increase in popularity. Meanwhile, the company has a moderate attitude towards the user-produced information and its general communication policy centers on the company itself, the selected collaborators and the chosen openness.

This method has proved efficient in preserving the high-end exclusiveness of the brand. Chanel has always kept a strong feeling of exclusivity in the international luxury market, and the consumers' view on it as "real luxury" has not decreased evidently. Nevertheless, this approach involves certain expenses; thus, the brand is usually conservative in the competition for social media attention, which restricts its influence on young consumers. Consequently, although the strategy of Chanel is excellent in protecting the basic values of the brand, it is still rather confined in promoting commerce.

3.2. Analysis of Gucci's social media communication strategy

In contrast to Chanel, Gucci takes a more open and youth-oriented strategy in its social media communication.

Gucci initiated viral challenges on TikTok by working with many influential people and creative content producers to invite users to imitate and create related works. This method quickly attracted a young group of people in a short time and created popular topics on social media sites. The style of pre-produced content has changed to be more playful and inspired by old fashions, together with

regular changes. Though some modifications have been made recently, the basic strategy is still aimed at mass participation. This intensive interaction and high-virality communication approach has brought about considerable short-term advantages to Gucci, significantly improving the brand's recognition and attractiveness towards young people [6].

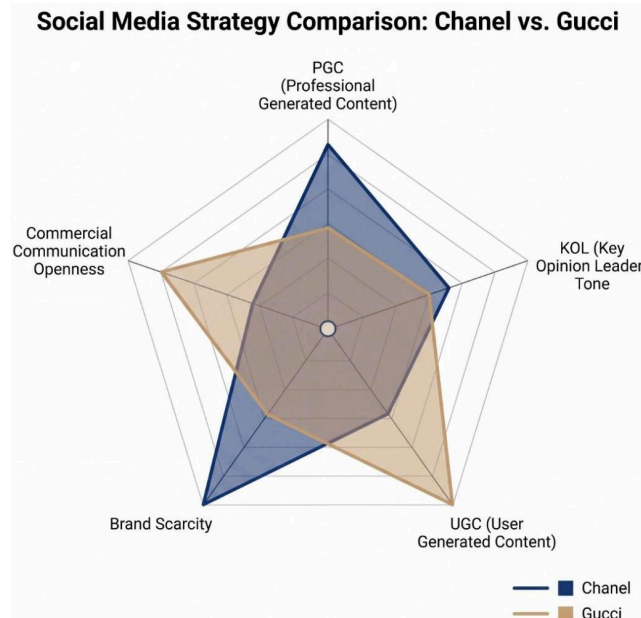


Figure 1. Comparison of Chanel and Gucci’s social media communication strategies across various dimensions(picture credit: original)

As depicted in Figure 1, this research investigates and assesses the strategic orientations of Chanel and Gucci in their social media communication based on five aspects. The figure demonstrates the distinctions between the two methods.

4. Discussion and recommendations

4.1. Analysis of results

The above case study shows two different communication methods and their corresponding effects. The different results can be understood by considering both the inherent features of luxury products and the basic principles of social media. Luxury products are characterized by attributes like rarity, uniqueness and richness, which form the high-class image and intangible value of a brand. On the other hand, the main principle of social media lies in its visibility, interactivity and quick spread, with the purpose of encouraging extensive and continuous user participation.

By making professionally produced content the main point of their plan and controlling the speed of release and the aesthetic requirements, Chanel has made sure that the information on social media is just an addition to their brand story, without affecting their basic values. On the contrary, Gucci's strategy is more successful in attracting the young people and creating short-term interest. Nevertheless, it is not feasible to give up some brand control to the Key Opinion Leaders and the public for the purpose of increasing traffic. This method results in unstable content quality and unclear style differences. When luxury brands frequently and similarly appear in the social media, their symbolic value will definitely be reduced.

From the viewpoint of the total effectiveness of the communication channels, the brands which mainly depend on Professional Generated Content and private domains keep a more stable long-term reputation; in contrast, the brands which mainly rely on Key Opinion Leaders (KOL) and User-Generated Content (UGC) are easily affected by changes in image. Nevertheless, it does not mean that mass communication should be ignored completely, nor does it indicate that one method is always better than the other. The appropriateness of these two methods is related to the present communication goals of the brand: if the main objective of the brand is to preserve its high-class and lasting value image, a communication strategy mainly based on Professional Generated Content is a safer choice; if the brand is experiencing a problem of aging and requires assistance from the younger market at present, a method with high engagement is suitable for the current situation, but the way of communication will have to be modified in the future.

This is not an imaginary idea, but is connected with the reasons for purchasing luxury articles: the wish to show off, to follow and to reward oneself. The great exposure of luxury articles affects the basic function of the status symbol; when luxury goods are commonly used, their ability to be regarded as status marks decreases considerably [7]. Although the wish to follow may cause a large scale of purchase in a short time, it promotes the popularity of a brand gradually. Though the wish to reward oneself mainly depends on personal experiences, the intangible value of luxury brands plays an important part in the sense of self-reward.

In fact, luxury brands can participate in mass communication on social media, but they should decide "how and to what extent they participate," always considering the importance of the brand's value. From the above discussion, it is clear that the presentation of the content is crucial for a brand's social media strategy. Chanel can keep its high-quality image on social media not only because of its strategic decisions but also due to its strict regulation of content.

4.2. Recommendation for a balanced strategy

4.2.1. Tiered communication channels

Luxury brands ought to set up definite and graded communication channels and specify the scope of their brand's existence on these channels. The Professional Generated Content should always keep its content in a high standard and possess a powerful story line. It is supposed to express the brand's main ideas through shareable images and storytelling techniques, highlighting the formation of basic brand features and distinctive style. In official announcements, the aim is not to promote consumer purchases, but to emphasize the brand's nature, representing intangible values which go beyond the product itself, like the brand's history, craft tradition and aesthetic concept [8]. The Key Opinion Leader (KOL)/Key Opinion Consumer (KOC) channel should play a role as an extension of the brand's story instead of being the main emphasis. However, suitable partners should be chosen to ensure their consistency with the brand's culture, preventing any discrepancy in the brand image due to different personalities of the partners. For User-Generated Content (UGC), creative competitions can be carried out to attract young customers, but strict limits should be set to avoid the production of huge amounts of irrelevant content, which might make the brand's story become too simple and scattered [9].

4.2.2. Creating high-quality content

Concerning the creation of content, producing excellent content is a significant strategy for luxury brands to maintain their special position on social media. The desire for perfect beauty by luxury

brands distinguishes them from general consumer goods. By generating high-quality and attractive content, the brands can make the consumers more interested and appreciate it rather than only reading some superficial information [10]. As for the posting frequency, luxury brands should follow the idea that the quality is more important than the quantity, ensuring that every piece of content is planned carefully. They should keep the brand consistent with excellence instead of relying on many posts to keep their image visible. If too many contents are published at the same time, it may lead to consumer fatigue and reduce the original effect of the brand's contents. One good content can create a much deeper impression and emotional reaction than the total effect of ten unpolished and ordinary ones. For luxury brands, the communication on social media is not mainly to compete for traffic, but to build up the intangible value of the brand [11].

5. Conclusion

The results of this research show that Chanel and Gucci have applied two different communication methods on social media, which produce varying effects. Chanel follows its own brand concept and maintains higher consistency in presenting an exclusive and premium image, although it has less freedom in brand communication. However, Gucci gives some authority to users, thus increasing the short-term interest in the discussed topics, but risks the weakening of its brand reputation. Hence, from the viewpoint of communication channels, strategies based on brand-created content contribute to a more stable long-term image, while those mainly depending on influencer and user-created contents are more likely to cause image deterioration. Consequently, it can be concluded that although luxury brands can carry out mass communication on social media, they should determine their participating ways clearly and appear in a controlled and layered manner.

This investigation gives useful suggestions for the subsequent research in this field, mainly affecting the way luxury brands conduct their social media advertising. It urges the brands to define their present communication goals and not merely seek for an increase in the number of visitors and exposure. In the future, the research may concentrate more on the particular methods used by luxury brands of different sizes and with various cultures on social media, and also the lasting effect of new kinds of media such as short videos and live streaming on the brand's reputation. Furthermore, more detailed studies should be carried out in these aspects.

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