(BA) Industrial Fashion Management

Facultade de Humanidades e Documentación

BLANDING

and the standardization of visual identity in luxury fashion

Blanding e a estandarización da identidade visual na moda de luxo

Blanding y la estandarización de la identidad visual en la moda de lujo

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ABSTRACT

Luxury fashion is a profitable and growing market that leads every segment of the industry. Its influence goes beyond trends as it establishes management and business strategies to follow. Its deep-rooted history gives it authority and expertise, while maintaining a unique presence sustained by its creative and innovative craftsmanship ability to turn garments into art.

The influence it has on consumers is one of desire and admiration, being able to deliver a well-rounded message through sensory cues such as visual signifiers. The logos of great fashion houses are some of the most recognized all over the world, instantly sparking an idea to mind. The red sole of Louboutin or the monogram print of Louis Vuitton transcend beyond fashion knowledgeable public to every social class and group.

In the last decade, homogenization of products and democratization of fashion have threatened to cause every luxury fashion house's identity to look the same. This is a very controversial topic and public opinion seems divided, as it takes away the uniqueness and exclusiveness of the feeling a luxury brand should offer, but visuals remain seemingly elegant and classic.

This dissertation covers the exploration of these themes, such as luxury identity and brand visual signifiers as well as the latest trends in branding. Including its causes and consequences, putting a special focus on the brand Burberry and their latest choice of rebranding, with the objective to determine whether *'Blanding'* is a strategic branding choice or a detrimental marketing tool.

To do so, this research covers the analysis of a wide variety of sources pertaining to the identity of luxury and the purpose of branding, as well as the continuous news of rebranding in the fashion world. A comparison between purpose and meaning is made to answer the question the objective presents. Arriving at a conclusion that aligns with the hypothesis raised, which is that the phenomenon known as *'Blanding'* does not accurately portray the identity of luxury fashion and only contributes to its devaluation.

KEY WORDS | luxury, luxury fashion, *'Haute Couture'*, heritage, brand identity, branding, differentiation, visual identity, visual identity system, brand signifiers, logotype, Sans Serif, *'Blanding'*, Burberry.

RESUMO

A moda de luxo é un mercado rendible e en crecemento que lidera todos os segmentos da industria. A súa influencia traspasa tendencias e establece as estratexias de negocio e de xestión a seguir. A súa profundamente arraigada historia dálle autoridade e experiencia, mantendo unha presencia única sustentada pola súa capacidade creativa e innovativa para transformar prendas en arte.

A influencia que ten nos consumidores é de desexo e admiración, sendo capaz de transmitir unha mensaxe completa a través de sinais sensoriais como os símbolos visuais. Os logotipos das grandes casas de moda son uns dos máis recoñecidos en todo o mundo, que evocan unha idea ao instante. A sola vermella de Louboutin ou o monograma de Louis Vuitton trascenden máil aló do público coñecedor da moda para cada clase e grupo social.

Na última década, a homoxeneización dos productos e a democratización da moda ameazaron con fase que a identidade de todas as casas de moda de luxo parezan iguais. Este é un tema moi controvertido e a opinion pública parece dividida, xa que quita a singularidade e a exclusividade da sensación que debe ofrecer unha marca de luxo, pero os elementos visuais seguen sendo aparentement elegantes e clásicos.

Este traballo abrangue a exploración destes temas, como a identidade de luxo e os símbolos visuais de marca, así como as últimas tendencias en *branding*. Incluíndo as súas causas e consecuencias, poñendo especial énfase na marca Burberry e na súa última decisión de *rebranding*, co obxectivo de determinar se o *'Blanding'* é unha decisión verderamente estratéxica de *branding* ou unha ferramenta de marketing prexudicial.

Para iso, esta investigación abrangue a análise dunha gran variedade de fontes relativas á identidade do luxo e á finalidade do branding, así como as continuas novidades do rebranding no mundo da moda. Realízase unha comparación entre propósito e significado para responder á pregunta que o obxectivo presenta. Chegando a unha conclusión que se aliña coa hipótese suscitada, que é que o fenómeno coñecido como 'Blanding' non retrata con exactitude a identidade da moda de luxo e só contribúe á súa desvalorización.

RESUMEN

La moda de lujo es un mercado rentable y en crecimiento que lidera todos los segmentos de la industria. Su influencia va más allá de las tendencias, ya que establece las estrategias de negocio y gestión a seguir. Su arraigada historia le otorga autoridad y experiencia, mientras que mantiene una presencia única sustentada por su capacidad creativa e innovadora para convertir prendas en arte.

La influencia que tiene en los consumidores es de deseo y admiración, pudiendo transmitir un mensaje completo a través de señales sensoriales, como símbolos visuales. Los logotipos de las grandes casas de moda son algunos de los más reconocidos en todo el mundo y, al instante, despiertan una idea en la mente. La suela roja de Louboutin o el estampado monograma de Louis Vuitton trascienden del público conocedor de la moda a todas las clases y grupos sociales.

En la última década, la homogeneización de los productos y la democratización de la moda han amenazado con a ver que la identidad de las casas de moda de lujo parezca la misma. Este es un tema muy controvertido y la opinion pública parece dividida, ya que le quita la singularidad y exclusividad del sentimiento que debería ofrecer una marca de lujo, mientras que las imágenes y simbología se mantienen aparentemente elegantes y clásicas.

Este trabajo cubre la exploración de estos temas, como la identidad del lujo y los símbolos visuales de la marca, así como las últimas tendencias en *branding*. Incluyendo sus causas y consecuencias, poniendo especial atención en la marca Burberry y su última elección de *rebranding*, con el objetivo de determinar si el *'Blanding'* es una decisión de *branding* verdaderamente estratégica o una herramienta de marketing perjudicial.

Para ello, esta investigación abarca el análisis de una amplia variedad de fuentes relativas a la identidad del lujo y el propósito del *branding*, así como las continuas novedades del *rebranding* en el mundo de la moda. Se realiza una comparación entre propósito y significado para responder a la pregunta que presenta el objetivo. Llegando a una conclusión que se alinea con la hipótesis planteada, la cual es que el fenómeno conocido como *'Blanding'* no retrata fielmente la identidad de la moda de lujo y solo contribuye a su devaluación.

PALABRAS CLAVE | lujo, moda de lujo, *'Haute Couture'*, herencia, identidad de marca, *branding*, diferenciación, identidad visual, sistema de identidad visual, símbolos de marca, logotipo, Sans Serif, *'Blanding'*, Burberry.

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I INTRODUCTION

The luxury fashion market is one of the richest in the sector, holding enormous power sustained by the most valuable and influential firms in fashion. Despite the amount of income that brings each year, the growth of the sector has been relatively slow due to poor strategic management. Most of which has proved to be outdated or based on trial and error focusing mostly on the product itself or traditional methods of publicity (Okonkwo, 2007).

'Blanding' and the standardization of visual identity in luxury fashion

A) <u>AIM AND OBJECTIVES</u>

The main aim of this dissertation is to study how standardization in 'Haute Couture' brand's visual identity affects their brand image, apart from determining the causes of this homogeneity and if it is beneficial long-term. Therefore, there is an encounter with several concepts that lead to more specific objectives. These are a means to deciphering the 'Blanding' trend in visuals:

o To identify a clear classification of the concept of luxury and its characteristics in the fashion brand.
o To investigate what relation image and identity has with perceived quality.
o To define a specific context revolving around branding.
o To explore visual identity as a branding tool to determine its purpose and optimal performance.
o To define *'Blanding'* and how it arose.
o To identify the causes and consequences of *'Blanding'*, using visual examples from the luxury industry.
o To carry out a case study pertaining to the brand Burberry as a consequential course of events from this branding strategy.

B) <u>THEME AND HYPOTHESIS</u>

The theme chosen for this dissertation stems from my own personal interests and motivations. I have always seen the luxury sector as fascinating and a great source for creativity and growth, following closely each season. Admiring at the same time, the capacity it must connect with the public through emotions like any other piece of art. Relying closely on marketing and visuals to share a direct image and message. My background with graphic design directed me towards visual identity and composition of visual systems, as I already have developed branding ideas for third parties.

The initial purpose of this paper was to delve into Burberry's actual visual system, as I have always been interested in the brand. As a result, I discovered that this year's rebranding was not the first in the past years and, through my investigation, found Burberry was not the only one, in fact several others changed just in this past decade. The reason was considered to be a standardization of visuals in fashion. Consequently, and because of my own curiosity to determine the causes and implications of said change, the theme shifted to *'Blanding'* and the possible sustainability of the strategy.

Upon the information found and the examples viewed, and, after an initial phase of research, I was able to conjure a hypothesis regarding the nature of 'Blanding' that can be formulated as it follows: *'Blanding'* is a consequence of today's social media marketing and democratization of luxury, being a trend that is not sustainable long-term for the luxury fashion house as it does not align with luxury's principles.

C) STRUCTURE OF THE WORK

This research is divided into four general segments that make up the structure of any academic paper and that follow the purpose of exposing information accurately and in the most comprehensible way possible. Its intention is to gather a general knowledge of the topic, going into more specific questions until a final conclusion is reached.

Firstly, the **Introduction** greets the reader, exposing the purpose of this research and what they can expect to find. The hypothesis is explained as well as the motivations behind the dissertation, the segments that can be found and an estimated work plan followed during research and elaboration.

The **Literature review** shows then the research already existing in the theme, presenting general and specific themes as well as the basic concepts treated. All of those referring to specific and reliable sources of information used to write about them.

Complementing the last headland, **Research and Methodology** indicates the methods and techniques used and carried out throughout the investigation, identifying, as well, the limitations encountered.

Reaching know the **Body of Work**, which is comprised of three essential sections: the fundamentals of fashion luxury; branding and rebranding, the importance of marketing the brand for fashion firms; and 'Blanding', the standardization of visual identity in the last decade".

The last headland exposes **Conclusions** gathered through the investigation, comparing the different segments to justify the hypothesis raised.

D) WORK PLAN

The investigation carried out has followed four phases:

1. A **general overview** of the topic that enabled the arrival of a conclusion, identifying the main points and themes to be discussed.
2. The **initial investigation** of the two main topics exposed, luxury and branding, to be able to discuss the current trend through a position of thorough understanding.
3. The elaboration of the **first two segments of the Body of Work** to act as a guide for the third segment.
4. A **second investigation** pertaining to 'Blanding' where other specific subjects also arise to add in the next phase.
5. The elaboration of the **third segment of Body of Work** as well as specification of other concepts found during the second investigation in the previous two segments.
6. The **illustration** of the document through gathered images, illustrations, and tables.
7. The elaboration of **Conclusions** and rest of the **formatting** of this document following the guidelines established

II LITERATURE REVIEW

The bibliography covers a large battery of typology of sources used, comprised of journal articles, periodical articles, magazine articles, website articles, books, book sections, theses, and corporate websites.

These sources have allowed for the information displayed to follow a rigorous standard for the elaboration of personal conclusions.

A) GENERAL AND SPECIFIC THEMES

o **LUXURY FASHION**: to deepen the understanding of where 'Haute Couture' comes from and what conforms it.

- *Understanding Luxury Fashion: Origins and Contemporary Issues*. (Cantista & Sádaba, 2020).
- *The anatomy of the luxury fashion brand*. (Fionda & Moore, 2009).
- *The concept of luxury brands*. (Heine, 2012).
- *Managing brand equity*. (Aaker, 1991).
- *The Luxury Strategy: Break the Rules of Marketing to Build Luxury Brands*. (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).
- *What's in a name? The history of luxury fashion branding*. (Okonkwo, 2007).

o **BRANDING**: to define the purpose of corporate branding, tendencies, and correct application.

- *The art of creating and managing luxury fashion brands.* (Okonkwo, 2007).
- *Brand building: The case of collaboration between Javier Carvajal and Loewe.* (Josa et al., 2020).
- *Why Branding Matters Now More Than Ever.* (Stephens, 2020).
- *How Much Does Brand DNA Matter?* (Sherman, 2018).
- *At Kering and LVMH, Corporate Branding Goes Beyond the Logo.* (Sherman, 2019).

o **VISUAL IDENTITY SYSTEMS:** to define what a visual identity is, what elements conform it and how it affects the image of the brand.

- *Brands in fashion: Brand identity.* (Crespo, 2021).
- *Brand new: How visual context shapes initial response to logos and corporate visual identity systems*. (Wertz, 2021).
- *Visual identity.* (Landa, 2011).

o **BLANDING:** due to the newness of the topic, there is no academic research done, but a variety of articles detailing each step and events surrounding the theme.

- *The End of Blanding?* (Pearl, 2023).
- *How Not to Be a Boring Direct-to-Consumer Brand.* (Mondalek & Lieber, 2020).
- *Blanding - The hottest branding trend of the year is also the worst.* (Brunfaut & Greenwood, 2018).

o **PREMIUM MEDIOCRE:** it entails what is considered to be, not only in fashion, but in the whole luxury sector.

- *RIBBONFARM. Constructions in magical thinking.* (Rao, 2017).
- *How Premium Mediocre Conquered Fashion.* (Rabkin, 2018).
- *The Dark Side of Luxury: When Negative Emotions Are Felt by Very Wealthy Consumers.* (De Barnier & Roux, 2020).

o **BURBERRY CASE STUDY:** from the beginnings of the brand to the problems the brand has faced and the devaluation that lead to the creation of a new strategy focused on luxury.

- *Our history.* (Burberry, 2023).
- *Burberry Reveals New Logo, First Campaign by Daniel Lee Ahead of Debut Show.* (O'Connor, 2023).
- *Can Burberry Get Back on Track?* (Shannon, 2017).

B) PRINCIPAL CONCEPTS

o **LUXURY**: Oxford (2023) defines luxury as "the habitual use of, or indulgence in what is choice or costly, whether food, dress, furniture, or appliances of any kind."

o **LUXURY FASHION**: can be defined as a brand that "focuses on excellent quality, high prices, scarcity, and exceptional storytelling (Pakhira, 2022)."

o **BRANDING**: it is "the process of giving a meaning to specific organization, company, products or services by creating and shaping a brand in consumers' minds (Marion, 2023)."

o **BRAND EQUITY**: refers to "a value premium that a company generates from a product with a recognizable name when compared to a generic equivalent (Hayes, 2023)."

o **CORPORATE BRANDING**: refers to "a company's image or identity and the way an organization presents it to customers (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023)."

o **VISUAL IDENTITY SYSTEM:** it is the "consistent use of logos, colors and typography. Over time, this visual identity becomes associated with the organization, and thereby reinforces its message and personality (Brandeis University, 2023)."

III RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

A) <u>METHODS AND TECHNIQUES</u>

There are various methods that have been used:

- Inductive method, due to the achievement of a set of conclusions that are a result of the information that constitutes the investigation.
- Deductive method since certain forecasts are extracted based on the conclusions and professional opinions.
- Descriptive method, from the interpretation and description, not only of academic research and theoretical frameworks, but real-life events. It expands on the knowledge of the topic and current issues within it.
- Explanatory method, as it is conducted to understand the current practices in the field.

The nature of the work follows a qualitative technique of research, that focuses on collecting data and information, providing deeper insights into the branding problem. It helps support the proposed hypothesis and investigate it further.

B) <u>LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH</u>

Limitations of the research were encountered as follows:

- Although there is research about luxury, very little of it is directed towards fashion, which is already an underdeveloped research field.
- Inside the field of branding and most commonly in the public view, terminology pertaining to it is constantly used interchangeably, giving way to confusion about specific terms and concepts.
- There is a general gap in the official academic definition of elements inside the visual identity system.
- 'Blanding' is a phenomenon that has not yet been studied, therefore, there are no academic records or research about the topic.

IV BODY OF THE WORK

A) THE FUNDAMENTALS OF LUXURY FASHION

One of the main objectives of this research consists of deciphering the intricate nuances of branding inside the luxury sector. The purpose, relevant as to investigate the phenomenon of '*Blanding',* and whether it aligns with the characteristics of the segment or deters from them, being detrimental for the modern luxury image long-term. To do so, there is a need to explain what luxury is, in what pillars it sustains itself and where it stands in the industry to be able to determine if a branding plan benefits it.

1. THE EVOLUTION OF LUXURY AS A CONCEPT AND MODERN '*HAUTE COUTURE'*

As a means to discern the essence of fashion luxury from other segments, it is imperative that a revision of its origins is made in order to determine which characteristics hold importance and which elements have changed from what '*haute couture*' used to be, to what we know today of the sector. In this category in fashion in particular, this step is crucial, because, as we are going to dissect in later sections of the research, heritage and brand history are the backbone of luxury fashion. Although luxury in garments is a latter occurrence, one can argue that the concept has existed throughout all the human experience (Okonkwo, 2007), evolving in meaning depending on the cultural setting (Mendoça, 2020). The connection between luxury and fashion is notably profound (Cantista & Sádaba, 2020). The latter has also been continuously influenced by history, society, traditions, religion, politics, and economy, being a faithful representative symbol of a specific period (Okonkwo, 2007).

Luxury, nonetheless, is an exclusively human experience, regardless of the definition given, that of excellence or vulgarity, and resides in the possibility of freedom of the human being. This link could be the reason why the term is so complicated to dissect (Mendoça, 2020). The general description of luxury indicates that it is something that makes life more pleasant, an escape from everyday harshness. And includes both quantitative and qualitative dimension, through the idea of excess and refinement.

That is why Plato relates luxury and freedom, for the fact that the human is capable of freely making the decision of psychologically transcending beyond natural survival obligations (Mendoça, 2020).

In ancient Egypt, fashion and beauty were a way for the Pharaoh to signify his total control of society. It was a period where luxury and beauty were becoming more present in appearance rather than objects. With this display of power, royals started relying on an assortment of artists, jewelers, craftsmen, and designers to elaborate the most flamboyant looks with the highest quality materials. Fashion seemed to be an important aspect of early

Figure 1 "Ancient Egyptian fashion"
Source: *(Tariq, 2023)*

Egyptian society, as the acquisition of the finest material goods were associated with the upper social class, where the rich, both men and women, wore heavy sets of gold jewelry and made-to-measure clothing (Okonkwo, 2007).On the contrary, the Cretan period was relatively modest in terms of appearance. It was the early Greek civilization where an attachment to luxury was much more present. Fashion reflected intellectual power and level of education, which was very valuable at the time (Okonkwo, 2007).

It was in this time of knowledge exchange and scientific discussion, that the concept of luxury began being studied by now renowned intellectuals, also viewing the term from a philosophical stand view. In his dissertation "Republic", Plato discusses the reasons why the human being is so attracted to luxury to the point where it becomes, not a choice, but a necessity, even influencing the constitution of society. The ability to think outside of a physical plane allowed human beings to surpass the limitations of their own biology, aspiring higher than survival, aiming to live in a state of wellness. Discovering then individual and societal aspirations that lay beyond biological needs, these not being enough, and seeking fulfillment (Mendoça, 2020; Scott, 2020). By experimenting with life, humans are drawn to express their own sensibilities, adopting models they identify with, like clothing, or indulging in the exclusive distinguishing element that is luxury (Mendoça, 2020). Latter research has shown that the need for a person to feel unique is a very common behaviour apparent in the consumption of luxury (Kauppinen-Räisänen, et al., 2018).

In the Etruscan empire, the use of gold portrayed beauty and luxury. The importance of jewelry that was seen in other societies before was deeply accentuated, specially within the aristocratic women. In the consequent Roman empire, the apparition of international trade and focus on politics led to the internationalization of fashion goods, where other societies began to learn of the Italian fashion style. But it was not only an individual choice, as attire was, too, dictated by politics (Okonkwo, 2007). There were detailed regulations for garments, colors, and fabrics to dictate appearance based on social class in order to maintain a hierarchy (Cantista & Sádaba, 2020). For example, the ruling government declared the specific use of colored shoes for each social class, therefore, being easily able to determine who held the power in a room. Some researchers state this is the start of the well-known Italian shoe industry, characterized by its quality and craftsmanship, as various talented designers and artisans became really sought after by wealthy aristocrats (Okonkwo, 2007).

Figure 2 "Difference in clothing between roman social classes"

Source: *(Wonder, 2023)*

From around 330 to 1453, the Byzantine empire counted with the commerce potency that was Constantinople. As it grew over the decades, it became one of the principal trade ports, as well as the richest most lavish Christian city in the world (Cartwright, 2018). Empress Theodora could also be considered the precursor of celebrity fashion influence. The empress was known for her impeccable

luxury taste and stylish clothing made from the most expensive materials, usually adorned with gold, pearls and other imported jewels. Because the empire gave freedom of style, unlike the romans, women of all social classes started imitating her style with whatever materials available within their purchasing power (Okonkwo, 2007). Even though clothing remained an indicator of status, this could be the first time in history where fashion was influenced in trends amongst society. Luxury then became this expression of power that held the idea of permanence and eternity, displayed through grandiose sculptures, palaces, and other gifts (Cantista & Sádaba, 2020).
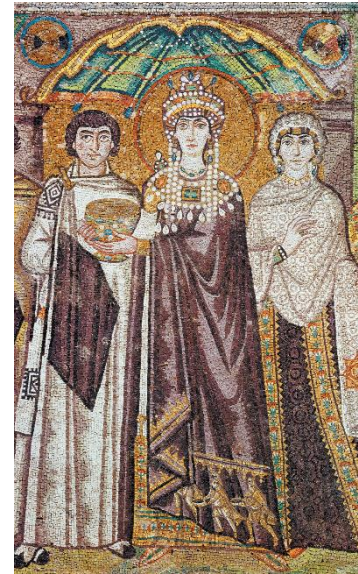
Something that died down in Europe's Middle Ages between the fifth and seventh centuries. Events in politics and national relations became the focus instead of fashion. But once European countries became more established, distinctive ways of dressing started emerging amongst

Figure 3 "Mosaic of Empress Theodora" Source: *(Brown, 2015)*

territories instead of a unified continental dressing code (Okonkwo, 2007). But surely, the emergence of a new social class, the bourgeoisie, the precursor of the middle class, made luxury stand a little closer to the general public through work, talent and merit, making some of those workers rich, and thus, able to indulge in luxury (Cantista & Sádaba, 2020).

The Renaissance was a moment of permanent change, of incredible cultural development and transcendental discoveries and that did not exclude luxury, in a moment where travel between the European and Asian continent was as fructiferous as ever. Even though clothes and accessories remained an indicator of social class and knowledge (Cantista & Sádaba, 2020), there was significantly more freedom in terms of style, and the Italian fashion industry bloomed. Florence became the epicenter of jewelry production and the country's silk industry became the best in Europe. Influences in society could also be seen from the big Italian aristocratic families, that made current citizens emulate their attire. While before it was Empress Theodora, the ones that now ruled in ostentatious and luxurious style were the Gonzague de Montoue and Medici families. Also, there is record of this being the first period with the existence of private exclusive clubs where high-society women attended to preview fashion and beauty products, an integral experience of modern luxury and that would form the foundations of twentieth century luxury fashion. This period was also the start of a centuries-long process of clothing detachment from social class as the middle class started dressing similarly to the upper class, mainly due to the increase of clothing production (Okonkwo, 2007). This was not well received by all, as, in some places like England, upper classmen argued that it created confusion in social circles, leading to the proclamation of further sumptuary laws by Elizabeth I in 1588 (Cantista & Sádaba, 2020).

Figure 4 "Louis XVI by Antoine-François Callet" Source: *(Museo Nacional del Prado, 2023)*

And, while the Italians dominated the Renaissance period, the Baroque era in the seventeenth century was indisputably the time for France. The ruling of Louis XVI was of astounding influence in the world of fashion. The monarch was known for his expensive taste and, consequently, carried out a series of reforms that would boost the fashion industry. Measures were put in place so that designers and artisans could access incentives and so that the export of French fashion goods would increase while imports decreased. Emerging French fashion magazines became well-known all over Europe, distributing the desire for French style (Okonkwo, 2007).

Once the eighteenth century began, it was clear that French fashion was the goal to achieve, as every person tried to adopt the recent born '*haute mode'* that came from Versailles. Territorial ways of dressing continued to exist but there was no doubt that French fashion dominated globally. So much so, that even other royal courts started adopting the trends and style. In this period, the magazines that appeared in the previous century continued to grow in popularity and new issues emerged in France, England, and Germany, influencing a curiosity for fashion that led to the appearance of more tailors. The leads of this style were well-known French fashionistas pertaining to a higher social class. Notable mentions include the elegant and classic Madame Pompadour and the extravagant Marie-Antoinette. This

Figure 5 "Marie-Jeanne Rose Bertin" Source: *(Cacciaguerra, 2021)*

century also saw the first relevant designer persona, Rose Bertin, a *couturier* that provided for aristocrats and royal family members who was the first to open another shop of her own in another country (Okonkwo, 2007).

This rate of development made possible the beginning of the modern luxury goods sector throughout the nineteenth century, propelled by positive and productive economic and social conditions, although, as always, appearance remained the main indicator of wealth. The French government continued to create incentives that favored the textile sector and it began to be recognized as an important contributor of economic growth. Paris remained the capital for luxury fashion and saw the emergence of household names like Guerlain in 1828, Cartier in 1847 or Louis Vuitton in 1854. But the most significant appearance belongs to the father of *'Haute Couture'*, Charles Frederick Worth, beginning his work in 1858. Not only was he the first to introduce named labels on his creations but he was very savvy in marketing tactics. He introduced what became known as *'defilé'*, a preview show where he would invite influential women that he would also dress for events (Okonkwo, 2007).

Figure 6 "The atelier House of Worth"

Source: *(Karra, 2023)*

As opposed to the first half of the century, the second half was dictated by simplicity, a result of the fast industrialization of the continent. Fashion became classic and functional, driven by a Victorian era where the access to a sewing-machine for the average woman started the interest in *'pret-à-porter'*, a much simpler segment compared to *'Haute Couture'* (Okonkwo, 2007). Eventually, fashion caught the eye of intellectuals, who started arguing for the objective of luxury. Most coincided with the desire to be recognized, being reminiscent of previous Greek philosophical conclusions about luxury, and to express an identity that was unique to the individual, a need to stand out just when mass production was accelerating by the minute (Cantista & Sádaba, 2020).

The nineteenth century centered its focus across the ocean in the newly founded America, who was deeply influenced by European fashion. Most of the fashion goods were imported from France directly to New York. As it happened in France, the growing middle class's access to fashion magazines with ingenious paper patterns and sewing machines made it possible for the average women to copy the Parisian style (Okonkwo, 2007).

Figure 7 "Spread in Weldon's Ladies' Journal in 1895" Source: *(Gershon, 2015)*

It was in the twentieth century when an explosion in fashion development occurred. This was the period where most of the luxury fashion household names came from. Charles Worth remained the undisputable master of '*Haute Couture'*, but competition quickly rose. Such as Gabrielle Coco Chanel with her hat business in 1910, Madeline Vionnet in 1912 or Elsa Schiaparelli in 1927 (Okonkwo, 2007).

However, the commencement of the First World War brought simplicity to garments without diminishing the desire for fashion. After the war, Hollywood movie stars became the newest celebrity trend setters and new couturiers started emerging in the Italian scene. For instance, Mario Prada in 1913 or Guccio Gucci in 1921. Expansion continued to develop after the Second World War, seeing the birth of firms like Christian Dior, Givenchy, Pierre Cardin, and Balenciaga. The modern luxury fashion industry was then established and has managed to maintain core tradition until today in an environment that is notorious for its changing capacity (Okonkwo, 2007).

During the sixties, Yves Saint Laurent created complete collections per season and Emilio Pucci was the first to use print in apparel. Fashion was seen as a possible vocation for the first time, leading to the emergence of fashion schools, and the craft became more experimental in what it could be considered the precursor of today's runway extravagance (Okonkwo, 2007).

'Blanding' and the standardization of visual identity in luxury fashion

Mass production threatened Paris couture for the first time during the seventies, as boutiques became less frequented than department stores and rock bands became the new fashion icons, betting for a more casual and individual look. '*Haute Couture*' suffered then a gradual disappearance from the spotlight (Okonkwo, 2007).

The eighties were a time for revolution and freedom. The rebellious attitude of punk culture affected fashion as well, becoming a vindictive symbol for many urban tribes following icons like Madonna or the Sex Pistols. Fashion began to be associated with art as well, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art was the first to display a clothing collection, from designer Yves Saint Laurent. Mergers and acquisitions started emerging, placing an important focus on the concept of branding as an intangible asset. From this moment on, strategic management took a shift with important events in the corporate fashion world. Bernard Arnault assumed the position of President for LVMH (Louis Vuitton Möet Hennessey) in 1989, a catalyst for the creation of several other luxury conglomerates such as PPR (Pinault, Printemps, Redoute), now known as Kering (Okonkwo, 2007).

Figure 8 "Yves Saint Laurent in his Metropolitan Museum of Art exposition in 1983"

Source: *(Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris, 2023)*

With the decision of brands to expand internationally during the nineties, luxury regained its spotlight, increasing consumption and expanding their product portfolios, placing the focus on accessories, leather goods and jewelry. Because of the accelerating advances in business, management practices also shifted, prompting a reinforcement of brand equity and intangible assets, and highlighting the importance of 'branding' (Okonkwo, 2007).

The main point of debate during the 2000s was the adoption of e-retail, where traditional luxury houses remained averse to in case it led to dilution. A dramatic change in the consumer was also seen, where it became self-aware to a higher degree. The consumer was now better informed, individualistic, and demanding, therefore, loyalty had to be earned with more effort. Consequently, firms elaborated more intricate plans to curate and nourish intangible assets to create and manage brand value (Okonkwo, 2007).

In modern times, luxury products have achieved never seen before levels of economic growth (Cantista & Sádaba, 2020). Luxury is used as an evasion or liberation from an everyday cycle of biological needs (Mendoça, 2020). Relying heavily on motivation to dissociate from the crowd (Perry et al., 2020).

2. THE TAXONOMY OF LUXURY

Although the luxury segment in fashion is a rapidly growing market, there is still a scarce definition of what luxury is. An interesting occurrence, since luxury brands are one of the most recognized and respected of the whole fashion industry (Fionda & Moore, 2009).

The bright lights, the models and flashy advertisements of luxury fashion have little to do with the brand itself most of the time. They are full of messages that promise a rich lifestyle and a comfortable life if only you manage to get your hands on the goods they advertise. It creates a craving for the product, not because of its characteristics, but because it promises an entry to the beautiful world of celebrities and glamour. Luxury goods are not a necessity but a way to fuel the spirit, a way to appreciate ourselves (Okonkwo, 2007). Luxury is something that one does not possess but wishes for, aspiration being one of its main attributes (Izquierdo, 2023).

Every purchase choice made daily is dictated by connotations and preconceptions. Even the smallest decision of whether to buy one brand of deodorant or another is based on the promises the brand makes to us, what we gain with the purchase. This feeling becomes multiplied when elevated to the luxury goods level, as they offer greater brand promises. If kept, the trust gained will continue to generate more purchases and more income for the brand. When it comes to luxury, the trust built between firm and consumer is much deeper and more personal because it is based on intrinsic aspirations rather than material possessions (Josa et al., 2020; Okonkwo, 2007). The human relationship with luxury is so intrinsic that we seek the superfluous as if it were a necessity (Mendoça, 2020).

There are four traditional main categories of luxury goods: fashion, perfumes and cosmetics, wines and spirits and watches and jewelry. Out of all the categories, fashion goods are the most complex to brand due to its rapid change nature, previous studies suggest (Fionda & Moore, 2009). There are also three recognizable levels by consumers which are accessible, intermediate, and inaccessible (De Barnier et al., 2012).

Even when there is no clear definition of luxury, especially for fashion, authors usually coincide in specific characteristics that a brand from this sector should recognize or strive to attain. Furthermore, it is possible to distinguish two inseparable dimensions in luxury, ethical and aesthetic. The first referring to the anti-economic facet of the concept, the second to the desirability the brands provide (De Barnier & Roux, 2020). Other authors created a variety of classifications. One of them identified two main components in luxury, personal and non-personal, and five dimensions: hedonic, extended self,

conspicuousness, uniqueness, and quality (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Dimensions that experts usually agree on and that will be debated further.

In this research, we go over the main concepts that come up in relation to luxury when studies search for an appropriate definition for the segment. Through the distinction of specific characteristics, it is possible to build a conceptual map of luxury fashion that will help classify brands accordingly.

2.1 BRAND IDENTITY

Brand identity has been an ongoing discussion in the research field that revolves mainly around two models, "Aaker's Brand Identity System" and "Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism".

2.1.1   Aaker's Brand Identity System

Aaker (1996, p. 68) defines identity as "a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. These associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organization members."

Aaker (1996) argued that brand identity could be seen through four different perspectives: brand as a product, brand as an organization, brand as a person and brand as a symbol.

- **Brand as a product**

The product is at the core of brand identity and so it involves product related attributes as well as scope, quality, and value, uses, country of origin, etc. It has an important influence on brand identity because it is directly linked to user requirements and product experience (Crespo, 2021).

- **Brand as an organization**

It has to do with organizational attributes that are considered more subjective, such as Customer Relationship Management, innovation, consumer concern and presence (Crespo, 2021), every aspect in an organization that would add to the value proposition and relationship with customers (Carnie, 2018).

- **Brand as a person**

It deals with the brand from the perspective of if it was a human being, expressing a unique brand personality (Carnie, 2018). It mostly includes the language a brand uses to communicate with the public, specific style of writing, attitude, colors, tone of voice in all the communication touchpoints. It is what brings consistency through all marketing strategies.

- **Brand as a symbol**

The brand's symbols should convey everything that the brand represents (Carnie, 2018). Consumers constantly encounter symbols and signs that refer to the brand identity as part of a bigger marketing

scheme (Izquierdo, 2023). These signs, together with the associations the public has formed around them, become a language the consumer has learned to read, another way of communicating through a semiotic text that can have a complex meaning with just a few symbols (König et al., 2016). They ensure that the promises of the brand can be effortlessly associated in a visual way, thus more effectively (White, 2018).
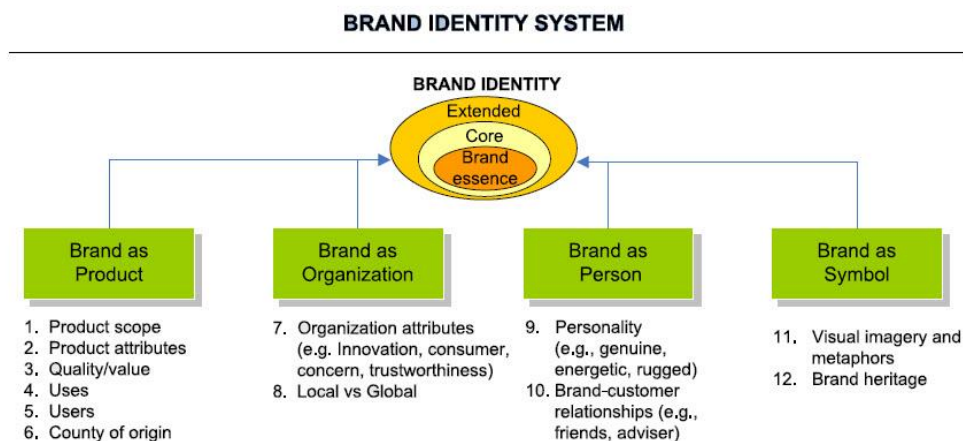

Figure 9 "Aaker's Brand Identity perspectives" Source: *(Van Haaften, 2023)*

2.1.2 Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism

"Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism", developed by Jean-Nöel Kapferer in 1986, on the other hand, not only considers the brand, but also the perspective of the consumer, distinguishing a sender and recipient side, as well as an externalization and internalization side (Carnie, 2018). The prism represents six essential elements of a brand that help establishing and maintaining the brand essence, them being physique, personality, culture, relationship, self-image, and reflection (Inkbot Design, 2023). Kapferer understood that there is an integral difference between identity and image. Whereas identity is how a brand would like to be perceived and the vision they project, brand image is the mental preconception the consumer has of that brand, and it may be separated or different from brand identity based on individual perceptions. Most of the times, for a brand to be successful, brand identity and brand image must become aligned (Inkbot Design, 2023).

- **Physique**

It plays a key role in establishing emotional and visual embodiment through physical attributes. It is a tangible representation of the brand's values and mission. It must shape how those values will play out, projecting what the brand stands for and what makes it different. It becomes a visual language through recognizable elements that convey style and evokes emotion. Brands differentiate themselves through these elements, creating a unique visual identity that leads their brand image (Inkbot Design, 2023).

- **Personality**

Similar to Aaker's model, personality is all about the human features present in the brand's character. Because the goal is to convey emotion, which is inherently a living being trait, there is a need to describe the brand as such as it will entice a much deeper connection between brand and customer. In marketing strategies, some brands even collaborate with celebrities that will show similar personality traits than the ones used to describe them. As we have stated previously, this connection is what reinforces emotional reaction and brand loyalty (Inkbot Design, 2023). While identity focuses on recognition, personality aims to provoke emotional response (McEnally & De Chernatony, 1999).

- **Culture**

Cultures hold significant meaning in terms of traditions, values, and conceptions. Companies usually associate with their country of origin for positive reinforcement, using values the culture is known for. It infuses brand ethics with a sense of belonging, thus appealing to a certain demographic. Not only it will help connecting with clientele from the brand's country of origin, but, by attributing the company the values of a certain culture, they can seem more trust-worthy to other demographics too. This allows for new shoemaker businesses in Italy, for example, to be seen as reliable due to the country's history with the craft (Inkbot Design, 2023).

- **Relationship**

This section of brand identity is crucial, as all the terms discussed come into play. The relationship between brand and customer can vary the same way personal relationships do. Because of this, it needs to be constantly nurtured, paying attention to the needs of the customer in order to generate appropriate responses that will result in loyalty (Fournier, 1998; Inkbot Design, 2023). Customer service is a central part of the equation and will ensure that the touch with the client remains aligned with the image the brand is trying to portray. It is important to notice that, while curating external relationships is crucial, taking care of internal relationships with employees is the most effective way to enforce company values and culture (Inkbot Design, 2023).

- **Self-image**

In the context of fashion, especially in luxury, customers tend to buy according to the self-image they would like to portray. Incorporating self-image into brand identity could be the key to attracting and retaining customers, through targeting a specific psychological group. It is a strategy based on psychological mechanisms that convinces that group that, by obtaining the product, they will achieve what the brand promises and they desire, that being elegance, confidence, classiness, etc. In this case, the brand is used as a means for the customer to achieve a self-image transformation (Inkbot Design, 2023).

- **Reflection**

Used mainly for benefit for the brand and marketing strategy purposes, reflection, although sometimes mistaken, differs from self-image. Reflection is a general representation the brand has of its customer base. It gathers the stereotypical notions of the average buyer (Inkbot Design, 2023).
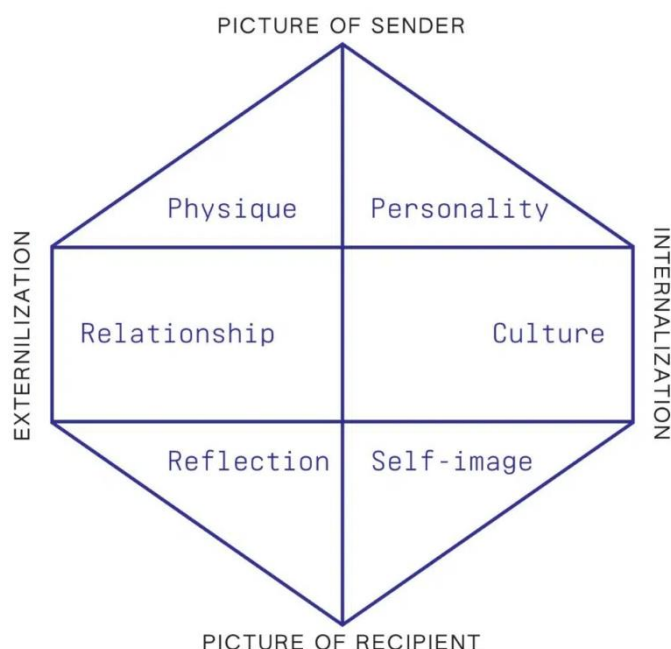

Figure 10 "Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism"

Source: *(Lombard, 2018)*

2.1.3 Identity and Image

These techniques, theoretical frameworks and notions ultimately answer questions about the brand's true mission, vision, and values, creating a comprehensive, multidimensional view of the brand, thus being able to define brand identity further through other visual or communication strategies.

Usually, brand identity in luxury fashion houses refers to a clear vision of what the brand stands for, a fixed set of values that defines the brands mission and guides their strategy (Fionda & Moore, 2009). The identity's intention is to be seen by the consumer in a certain manner, guiding brand image (Carnie, 2018). As of today, brand image, which is based on the perceptions the consumers have about a brand, is a significantly big selling factor in most luxury fashion houses (Okonkwo, 2007). Brand image consists of a mental representation in the mind of the consumer that portrays certain attributes and perceived benefits of a certain product or brand (Keller, 1993; Mestre, 1996).

Image is usually mistaken for identity, a mistake that can threat dilution or change the values of the brand (McEnally & De Chernatony, 1999). But, as has been established, it is the latter that guides the former. Brand identity is the factor that distinguishes the brand through time, deliver promises made to

clients and define the associations it pretends to achieve. Image is what the brand currently projects and identity the aspiration that constantly needs to be worked to (Mestre, 1996).

Specially now, in a globalized industry, one of the key aspects of image is consistency, to enable easy customer recognition (White, 2018). Customers expect the brand to share the same values all around the world, preserving the brand symbolism that defines a luxury firm (Matthiesen & Phau, 2010). In luxury, consumers will be primarily influenced by brand image and consider the brand based on symbolic attributes first and functional attributes second (Maurya & Mishra, 2012; Vickers & Renand, 2003). Nonetheless, inconsistencies can be avoided through communication, delivering the brand's message consistently to all publics and media (McEnally & De Chernatony, 1999).

2.2 BRAND SIGNATURE

Brand signature can be found in iconic products from a brand, a reoccurring theme in their best sellers or garment traits the brand is known for. Could be a specific product, a pattern or even a color. Sometimes, there is some type of connection between the brand signature and the brand's history (Fionda & Moore, 2009).

2.3 HERITAGE

Most luxury fashion houses are defined by a specific deep-rooted history with well-known founders that influences their identity (König et al., 2016). This heritage could be present in the form of knowledge or status, leading to specific techniques in production or a beneficial positioning in the market. It adds to the brand's authenticity (Fionda & Moore, 2009; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). Authenticity and emotions are at the core of luxury brand positioning (Heine, 2010), where identity is defined by track record, longevity, core values, use of symbols and knowledge about the brand's history (Balmer et al., 2007). The products and services must be credible and aligned with the desired positioning.
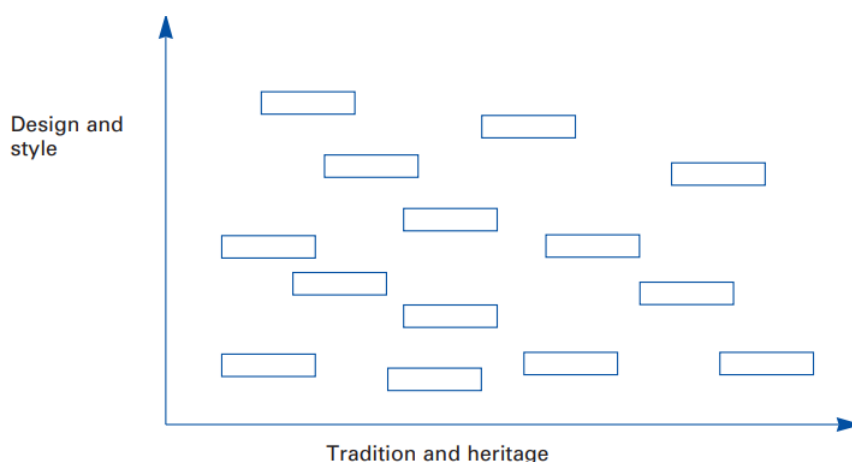

Figure 11 "The luxury brand positioning map" Source: *(Okonkwo, 2007)*

The definition of this identity makes it possible for a brand to carry out a differentiation strategy where heritage is the main driver a creator of value, making the firm trustworthy through its experience (Aaker, 1996, 2004) and, therefore, contributing to the brand's continuing success (König et al., 2016).

There is a causal relationship between brand heritage and customer perceived value that has been found in existing research, resulting in an increase of brand strength (Wiedmann et al., 2012).

Proof of authenticity may be vital when selling luxury fashion goods, as, today, is a requirement for a lot of experts or knowledgeable buyers. Fashion houses understood this early on, creating specific numeric codes that demonstrated that the product was authentic as far back as 1980. In purses and bags, a product category that has high collectable value, these codes can be found in minute tags that are hidden in interior pockets (Izquierdo, 2023).

New brands can only achieve the luxury status if they understand the importance of balance between brand concept and heritage (Okonkwo, 2007).

According to Balmer et al. (2007), a heritage brand could only be classified as such if it presented certain characteristics:

- A track record that demonstrated continued delivery of value to customer through the keeping of brand promises.
- A decent amount of longevity and experience, which is recognized as extremely difficult to measure.
- A deep set of core values that is continuously held and defended and that guides all aspects of corporate behaviour.
- A comprehensive system of symbols used in communications that reflect the past of the brand.
- History is considered important for its identity by the brand.

2.4 PRODUCT INTEGRITY AND INNOVATION

This term results very broad, but it is used to include qualities like quality, craftsmanship or even attention to detail (Fionda & Moore, 2009; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009), resulting in a more appealing appearance (Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2018). Found mostly in demanding processes, some of them by expert hands with decades of training in the craft (Okonkwo, 2007).

It also refers to the ability of putting quality and truth above benefits and quantity (Izquierdo, 2023; Kapferer, 2010). Even when a product present natural irregularities characteristic of what is handmade craftsmanship, it is still appreciated by luxury connoisseurs for its authenticity (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).

Luxury fashion houses and constantly ahead of the lead, being able to foresight what is to come in the industry and being the first ones to innovate and bring in new materials and processes. Just like Louis Vuitton introduced the canvas material in fashion in the nineteenth century (Okonkwo, 2007). Nowadays, newness and cultural relevance could be considered just as important as heritage (Sherman, 2018). The dimension of innovative value in luxury has gained importance in the latest decade as a response to the lack of rarity and exclusivity caused by the sectors' democratization (Chen & Lamberti, 2015; Kapferer, 2012).

2.5 PRICE

The premium price of luxury goods is a direct result of the production process and costs, but it is not entirely due to quality or craftsmanship. Price is also a strategy used to signify luxury status, it almost acts as a barrier of entry, producing a sense of exclusivity (Fionda & Moore, 2009; Perry et al., 2020). The connection between price and the perception of quality from the consumer is usually positive as well, meaning that the average buyer perceives a product as higher quality when the price range is higher too (Perry et al., 2020). Out of all the characteristics found in luxury, price is the easiest to measure and evaluate. Still, there is a grey area between premium and entry-level luxury pricing that makes it difficult to discern the segment of a product just based on price (Heine, 2012).

2.6 EXCLUSIVITY AND DIFFERENTIATION

Exclusivity is a general term that is almost unquantifiable, as it could be produced by a number of factors that differs in measure from one brand to another (Fionda & Moore, 2009; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Okonkwo, 2007). Firms and big fashion houses constantly compete to be the most exclusive, well-known brand to boost brand awareness and perceived quality (White, 2018). They understand the underlying thread in Plato's use of the concept luxury, where these goods are used as an escape from the quotidian. They make the customer feel that the exclusivity of a certain product offers that scape because it is unique and not something you achieve every day, thus increasing the desire for it (Mendoça, 2020).

Differentiation has always been a must for luxury fashion brands (White, 2018) and is possible through multiple case scenarios, from quality of materials to design or performance (Okonkwo, 2007). Supposes the specialization in a unique quality or value the brand possesses that is recognized by the entirety of the segment. It strives for leadership in a particular skill like quality, technology, innovation, etc. (Mestre, 1996). It is a task that needs to be done but still seen as daunting by many (White, 2018). In a highly competitive segment, luxury fashion brands must develop strategies for differentiation whilst maintaining their exclusivity (Maurya & Mishra, 2012).

2.7 A CONCEPTUAL MAP FOR LUXURY DEFINITION

Gathering all the expert opinions on what elements and characteristics should be found in a luxury goods fashion firm, it is possible to elaborate a conceptual map underlining the most essential aspects of the research.
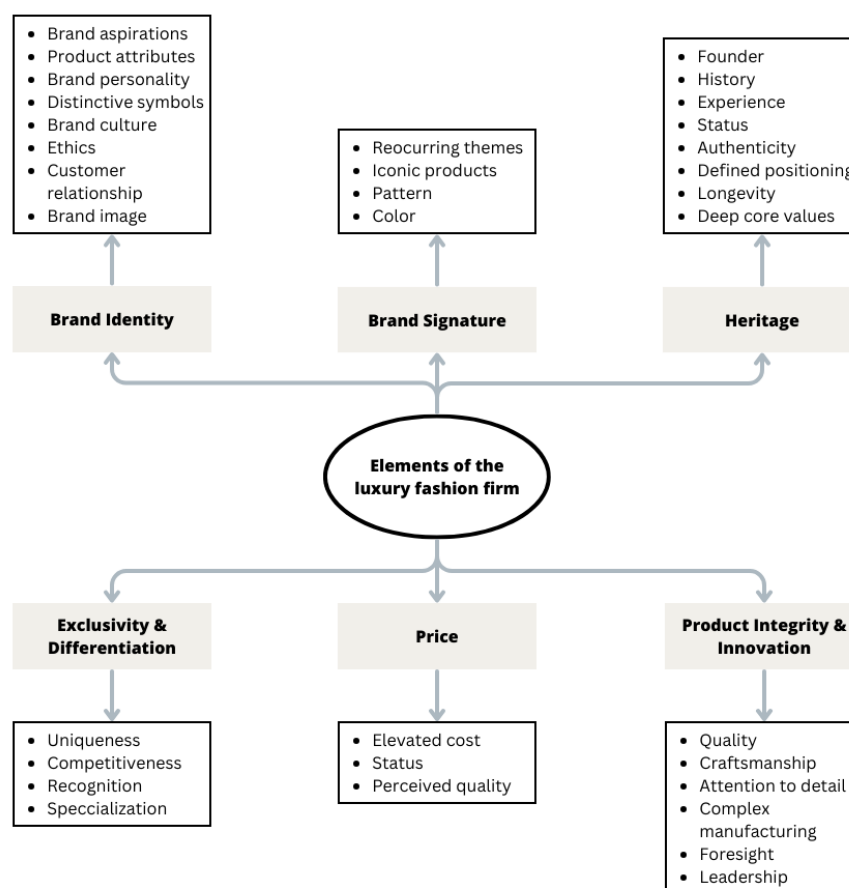

Figure 12 "Conceptual map of the elements in the luxury fashion firm" Source: *own elaboration.*

3. PERCEIVED VALUE AND BRAND EQUITY IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

All these qualities create brand value, an important intangible asset that should not be underestimated by any brand, as it is converted into billions of dollars in revenue (Okonkwo, 2007). Luxury value can also be divided into four individual dimensions: financial, functional, social, and individual (Wiedmann et al., 2012). The perceived value of a brand includes the consumer perception of a product's attributes and global functionality. It differs from objective perceived quality as it is much more abstract and dependent on the individual that carries out the evaluation (Zeithaml, 1988). It is determined by extrinsic attributes as well as intrinsic attributes and is an influence factor in purchase decisions and resulting brand loyalty, especially when the buyer is not familiar with the brand (Aaker, 1991). Brand loyalty consists of a preference for a brand within a product category. It is extremely powerful, as customers

will not seek out new communities they do not know if they are comfortable with the brands, they already trust based on their personal experiences. Sometimes, this decision can be conscious or unconscious. Regardless, it reduces search costs for the consumer and provides long-term benefit for the company (Okonkwo, 2007; Stephens, 2020).

Customers lean on desire of perceived value, not in a rational way, when making purchase decisions that are guided by culture, trends, and imitation of others' lifestyles (De Barnier & Roux, 2020). In is an effort to appear culturally significant in fear of rejection (Bierbrauer, 1992). This can also lead to a sensation of dissatisfaction with one's appearance if that standard is not met and well-being is not found in the purchase (Marks et al., 2006). Perceived value, positioning and brand loyalty culminate in what is called brand equity. It is a set of attributes distinctive to the brand that conform the worth attached to the brand name. Measured directly through value that can be expressed to ways. Firstly, through the sum of positive and negative associations to the brand. Secondly, when consumer-based equity can be expressed as an intangible asset represented in the company's balance sheet (Okonkwo, 2007). Brand equity is, ultimately, the response of the consumer to a purchase decision based on their brand knowledge (Keller, 1993).
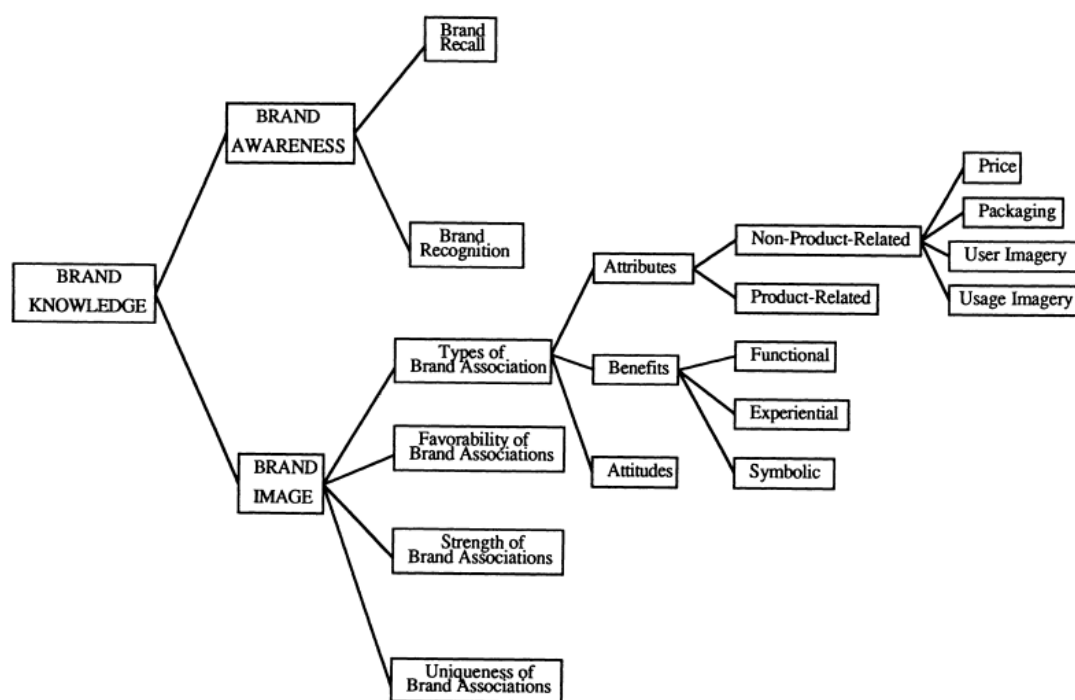

Figure 13 "Keller's dimensions of brand knowledge" Source: *(Keller, 1993)*

B) BRANDING AND REBRANDING, THE IMPORTANCE OF MARKETING THE BRAND FOR FASHION FIRMS

In a time where the market is oversaturated with, not only brands, but images, texts, videos and other visuals, the need for branding becomes evident. Each brand looks for a unique tone of voice and feeling that will help it build a relationship and create a connection with the customer. And, while the emphasis is usually on logos, there are entire visual systems dedicated to conveying the brand identity.

1. CORPORATE BRANDING AND ITS EVOLUTION

1.1 WHERE DOES CORPORATE BRANDING COME FROM?

In its most pure form, branding has existed for hundreds of years. Depending on the definition the expert uses, the date of origin tends to vary. Some researchers date it back to pre-historic times when farmers used to mark cattle with a symbol to differentiate their product from other farmers'. These marks would often be symbolic of quality. After that, the same notion can be traced to the Greek or Roman empires when they started branding signs in well-known commercial trade routes with specific product descriptions (Okonkwo, 2007).

More refined branding can be found in the sixteenth century, where whiskey distillers used to brand the distillery's name and whisky type on the wooden barrels. Regular consumers could quickly identify the whiskey's characteristics if they were familiar with the names burned in the wood. This development experienced exponential growth during the nineteenth century. As part of the industrial revolution, products started carrying labels to indicate the origin or merchant that distributed it, most of the labels morphing along the years to show a brand name instead of the latter, the first time this occurred at a mass production level. Still, it remained to differentiate competitors and lacked the inclusion of it into a bigger scale marketing plan, as we know of today (Okonkwo, 2007).

The concept of branding, especially corporate branding, has suffered a significant evolution in meaning over the decades to become something more intangible where knowing what a brand stands for in every social aspect could be crucial for end-consumers' decisions. The brand is now attached to a sense of emotional response from the consumer and financial value for the owner (Okonkwo, 2007).

Therefore, the brand could be described as "a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of these that is intended to identify the product of a seller and to differentiate it from those of competitors. It is an identifiable entity of a company's total offerings that makes specific and consistent promises of value, which results in an overall experience for the consumer or anyone who comes in contact with the brand (Okonkwo, 2007)." Other authors describe the brand as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of these, intended to identify and differentiate the goods or services of one seller from those of competitors (Mascarenhas et al., 2006, p. 399)".

Synthesizing these concepts, the brand turns to be the sum of all characteristics and assets of a brand name product, service, or group that differentiates it from the competition, as well as the perception of the brand by the public (Landa, 2011).

A brand encompasses all the experiences perceived by the consumer in all contacts points delivered by the brand and it forms a place in their mind based on the perceived benefits they can gain from it. "Products can be easily copied and become outdated, but brands are unique and timeless (Okonkwo, 2007, p. 9)."

Therefore, branding curates the idea of a brand, developing a name and visual identity amongst other activities. It is an effort to unify consumer experiences by an integrated program consisting of a common visual and verbal language that is supposed to convey brand identity. It engulfs every application, platform, communication, and advertisement, creating a specific design language unique to the brand (Landa, 2011).

Creating a design language for a brand is essential for marketing as it assures consistency. It consists of fabricating some sort of style guide that will lead the design of products, campaigns, and even architectural settings. These languages are not rigid by any means but include a repeating sample of materials, color schemes, shapes, patterns, textures, and layouts that the designer can modify or vary, keeping elements and discarding others. Therefore, the work done will be similar but not identical. Previous studies suggest that the public shows influenced positive attitudes towards brands that implement strong design languages, evidence pointing towards the effective contribution of a defined brand identity (White, 2018).

The importance of branding, however, has become more studied and used in the last sixty years as it can also be used, not only for physical products, but for service, companies, countries, or individuals (Okonkwo, 2007). Similar to human beings, brands can also be described through a set of characteristics, as experts like Aaker and Kapferer have defined. These characteristics give meaning to the company, evoking specific associations attached to the corporate brand name (White, 2018).

Currently, a business that does not count with a firm definition of its purpose, lacks direction, and could potentially lead to the business' failure. The absence of consistency in brand communications conveys a message of its own and fails to instill recognition amongst consumers. Investing time and resources in building specific protocols for imagery and public communications is not a mindless act at all. As mentioned for brand identity, consistency in the previous fields ensures that the consumer will attach certain ideas to a brand in their mind unconsciously (Manavis et al., 2023). Every experience the customer has at every touch point should be a positive one (Landa, 2011).

Brand recognition is an important part in marketing strategy, especially if trying to build a specific reputation in competitive markets where the need for differentiation is clear. Not many products are truly a unique offer, usually, they offer similar or identical functions in what's called parity. Branding allows the product to stand out (Landa, 2011). If the brand in question does not resume any effort to do so, two possible scenarios can occur. The first is that the public will not connect with the brand, and consequently will forget or ignore anything that has to do with it. The other scenario could even be worse, as the public would form its own opinion on the brand without any influence or other external influences such as competitors, which is dangerous, as opinion and reputation are very difficult to shift in the mind of the consumer.

Design professor Robin Landa (2011) distinguished five stages of the branding process for a coherent branding strategy:

Orientation → Analysis → Concepts → Design → Implementation

The **orientation** stage consists of carrying out extensive research prior to developing the strategy. The strategy occurs during the analysis phase. Brand strategy is the core of the process, the underlying essence of branding that unifies every application, defining the brand's personality and promise through positioning. Essentially, it defines where the brand stands in the marketplace and determines brand architecture, meaning the product portfolio (Landa, 2011).

The next phase, **conceptual design**, revolves around the idea that every brand has a quality at its core that becomes its construct. Even if other brands possess the same quality, owning it in the mind of the consumer will ensure that the product will become the first choice against competition. Constructs can come from various backgrounds such as heritage, unique functionality, originality, expertise, etc.; and factors like differentiation, ownership, consistency, and relevance for the brand must be considered when formulating one (Landa, 2011).

During the **design** phase, the previous elements are visualized, always having in mind differentiation, brand promise and possible branding applications. Composition and visualization attributes express a visual attitude that acts as a differentiator, making the brand memorable and defining an individual character that should stand out from competitors. As we have seen, brand promise is what the brand intends to carry out, but sometimes the public can have a different perception of its delivery. Lastly, design is going to depend on the point of contact and media used, being a letterhead, website, corporate statement, print, broadcast, advertisement, product placement, etc. (Landa, 2011).

When it comes to rebranding, this whole process changes and the objective transforms from creating to reinventing, repositioning, and redesigning.

1.2 <u>MODERN CORPORATE BRANDING, BEYOND THE VISUALS</u>

Branding has long been mistaken with advertising. The latter is a conscious effort of promotion, whether for the brand itself or a product. It considered a transactional exchange for financial benefit, like, for example, a specific campaign (Stephens, 2020). Corporate branding is not an intermittent effort, one that the company can make only when it is punctually beneficial. It is a long-term effort and a reflection of the company's actions and goes beyond what it is trying to convey (Josa et al., 2020). More specially, it is the result of a series of inputs that reveal to the public the true character of a company. Because the result lies in the heads of the customers, it cannot be transactional, thus bought, but transformational. Consequently, a company cannot turn to branding in a moment of crisis, instead, it needed to have cultivated it beforehand, as it is not what the company says but what it ultimately is (Stephens, 2020).

2. BRANDING FOR THE LUXURY FASHION FIRM

The objective of branding is to achieve great positioning inside the mind of the consumer through certain associations that relate to the firm's image, purpose, and mission (Okonkwo, 2007). It strives to set the brand apart from competitors while looking for people who have specific needs and preferences to build a strong relationship (Inkbot Design, 2021).

Just like Louis Vuitton did with logomania, Chanel with tweed or Schiaparelli with gold accessories. Iconic signifiers are what independent fashion houses were built upon, transforming into multi-million-dollar luxury businesses while telling the stories of their founders and creating an emotional connection with the public (Sherman, 2018).

Figure 14 "Louis Vuitton, Chanel, and Schiaparelli brand identifiers" Source: *own elaboration.*

When a great branding strategy results in positive associations in the mind of the consumer, this is usually translated into brand loyalty, where the consumer in question is more predisposed to make a purchase of a brand rather than another due to what they already know about it. That purchase has been nurtured by the continuous messages the person has been exposed to. Brand loyalty is mostly based on commitment, which is what builds brand equity. The more commitment the consumers have to a brand, the more equity it holds, which adds value to the brand (Josa et al., 2020; Landa, 2011; Okonkwo, 2007).

The truth is that luxury brands hold all the trend-setting power as they are bestowed with the infinite authority that only a well-known name can give. Only by hearing a name, by seeing a logo or a specific characteristic of a product are we able to spark a though, an opinion about said brand, as futile as it may be (Okonkwo, 2007).

Branding is what keeps the wheel of desire for the future going as luxury is constantly moving forward. It is the rule setter of the fashion world, never present, never staying in today and always thinking about tomorrow, keeping in their craft the inspiration from the past to shape the future. Creating a strong brand that portrays this strong desire for the future and constant change engages the viewer like nothing else, fueling the need to know what these big fashion minds are going to do next (Okonkwo, 2007). In

the present atmosphere, the ability to re-interpret tradition and the ability of linking past and present in a meaningful way is the key challenge for luxury brands (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Phan et al., 2011).

Recent brands state that heritage and an impactful history is the base of the storytelling, but that story needs to be filled with innovation. Although recently, new entrants to the luxury market have shown less interest about heritage, stating that the traditional formula of brand DNA is overrated, and focus on quality and uniqueness is what attracts the new customer (Sherman, 2018). The same conclusion was gathered in a Deloitte study in 2017, where the marketing messages that successfully appealed to consumers where those revolving around newness and cultural relevance rather than heritage and inspirational qualities (BOF Team, 2018). Holli Rogers, chief executive of Browns Fashion commented in an interview that "brands may have lost their relevance in culture, perhaps because they're telling too much of the heritage story (Ahmen, 2017)." Therefore, it is evident that balance between past and future is what keeps luxury fashion the leader in the industry. Brand inner codes persevere through time, but style always changes.

This example is constantly viewed in fashion houses, as we entered the period of founder deaths. Since most iconic firms were born in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, their original creators have been replaced by new creative directors. Part of their work is to take the designer's original vision and re-interpret it in an effort to modernize those tenets (Sherman, 2018). It does not matter which creative director is at the lead of Chanel, tweed will always be an integral part of the brand. Repeating those symbols in various collections is what makes them stand the test of time.

As we have seen previously, identifiers are a visual language that conveys meaning and brand identity. We have also distinguished the difference between identity and image. That is why it is extremely important for brands to act upon their promises. As has been stated customers will perceive, not only the intention of a brand's words, but their actions as well. This is branding too and has placed an incredible focus on fashion companies as the industry has been under scrutiny since the environmental revolution of this century. There is a need for "luxury with good intentions" (Gutsatz & Heine, 2018). A growing desire for authenticity and sincerity from brands as it is not enough to be neutral, now a brand must be proactive to do less harm.

Just in 2019, the luxury fashion conglomerate Kering announced that it would not be working with underage models anymore, that it would develop stricter animal welfare standards across their supply chain and would set new climate goals. As a rival, LVMH, also announced a series of corporate programs in response. Two decades ago, corporations were less inclined to dialogue, letting brand and their work to speak for themselves (Sherman, 2019).

The shift has come from a wave of new corporate communication that stemmed from the new digital age. A period where the Internet has established a sense of forced transparency. Nowadays, the customer

base knows everything that goes behind the scenes and can be quick to turn judgement into financial losses. In a study done by social media solutions provider Sprout Social, they found that 86% of consumers believed transparency to have increased importance and 81% believed companies should be responsible for a high index of transparency (Sprout Social, 2018). Companies quickly understood this to be an integral part of branding (Josa et al., 2020) and have been using it to communicate messages about their values and how they operate through financial, environmental and responsibility reports. The challenge for fashion brands, especially luxury firms that comprise bigger conglomerates, is to convey those corporate values while standing apart and remaining unique (Sherman, 2019).

In an interview with The Business of Fashion in 2013, Louise Beveridge stated that "it's not just about caring, it's about action. We don't just care about sustainability, we have a team of experts on energy, biodiversity and so on (Kansara, 2013)."

3. HOW TO COMPOSE A STRONG VISUAL IDENTITY SYSTEM

People tend to confuse the terms brand identity, branding, corporate identity, and visual identity, thus using them interchangeably. But branding is a broader term that engulfs several activities, one being visual identity (Landa, 2011).

A design strategy is meant to connect with the consumer on an intrinsic level through imagery that will evoke some type of emotion (Manavis et al., 2023), and appearance is the first thing the public notices (Inkbot Design, 2021). Aesthetics ensure that the attention of the buyer is captivated, with a focus on the online setting, as it is easy for them to scroll without looking twice, giving the brand a small window to make an impression (Cai, 2019). An, even though, design and visual content seems to be one of the biggest challenges for 23.7% of marketers (Enfroy, 2023), it is only because of its impact on purchase decision due to the ease with which the human brain processes visual recognition. While a person is able to remember 10% of what they heard three days ago, it can recall 65% of an image viewed in the same period of time (Medina, 2008). As a result, visual content has overtaken verbal elements in marketing strategies (Phillips et al., 2014).

Visual identity includes all the observable and measurable elements of the organization's identity that are used in a visual comprehensible representation of a brand, including several graphic design applications like the logo, packaging, uniforms, corporate communications, etc. These are visual differentiators, unlike verbal ones like the name and tagline. If well-designed, it can impact the brand's perceived value immensely (Crespo, 2021; Landa, 2011). The visual identity system also ensures a certain degree of consistency across the brand's communication effort (Wertz, 2021). Through visuals, it is easy for the consumer to differentiate luxury from mass-market with a glance due to their aesthetic

(Crespo, 2021). The consumer should be able to identify the brand by visuals without hearing or seeing an explicit name.
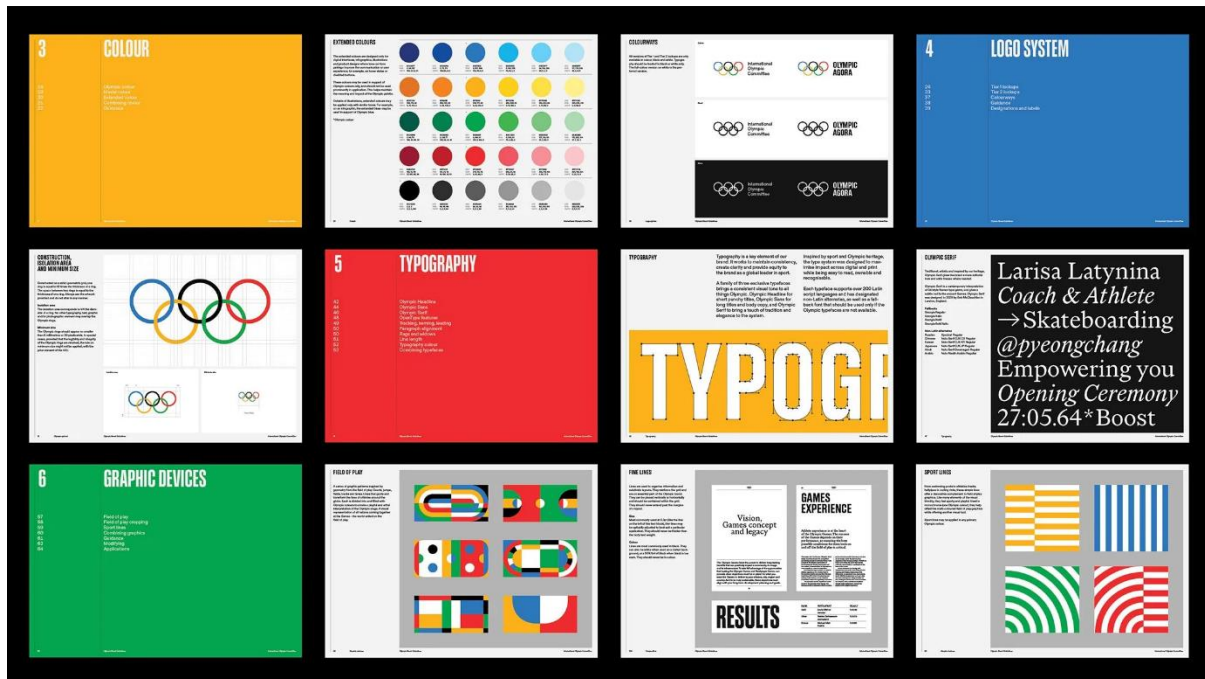

Figure 15 "The Olympics' visual identity system" Source: *(IOC News, 2022)*

It was established in previous sections how impactful it can be to get through to consumers through emotions. Primarily, because they generate a response that can help them recall a specific brand according to a specific set of factors. Whereas emotions are intangible, the visual identity system is a tangible resource that represents the brand's qualities and values (Wertz, 2021). Making sure this system is aligned with the rest of the company's strategy is essential.

A recognizable logo is a strong tool, but it alone cannot create the visual environment necessary to make an imprint in consumers' minds. Visual context provided by supporting imagery can significantly improve retention and future recognition when visual elements apart from the logo are used. Furthermore, if the brand is relatively new to the market, this visual context can help understand brand identity and explain the logo chosen by the corporation. In other cases where the response to redesigning already existing logos is usually negative, the use of supporting elements, can aid in the minimization or even annulment of said response (Wertz, 2021). As years pass, new luxury brands are already being born with a strong set of values, adequately represented through a well-through system. As it has evolved from an option into a necessity for differentiation (Scott, 2020).

Just like there are different elements part of a visual identity, there are various purposes or uses for one such as the creation of a new company, a name change, a redesign to stay relevant, a redesign to ensure success, a reposition in the marketplace or the occurrence of a merger (Landa, 2011). When redesigning

a logo, for instance, the total replacement of the symbol instead of the modification of some parts can lead to a negative cognitive effect from the consumer where they are convinced that it is a new brand, disassociating all the knowledge they previously had about the firm. Consequently, the brand losses accumulated brand equity (Di et al., 2022).

Essentially, a brand counts with different parts of their visual identity, just like a kit, that is supplied to the consumer. Those parts get modified and reinterpreted constantly while maintaining a similar feel and are used for all types of applications (Mondalek & Lieber, 2020). But, at all times, it should strive to be recognizable, memorable, distinctive, sustainable, clear and flexible (Landa, 2011).

3.1 THE NAME

The name is the primary form of identification that will constantly be displayed visually and aurally in communications, a verbal identity and signature. An appropriate name will be the result of a well-rounded strategic thinking process to fit the brand. It is important to dwell in this process as the name usually remains unchanged, unlike logos, which periodically change.

For the name to be effective, it will usually be short, distinct, and memorable and will convey either product benefits or the nature of the brand. It needs to serve a purpose, adding significance and extendable, meaning capable of evolving as the company grows. It is also crucial for it to be long-lasting, legally owned, and easy to pronounce and write, therefore usable worldwide (Crespo, 2021; Landa, 2011). Marketers over the years have been able to fit brand names into specific categories. The main ones being:

- **Founder name** → The organization is named after its founder or family name and carries some sort of perception of accountability. This is the case for most of the modern luxury fashion houses (Crespo, 2021; Landa, 2011). Examples of this would be Chanel, Hermès, Guerlain, Balenciaga, Louis Vuitton, Prada…
- **Descriptive** → It describes what the organization is or does, meaning product or service (Crespo, 2021; Landa, 2011). Ex: Burger King or Coca-Cola.
- **Fabricated** → Names that are made up for the specific purpose of serving as a brand name, as a result, these words don't exist in any language but always intend to sound appealing (Crespo, 2021; Landa, 2011). For example: INDITEX or Oysho.
- **Metaphor** → These are allegorical or symbolical names made from other names or words that already exist, but that are taken to serve their own purposes, such as Nike, which is the Greek goddess of victory (Crespo, 2021; Landa, 2011).
- **Acronym** → Shortened names made from bigger words or brand names such as DKNY (Donna Karan New York) (Crespo, 2021; Landa, 2011).

3.2 THE LOGOTYPE

It is considered the centerpiece differentiator and identifier of a brand. Centered around the company's name or initials, it tells a focused visual story compressed in a singular simplified unit (Crespo, 2021). Before thought merely as a trademark symbol, now it conveys additional meaning mainly for marketing purposes. It consisted of an identifier craftsmen would use to mark their work. After the Industrial Revolution, logos would differentiate a product from its competitors, when so many companies started emerging. This competition would highlight the importance of standing out thorough visual identifiers and brand signatures (Wertz, 2021).

The logo is not limited to the company itself, rather than signifying a bigger company culture that the consumer associated with a brand (Oswald, 2012). As it happens with other imagery surrounding the brand, it evolves into a pictorial meaning for something much more subjective than the corporate company, becoming part of the image of the brand itself (König et al., 2016). What a logo looks like visually could be considered less important than what it means in the mind of the consumer (Wertz, 2021). The public assigns the meaning to a logo, making their own assumptions that are always influenced by the brand or other external factors.

As the logo is the first piece of the puzzle in any visual design process, the font, shape and color palette that result from its design will be the framework of the remaining system, there are also several categories found in logos such as wordmark, lettermark, symbol, pictorial symbol, abstract symbol, nonrepresentational, character icon, combination mark, and emblem (Landa, 2011).

The design process of the logo depends entirely on the designer's ability to compress the identity of the brand in a small unit as it must convey a story (Landa, 2011).
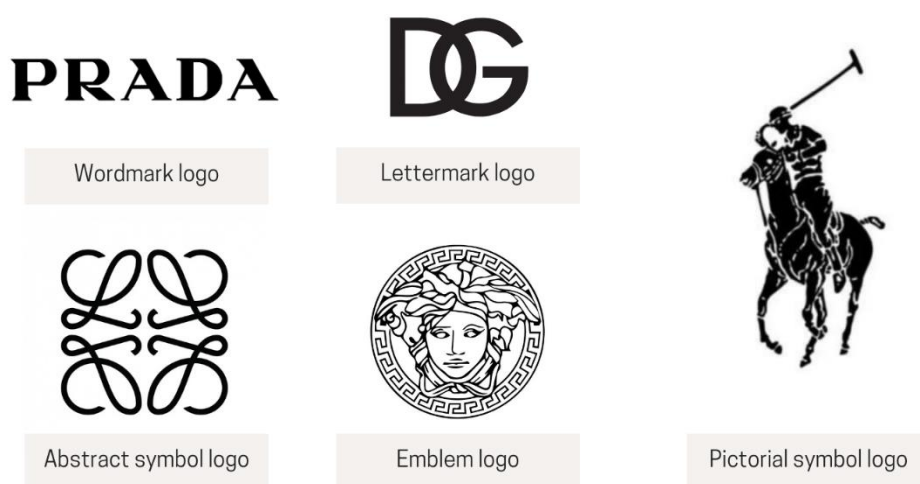
Figure 16 "Fashion examples of types of logos" Source: *own elaboration.*

3.3 TYPOGRAPHY

Typefaces are known for carrying heritage and connotative meaning. Therefore, this meaning needs to be taken into account when selecting a typography that is appropriate and shows expressive potential. Some considerations to keep in mind are legibility, connotation, uniqueness, differentiation, typeface family for flexibility, application to ranges of sizes, compatibility with color palette, etc. (Landa, 2011).

Once the logo is approved, typography is just a mere extension of that language, as it should be influence by the logo's elements to achieve a cohesive look. Moreover, there should be a choice for primary, secondary, and tertiary typeface (Ritchie, 2023).

Figure 17 "Vogue typography chart"

Source *(Nikolic, 2018)***:**

3.4 TAGLINE

It is a phrase typically used in conjunction with a brand's name or logo, also referred colloquially as 'motto' or 'slogan'. It typically does not stand alone in marketing but is a complementary identity element and can change over time if no longer found useful or representative (Crespo, 2021).

Figure 18 "Nike's tagline" Source: *(MDG, 2023)*

3.5 COLOR PALETTE

Colors can be one of the main identifiers for a brand along the logo, used individually or as a palette. Many build their identity promotion strategies around a signature color. It is a powerful tool because color has proved to provide psychological connotations that can be used strategically to benefit differentiation or preconceptions (Crespo, 2021; Shannon, 2020). Everyone immediately recognizes Pantone 1837 as jeweler Tiffany's signature color, which is present all over their communications, advertising, marketing, packaging, and products. So much so that the common name given is 'Tiffany Blue'. The same occurrence can be seen in the famous Pantone 18-1663 TP red sole of the shoe brand Christian Louboutin, or the characteristic orange used in all the Hermès packaging (Shannon, 2020).

The choice of color dictates how the brand will be perceived, the promises and identity it wants to project. Not only that, but it needs to stand in time as well. It is advised for brands not to use trendy colors because of their lack of longevity. On of the main reasons high-end brands tend to stick with white, black, and neutral shades, adding that black and white have widely been accepted as classic and elegant colors, fit for luxury (Shannon, 2020).

And while color is very effective in terms of evoking brand identity, it is the most difficult to own. On the contrary, names, logos, patterns, and shapes are usually trademarked without many incidences. But, in the most general sense, color registration is very rare and, in most cases, not possible. There needs to be certain conditions in place for the case to be approved. For example, the shade needs to be already associated by the public with the brand and the intended usage also needs to be specified. A hurdle for newer brands, as the color would have to be used for a long period of time to create that type of association in the minds of consumers (Shannon, 2020).

Figure 19 "Tiffany's, Louboutin and Hermés trademarked colors"
Source: *own elaboration.*

3.6 ARCHITECTURE AND INTERIOR DESIGN

Architecture and interior design are a physical reflection of the brand's identity and creating special and unique atmospheres at flagship stores is a must for luxury fashion houses, that rely so heavily on experience (Crespo, 2021). Luxury fashion brands expend significant portions of their wealth to ensure the architectural setting as well as the interior design of their flagship stores is unique and aligned with the brand's identity, portraying an exclusive feel and ensuring a customer experience that will not be found in any other store, partially through recognizable features or symbols that are tied to a clear association with the brand (Cai, 2019; White, 2018).Nowadays, the consumer is also requesting that the same attention to detail put in stores is found on the retailer's website, while keeping up with trends as well as technology. Visual identity can help build that unified experience people are searching for in luxury (Cai, 2019).

3.7 Patterns

Patterns can become an instantly recognizable symbol for the brand and can be used in a variety of different environments. They can provide texture, fill in blank spaces and fulfil the brand experience as a whole. With a recognizable pattern there can even be a lack of logo in a product (Crespo, 2021).

Figure 20 "Missoni's chevron pattern" Source: *(Shoaib, 2022)*

3.8 Photography style

Image style is always aligned with the brand's strategy. The art direction in photography leads the consumer mind to a certain set of emotions and plays into the power of storytelling (Crespo, 2021). Because it communicates the brand story, it should use cohesive visual styles and appear un the highest quality possible (Ritchie, 2023).

4. The Corporate Identity manual

With the creation of a visual identity system comes the elaboration of a corporate identity manual consisting of a document containing adequate standards for the use of the system that must be kept up to date. It intends to ensure consistency and logo recognition across the desired media, maintaining integrity of meaning and graphic standards internally and externally (Landa, 2011; Valades, 2021). Every brand adapts their branding guidelines according to their graphic elements and necessities, but every one of them should include a series of basic standards. For the sake of visualizing the document, a basic structure is going to be displayed of the most common sections using a well put together example.

- Cover and content table, small and functional.
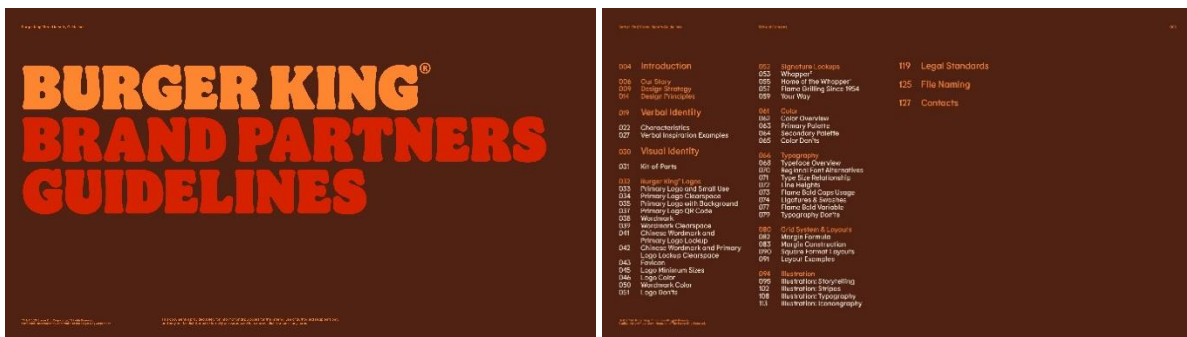
Figure 21 "BK Corporate Identity Manual: cover and contents" Source:
(Branding Style Guides, 2020)

- Before going straight into graphics, there should be an introduction where the mission, vision, values, and personality are presented. It is important as well to define the tone of voice (Álvarez, 2019; Valades, 2021).

Figure 22 "BK Corporate Identity Manual: tone of voice"

Source: *(Branding Style Guides, 2020)*

'Blanding' and the standardization of visual identity in luxury fashion

- Moodboard that will help visualize the concept and identity of the brand (Álvarez, 2019).

Figure 23 "BK Corporate Identity Manual: moodboard"

Source: *(Branding Style Guides, 2020)*

- The principal logo and symbol as well as its variations. It must be shown alone, with the tagline, along with a protection zone, sizes permitted, context, spacing, positive or negative space, placement, and improper use of the logos (Álvarez, 2019; Bynder, 2023).

Figure 24 "BK Corporate Identity Manual: principal logo, protection zone and sizes"

Source: *(Branding Style Guides, 2020)*

- The guidelines should specify the color using references for both printing and digital media (Pantone, CMYK, RGB, HEX) (Álvarez, 2019).

Figure 25 "BK Corporate Identity Manual: color guidelines" Source: *(Branding Style Guides, 2020)*

- The typographic system and its different combinations (Álvarez, 2019).

Figure 26 "BK Corporate Identity Manual: typography" Source: *(Branding Style Guides, 2020)*

- Imagery and graphic elements such as corporate photographs, library of iconography, illustrations, and patterns (Álvarez, 2019).
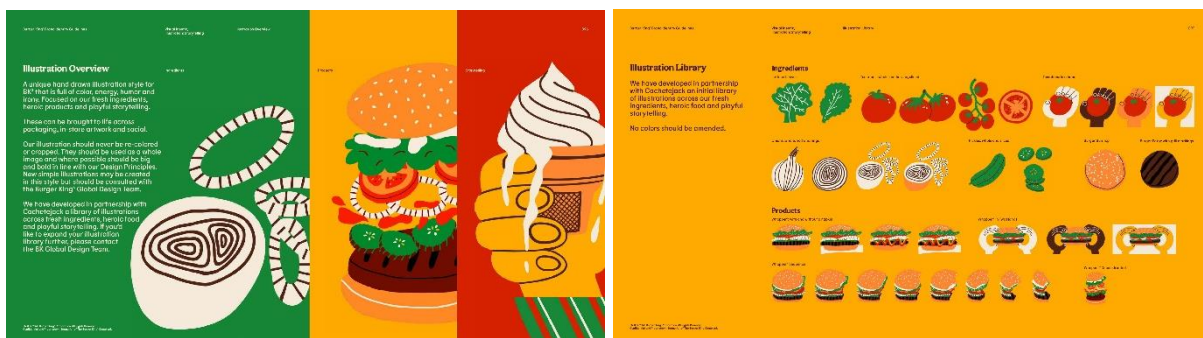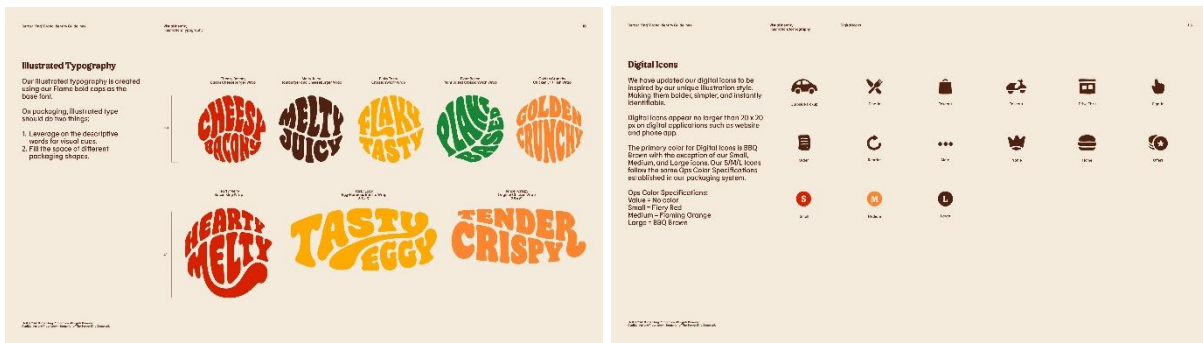
Figure 27 "BK Corporate Identity Manual: graphic elements" Source: *(Branding Style Guides, 2020)*

- Possible applications in various types of media, physical and digital (Álvarez, 2019).
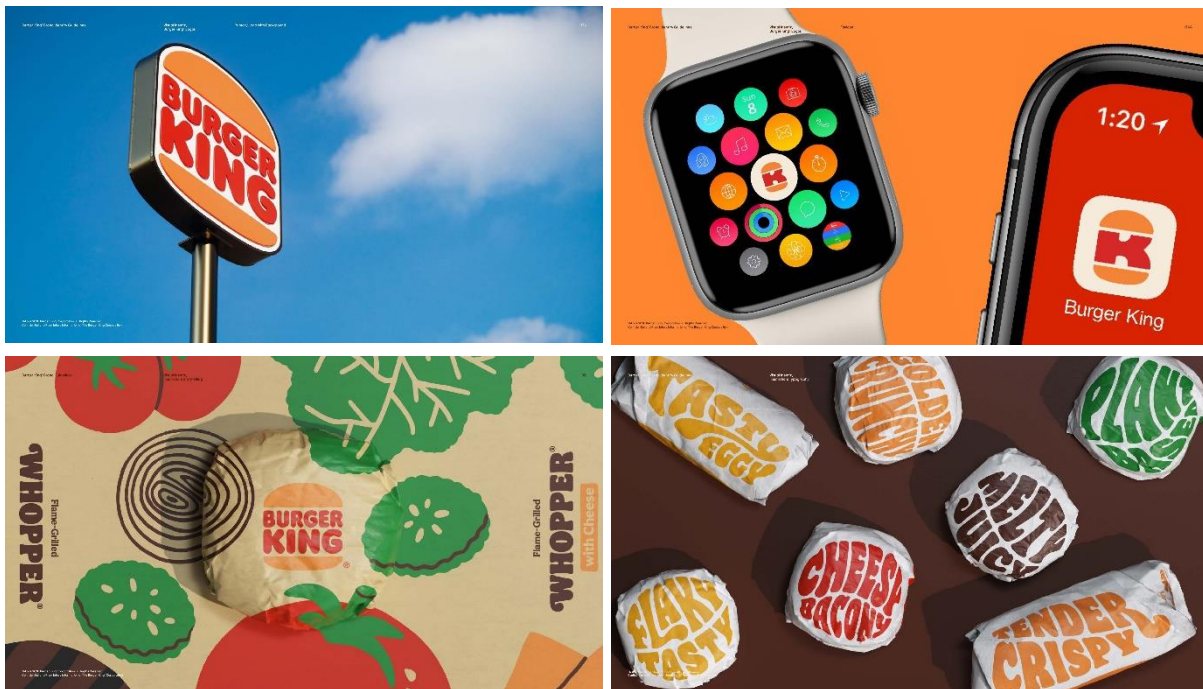
Figure 28 "BK Corporate Identity Manual: aplications" Source: *(Branding Style Guides, 2020)*

- Placements, grid systems and margins.

Figure 29 "BK Corporate Identity Manual: placements and grid system" Source: *(Branding Style Guides, 2020)*

C) 'BLANDING', THE STANDARDIZATION OF VISUAL IDENTITY IN THE LAST DECADE

Over the last decade, the public has seen how every luxury brand has replaced their visual systems for a much more dulled Sans-Serif version. The cause stems from the rise of popularity in logoed products and the intrinsic necessity to show off luxury in social media. This trend has, however, remained controversial and has shown signs of not being sustainable in the long-term.

1. THE SANS SERIF INVASION AND HOW IT AFFECTED LUXURY FASHION

The term '*Blanding'*, a mixture of the word 'branding' with the word 'bland', was first used by Thierry Brunfaut, creative director at the firm Base Design, in 2018 referring to it as "the worst branding trend". A phenomenon where firms were replacing their historic logos with a version in a simple, bold sans-serif font, accompanied by minimalist motifs, packaging and black and white color palettes. And it expanded, not only to logos and names, but to company culture, recycled packaging and inspirational copy and paste stories of brand founders (Mondalek & Lieber, 2020).

Later in 2020, Bloomberg Opinion writer Ben Schott expressed his approval and dwelled more in depth into the term. He claimed there was a certain duality when it came to '*blands'* as he called them. They claimed to be unique in product characteristics, purpose and delivery but exhibited the same look, feel and tone of voice as hundreds of others. He even identified a '*Blanding'* spectrum, affirming there was not just a hundred percent bland brand, but that a brand carried a certain amount of blandness (Mondalek & Lieber, 2020).

The Sans Serif is a larger family of typeface that includes many different typographies. It is derived from the Serif font. A Serif is a line motif that is added to the beginning or end of a letter, being purely decorative. If those motifs are erased, the result would be a Sans Serif font. Recognizable Serif fonts would be "Times New Roman", "Baskerville" or "Garamond", while Sans Serif, meaning literally "without the Serif", would be "Helvetica", "Open Sans" or "Neue Haas Grotesk" (Álvarez Tocalli, 2022).

Figure 30 "Visual difference between Sans Serif and Serif" Source: *(TypeType, 2022)*

Migrating from the world of start-ups and tech, the '*Blanding'* trend can be traced back to industrial and technological companies founded by well-connected business owners (Mondalek & Lieber, 2020; Pearl, 2023). Apple, Google, Airbnb, Uber, and other tech giants use what is known as intuitive branding, which uses simplistic visual elements that convey newness and innovation. For the sector, this design language has been extremely successful, becoming a recognized formula (Brunfaut & Greenwood, 2018).

It was already speculated that the fashion industry would start being directly affected and influence by technology, creativity, and young consumers (Izquierdo, 2023). And so, luxury fashion houses started adopting these thick, unembellished typographies and each one of them, Balenciaga, Berluti, Celine, Balmain and many more, gave a different reasoning trying to justify it by alleging it was a unique creative choice (Pearl, 2023).

The rules to '*Blanding'* are quite simple. The brand just needs a name in a sans-serif font that is clean and readable with a generous amount of white space around it, a direct tone of voice, lack of symbolic logo, and, in occasions, the use of illustrations and vibrant colors (Brunfaut & Greenwood, 2018).

Brunfaut approaches the trend from a branding perspective. As it has previously been discussed, the essence of branding is differentiation, to use symbols that would evoke associations in the mind of the consumer with a specific brand. It is a way to tell the buyer to choose your product over someone else's without any words, just using a visual design language. Blanding, on the contrary, is not designed to stand out, but to blend in (Brunfaut & Greenwood, 2018).

It is not unusual for a brand to update their visual identity in order to signify a change in direction or strategy, but consumers often may find it hard to adjust to said change (Wertz, 2021). These creative choices, as they called them, did not go undetected as an image of the compared logos started making the rounds on social media, which began to fill with backlash (Pearl, 2023). Comments about it were divided. Surprisingly, branding specialists were the ones to point out the benefits, calling it "modern utility". The cleans letters allowed for a more legible and scalable logo, making it a suitable choice for any type or form of media, like a smartphone screen, including products. Its simplicity allowed for it to accommodate trends as they came and went (Brunfaut & Greenwood, 2018; Whelan, 2019).

Others argue that it is a self-awareness act from the fashion houses, concerned with the identity they are portraying. As most of them started their journey in a different century, and culture and ethics have evolved tremendously, it could be a trial to distance themselves from symbols that could be associated with dated values (Whelan, 2019).

Figure 31 "Blanding image that circulated through Twitter."

Source: *(Pérez, 2022)*

1.1 A comprehensive '*Blanding'* timeline

2012

Figure 32 "Yves Saint Laurent logo evolution"
Source: *own elaboration.*

One of the first manifestations of this happening in fashion, was when, working for **Yves Saint Laurent**, Hedi Slimane completely discarded the iconic "YSL" monogram created by Adolphe Mouron Cassandre in 1961 (Ahmed, 2017).

2013

Figure 33 "Fendi logo evolution"
**Source:** *own elaboration.*

The fur and leather goods fashion house **Fendi** modified its logo this year. It was a curious occurrence, since the brand had always, since 1925 used a sans-serif block font. Nonetheless, the designers slightly rounded the corners of the text for the first time in its history and added the word "Roma" beneath it, reminiscent of their first logo. Another element that was brought back was the double 'F' monogram that was exhausted during the 90s (Logos-World, 2023).

Balenciaga also decided to jump on the trend a rebrand exchanging its facing "B" emblem for just the wordmark, getting also rid of the location and making the lettering bolder. The brand would further elongate and engorge the letter in 2017.

Figure 34 "Balenciaga logo evolution"
Source: *own elaboration.*

2014

Figure 35 "Loewe logo evolution"
Source: *own elaboration.*
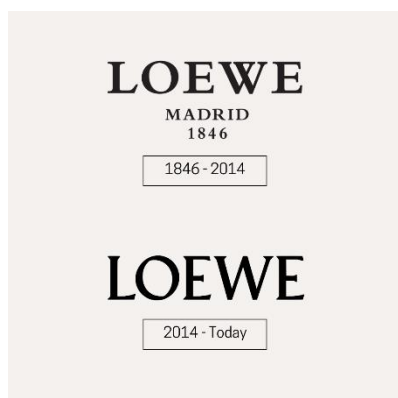
Loewe's wordmark, which hadn't been changed in a hundred and sixty-eight years, faced a substantial removal of identity. Both the location and the year were erased from the logo, leaving a less serifed 'Loewe'.

2015

For 187 years, **Guerlain** had maintained their classic sharp and stylized logo with a crossed double 'G' monogram on top. That changed in 2015, when the monogram is removed, and the font is replaced by a significantly more boxy and squashed option. This was not the only change, as in 2022, the brand continues to further *'sans-serify'* their logo by making it more squared and bolder.

Figure 36 "Guerlain logo evolution"
Source: *own elaboration.*

2016

It is worth mentioning that, in 2016, the total opposite happened to **Mugler**, which shifted from a simpler and more minimal logo to a personal signature containing both the name and last name of the designer.

Figure 37 "Mugler logo evolution"
Source: *own elaboration.*

2017

Clavin Klein launched its first logo in 1968 as he opened his clothing, accessories, and fragrance brand. It was composed of his name with his initials in capital letters and a stylish thin font. In 1975, the font changed slightly, making the logo thicker. The brand retracts in 1992, making it just a bit thinner than it was and rounding the dot above the two 'i'. It was the entrance of Raf Simons as new chief creative officer in 2017 that motivated the change. He hired graphic designer Peter Saville to tweak the logo made by art director Fabien Baron decades ago, which declared that change should only be welcomed if needed, not just for the sake of changing (Ahmed, 2017). It is not until 2020 when the logo is changed yet again after a period of stagnation. The dots on the 'I' turn square as the logo goes back to being lower case with upper case initials.

Figure 38 "Calvin Klein logo evolution" Source: *own elaboration.*
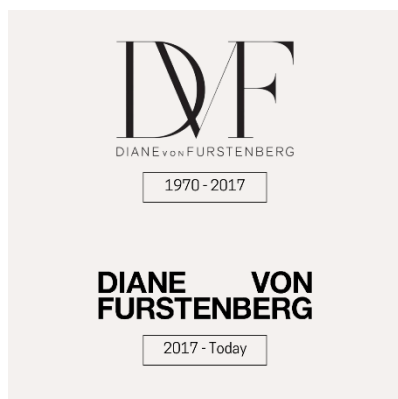
In the case of **Diane Von Furstenberg**, the logo hadn't been changed since the creation of the brand in 1970. Its rebranding followed the same exact rules as everybody else's.

Figure 39 "Diane Von Furstenber logo evolution"
Source: *own elaboration.*
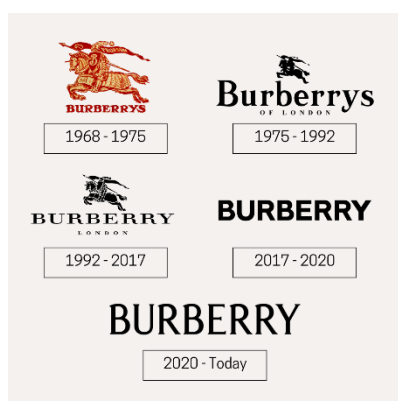
2018

In 2018, in just one quarter of the year, **Burberry** redesigned its identity, Celine lost its characteristic accent and Balmain changed the typeface they had been exhibiting for 70 years (BOF Team, 2018).

Figure 40 "Burberry logo evolution"
Source: own elaboration.

The French **Celine**, founded in 1945, erased their accent and readjusted the letter spacing, allegedly to achieve a simplified and balanced proportion (Brunfaut & Greenwood, 2018). The redesign was a commission from Phoebe Philo to art director Peter Miles when she took the reins of the brand's creative vision (Ahmed, 2017).

Figure 41 "Celine logo evolution"
Source: *own elaboration.*

Figure 42 "Balmain logo evolution" Source: *own elaboration.*

In an effort to convert the niche player **Balmain** into a household name, chief executive Massimo Piombini also ordered a rebrand along creative director Olivier Rousteing. The logo, which was the brand's primary signifier, succumbed to sans-serif font. The brand complemented the new look by expanding their product portfolio with new accessory launches and hiring new in-house sales and production teams to manage them. The new accessory category was no coincidence, as the collections were embedded all over in the brand's new logo (Sherman, 2018).

Berluti also announced a change in its visual identity, revealing a bold upper-case wordmark to replace the lower case, serifed and spaced logo tit preciously displayed.

Figure 43 "Berluti logo evolution"
Source: *own elaboration.*
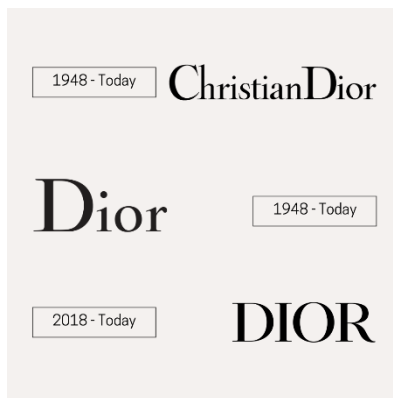
Seems like brands, apart from changing font, also steered away from lower cases as, yet another one, in this case **Dior**, revealed a new capital letter logo while also maintaining the previous one.

Figure 44 "Dior logo evolution"
Source: own elaboration.

2021

The **Lanvin group**, after joining a cohort of other luxury houses, unveiled a new brand identity that steers away from their original traditional feel, jumping on the bandwagon of sans-serif capital letters. The group felt it spoke to "our strong belief in authenticity, creativity, craftsmanship, innovation and inclusivity on a shared platform", as this statement was accompanied by the publishing of a new corporate website (Hall, 2021).

Figure 45 "Lanvin logo evolution"
Source: *own elaboration.*

Hugo Boss was the next victim of the sans-serif invasion. Even when there were never other graphics accompanying the logo, the brand got rid of the big "BOSS" and simplified the letters significantly.

Figure 46 "Hugo Boss logo evolution"
Source: *own elaboration.*
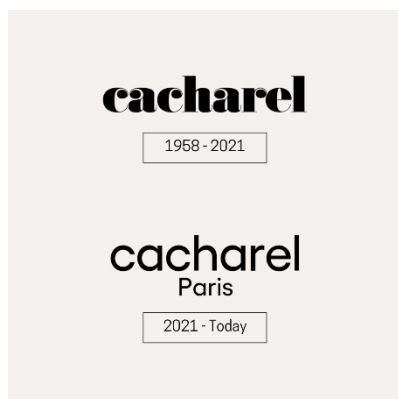
Cacharel followed closely, giving up its distinctive and characteristic typography for a duller one, adding the word "Paris" beneath the name of the brand.

Figure 47 "Cacharel logo evolution"
Source: *own elaboration.*

2022

Ferragamo may be the brand to suffer the most logo changes in its history. After five changes in the span of only fifty-five years, the brand settled in a signature like logo with the name and last name of the designer. And, even though this wordmark prevails, in 2022, the firm decided to launch an alternative much more similar to the trends every brand was following.

Figure 48 "Ferragamo logo evolution" Source: *own elaboration.*

2023

Phoebe Philo, who had previously prompted the Celine logo makeover, followed the serif trend by founding her own firm in the most recognizable font, Times New Roman (Pearl, 2023).

Figure 49 "Phoebe Philo logo"
Source: *own elaboration.*

Paco Rabanne's font rebranding in 2016 was extremely subtle. But, in 2023 and after the loss of the designer, the logo had its biggest shift, disposing of the "Paco" altogether and just keeping the brand as Rabanne.

Figure 50 "Rabanne logo evolution"
Source: *own elaboration.*

Figure 51 "A comprehensive 'Blanding' timeline" Source: *own elaboration*

SAINT LAURENT PARIS	2012
	2013 — FENDI ROMA
LOEWE	2014
	2015 — GUERLAIN
Thierry Mugler	2016
	CALVIN KLEIN
	2017 — DIANE VON FURSTENBERG
BURBERRY CELINE	BALENCIAGA
BALMAIN PARIS 1895 BERLUTI PARIS	2018
DIOR	2019
Calvin Klein	2020
	LANVIN
	2021 — HUGO BOSS
	cacharel Paris
GUERLAIN	2022
FERRAGAMO	PHOEBE PHILO
	2023 — rabanne

1.2 CHALLENGES OF THE 'BLANDING' TREND

There are many reasons why this phenomenon would be seen as unfit for an industry with such deep-rooted history and strongly related to uniqueness. In the case of technological companies, where the trend originates from, it made sense to use such simple visuals as it matched their essence and product, which is the whole objective visual identity. Branding needs to amplify the core essence of the brand, their mission, vision and values.

Sans-serif may seem the simplest solution to effectiveness and efficiency, a quick way to accommodate a wordmark to every type of platform. But it downplays the possibilities of omnichannel, especially when it is starting to become the norm in the fashion industry for the endless possibilities it presents. This challenge should foster creativity, not cut it from the root (Brunfaut & Greenwood, 2018).

Fashion arrived at a point where the entrance of new creative directors meant the loss of iconic brand signifiers in the name of reinvention, using the logo as just another symbol. Nonetheless, this affected consumer behavior just as much as creative inspiration (Ahmed, 2017; BOF Team, 2018).

2. THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE PREMIUM MEDIOCRE SECTOR AS CAUSES OF STANDARDIZATION IN VISUAL IDENTITY

Luxury is all about the illusion of status that it provides to its buyers. Marketers have understood this for centuries now and have discovered ways of profiting from this without putting in more effort and resources. That is how premium mediocre – a new sector of fashion recognized solely on a social basis – became to be.

The term Premium mediocre was presented publicly for the first time by blogger Venkatesh Rao in 2017 while describing the quality of a restaurant (Rao, 2017). Although it was initially used to describe food, the general understanding of said term was quickly translated into other industries. It could roughly be explained as "the finest offer of an average sample or the attainable offer of a niche sample". For example, the most expensive wine available in a cheap restaurant or the cheapest stay in a seemingly expensive hotel.

It offers the sense of obtaining quality and exclusivity when it is nothing of that sort, just being supported by the way the product is marketed. It is distributing a mediocre product in luxe packaging with a refined advertisement campaign on its back to give the buyer the illusion that they are purchasing something luxurious (Rabkin, 2018).

This phenomenon is mostly attributed to one generation in particular, Millennials. Who still like to run after the American dream while exhibiting precarious living conditions that are a result of the

oversaturated modern economy. It is inherently an illusion of wealth by obtaining something previously considered premium but now available due to democratization of goods (Rao, 2017). The attainment of luxury making it more normalized (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014). The public even coined another term to describe this event, they called it "affordable luxury" and mostly manifested in American fashion brands such as Michael Kors, Kate Spade or Tory Burch (Rabkin, 2018).

It is a way to shout and scream that one can afford a certain lifestyle and tends to be effective on a segment of people who is not knowledgeable within the sector of high fashion. Premium mediocre plays in the field of high brand prominence, where a product is pretentious, opulent and flashy whereas people who possess certain notions in high-end fashion and the history of its firms tend to choose low brand prominence products that are usually modest, discreet and minimalistic (Heine, Using Personal and Online Repertory Grid Methods for the Development of a Luxury Brand Personality, 2009). The allure of conspicuousness is such that in a survey where a sample was instructed to choose between products that seemed opulent and others that categorized as discreet, 36.3% of respondents chose only discreet products (Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2018).

A shift in the latter decades that has proved to devalue the standards of luxury products to the point where firms who were previously considered exclusive, are not seen as unique, unreachable nor inaccessible by a large sample of buyers anymore (Kauppinen-Räisänen at al., 2018). The concern for this devaluation was mostly seen among Chinese consumers, whose luxury market expanded quite recently (De Barnier & Roux, 2020). The "*premiumification*" of the luxury sector is a direct response to the demand of younger generations that strive for symbols rather than functionality (Izquierdo, 2023).

The attraction to labels instead of style does not only rely on individual sense of achievement, but also makes the consumer feel part of a tribe, unique and culturally relevant. A sense of belonging that has less to do with the history of the fashion house and more with participating in a community (De Barnier & Roux, 2020; Sherman, 2018). These logoed products can become essential signifiers for these social tribes (Ahmed, 2017). A reason why it is also denominated the "*luxurification* of society*", where affordable luxury consumption aims to meet aspirational needs (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2006).

The fault does not only lie on the consumer's part, as firms also acknowledge the phenomenon and the possible financial gain they can acquire from it, targeting the middle class for these products in particular (De Barnier & Roux, 2020). Luxury brands have massified and globalized their supply chains adapting to the rapid modern fashion cycle to appeal to a broader public (Scott, 2020). Mostly because of the growing margins that exist in the segment due to the incredibly high difference between cost and price (Rabkin, 2018).

Expanding their product portfolios through a strategy where they promote rare goods, when they are not even close to being scarce (Kapferer, 2012).

'Blanding' and the standardization of visual identity in luxury fashion

Rao (2017) goes as far as to specify two key elements that are distinct to premium mediocrity that help identify it above other phenomenon. Firstly, premium mediocre consumers are aware of what they purchase is not luxury at its core. That doesn't stop the purchase nor the pretension that it is actually a quality product. Secondly, the public is also aware that it is supposed to represent the desired lifestyle, not an active one.

Millennial use of social media has also been a contributing factor to the surge of *'Blanding'*. The president of the firm New Theory Ventures even blames the lookalike branding on the 'flat lay' images that are popular on Instagram, where products are neatly arranged in muted color schemes. Brands started to design around that color scheme to appear in said influencer posts (Mondalek & Lieber, 2020). The use of social media took away some of the power fashion magazines held to dictate trends, allowing independent designers to attract an audience without additional costs (Fischer, 2019).

Visibility has proven to be essential in terms of consumption (O'Cass & Frost, 2002), where the buyer tries to elevate their status by showing visible markers of luxury brands, the logo being the most used and obvious (Kauppinen-Räisänen at al., 2018; Perry et al., 2020). The logo is a key factor in a time where people often share a curated version of their life online through a small screen (Rabkin, 2018).

For younger generations, their first approach to luxury is through Instagram or second-hand stores (Izquierdo, 2023). And, unlike before, do not rely on the brand to tell its story but will do their own research, getting to their own conclusions, which can be incredibly impactful (Sherman, 2018). Unlike with other generations, today's younger people's self-taught taste is becoming incredibly refined (Fischer, 2019).

The need to feel included through that perceived value of luxury goods that has been discussed, is greatly amplified through social media, elevating too, the feeling of inadequacy when the standard posting is not met. As it happens with the democratization of the sector, high-end brands are aware of the idyllic standard and, because social media is an important communication channel for them, they play into it, associating their products with beauty, status, and perfection (Abel, Buf, & Burr, 2016).

Figure 52 "Supreme x Louis Vuitton collaboration" Source: *(Bayyoud, 2019)*

2.1 LOGOMANIA AND CYCLICAL FASHION

The truth houses have affirmed is that, as the demand for premium mediocre augmented, the simplification of their logos made it easier to produced logo-printed products that resulted easier to read (Pearl, 2023). Chief merchant Rati Sahi Levesque from the luxury online vendor The Real Real stated that the website experienced a 20% higher demand for logoed products than non-logoed products from the same brand (Ahmed, 2017).

Several brands are returning to logos. The creation of the TB monogram for Burberry; Alessandro Michele, creative director of Gucci, brough back the interlocking 'Gs' from the 90s, adapted to a younger modern public; In Dior, Maria Grazia revitalized the firm's logo for ready-to-wear handbags; and Fendi brought back the double 'F' print for clothing as well as accessories (Chitrakorn, 2018). By 2019, UK luxury retailers had increased their single-logo item offer by 15%, according to trend forecaster WGSN (Reuters, 2019).

Even if logomania becomes a staple in luxury, fashion houses should not recalibrate their whole visual arsenal to fit a trend as it is not aligned with their identity and will undoubtedly cause backlash (Pearl, 2023). The logo must not work separately from the creative vision but complement it. Public perception needs to be built to a point where a brand is able to be recognized for its essence, not from a logo on a t-shirt (Ahmed, 2017). Some authors suggest that the devaluation of luxury goods due to these circumstances should not be permitted as it taints the image that they try to evoke (Scott, 2020).

It was the case of Tommy Hilfiger. The brand became a public traded company in 1992, resulting in their products being overexposed and overdistributed. Dilution came to a point where the designer felt obligated to stop and rethink his whole strategy, finally reverting to being private again in 2006 (Fischer, 2019). During the 80s, something similar happened, where the licensing of couturiers to mass market manufacturers, made it possible for a bigger scale of population to purchase simpler category products from expensive brands. What happened next was brand dilution and, consequently, licensing caused for those luxury houses to lose their image of exclusivity (Rabkin, 2018).

3. LIFE FOR LUXURY VISUALS AFTER 'BLANDING'

Homogeneity is dangerous for a creative industry (Whelan, 2019) and minimalism does not guarantee success. Other forms of branding based on maximalism have the advantage of being easily recognizable, especially for the packaging, where the opportunities are almost endless. It was the case for Natalie Mackey and her beauty brand Winky Lux, that saw how her vibrant, colorful, and bright choice of branding elicited an emotional response from the consumer, resulting in triple-digit sales growth each year. Previously, several branding experts had urged her to adopt the sans-serif route when it was not

necessary, as it was not integral to the brand identity, but just because it was the trend of the moment (Mondalek & Lieber, 2020). It is great time for newcomers to enter the industry through a differentiation strategy that focuses on portraying a unique image (Whelan, 2019).

Figure 53 "Winky Lux packaging" Source: *(Fink, 2021)*

'Blanding' used to work, but as the segment becomes crowded with brands that look and feel the same, marketers are starting to search for something else to replace it with. It has led them to rethink about how and where the relationship with the customer occurs, playing into that (Mondalek & Lieber, 2020). Branding is starting to diversify for standardization and into the appearance of several different currents.

Increasingly, there has been a wave of rejection for the 'anti-marketing' that revolves around the 'millennial' aesthetic, sleek fonts and pastel colors that has been the narrative in branding for the past decade, call of retirement for sans-serif touchpoints (Mondalek & Lieber, 2020).

For example, just in 2022, Ralph Lauren decided to take a more creative approach to their iconic Polo logo. They revealed a new collaboration with the famous game Fortnite in which the jockey player is riding the characteristic llama that appears in the game. It was a marketing choice that was obviously meant to appeal to Gen-Z. Some consider this a smart move, as the generation is starting to gain somewhat of a purchasing power, expecting 33% of their revenue to come from younger consumers in the next several years. David Lauren, chief branding and innovation officer of the firm, stated that growth in luxury will result from immersive marketing experiences in spaces where young people gather (Bloomberg, 2022).

Figure 54 "Ralph Lauren x Fortnite collaboration" Source: *(Webster, 2022)*

At the same time, "affordable luxury" brands that made incredible profit before are recently dropping in value as sales have declined. This was not unexpected as these types of brands tend to expire after a

few years of success. Their lack of heritage influences their brand equity, becoming more volatile (Fischer, 2019).

Figure 55 "Sophia Richie has been deemed as the icon of quiet luxury."

Source: *(Kuefler & Ostquist, 2023)*

Another popular trend that is also making the rounds online is the "quiet luxury". Its premise is that people will make a connection to luxury on their own, not by seen a bright tag or logo on the product. It is subtle but quality, like a pair of navy trousers or a cashmere coat (BOF Careers Team, 2023).Over the past year, brands have been ditching apparent logos for the use of visual signatures in response to this rising trend with the objective in mind to create a visual language that is recognized without the logo (Chitrakorn, 2023).

Although reactions to change could be initially negative, designers suggest judging a new visual identity system's success long-term (Wertz, 2021). In an interview for the design podcast *Obsessed With Design*, branding designer Paula Scher stated that "identity systems have to live in the public. That's why I'm very much against people who do instant criticisms on blogs on identities" (Miles Herndon, 2016).

4. CASE STUDY: BURBERRY TAKES A STEP BACK FROM THEIR 2018 RE-BRAND

4.1 LEADING THE EMERGENCE OF THE BRITISH FASHION INDUSTRY
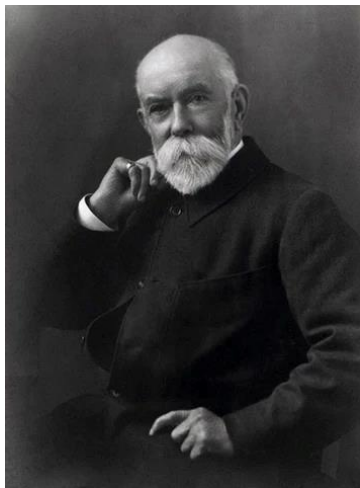
Twenty-one years old Thomas Burberry founded Burberrys in 1856 in the town of Basingstoke. The original aim of the brand was to protect people from the inclement weather in Britain. As a result, Thomas invents the gabardine fabric in 1879, a breathable, weatherproof material that he patented in 1888. The material was so resistant that the person responsible for the world longest distance traveled overseas by hot air balloon in 1908, Air Commodore Edward Maitland, completed the journey in a Burberrys gabardine (Burberry, 2023).

Figure 56 "Thomas Burberry" Source: *(Janne, 2023)*

Their iconic knight logo displaying the word '*Prosum*', meaning to be useful or advantageous, came to be through a public competition around 1901. The winner of the design was inspired by thirteenth and fourteenth century armors displayed at the Wallace collection in London (Burberry, 2023). Furthermore, the letter 'B' was displayed in the shield and flag, reaffirming the manufacturer. The knight logo was then trademarked all the way back in 1909 and was used consistently over the next 100 years (Logos-World, 2023; Pearl, 2023).

Figure 57 "Burberry's first logo" Source: *(Logos-World, 2023)*

The "Tielocken" coat design, predecessor of the modern trench coat, was patented in 1912 and the next year, the brand moved to London in response to their success. The trench coat is then invented during the First World War with a more functional design than the "Tielocken" (Burberry, 2023).

The birth of another signifier occurred in the 1920s when the 'Burberry check' was registered as a trademark, appearing in the subsequent collections. But a pivotal time for the brand was when, in 1955, Queen Elizabeth II granted Burberry a Royal Warrant as Weatherproofer, followed by a Royal Warrant as Outfitter in 1990 by the Prince of Wales, now King Charles III (Burberry, 2023).

The first change in the brand's iconography came I 1968, when the text became the predominant part of the logo, reducing and simplifying the knight, which was positioned above the text, as if jumping over the 'b'. The only addition is the "of London" that appears below the brand name, now in lower case apart for the initial (Logos-World, 2023).

The brand suffered another redesign back in 1999 where the 'S' in Burberry's was dropped by Fabien Baron, opening its first store on Bond Street the consecutive year (Burberry, 2023; Chitrakorn, 2018). The redesign altered the proportions of the elements, the wordmark was brought to upper case again, the horse rider gained clarity and complexity in details, and the whole branding package was rethought (Logos-World, 2023).

Figure 58 "1920s Burberry magazine advertisement"
Source: *(Retro AdArchives, 2023)*
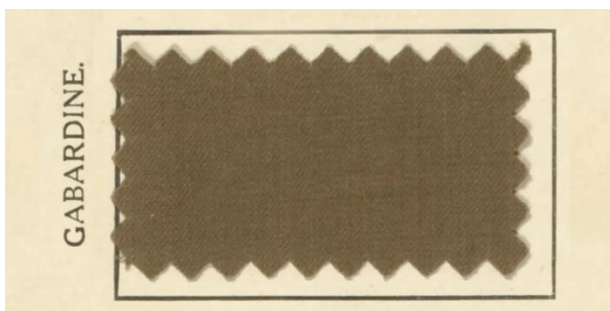
Figure 59 "Patented gabardine sample"
Source: *(Burberry, 2023)*

4.2 THE UNKNOWN BURBERRY MARKET POSITIONING

Burberry was one of the luxury firms most affected by the logomania trend of the 90s and poor business licensing choices. It supposed a long period of brand dilution where the image of the firm was associated with English "chavs" and heavily logoed products from a badly organized product portfolio that devalued the brand. It became known to signify a sporting fraternity of sort (Lloyd & Schaber, 2019). It wasn't until 1997 when businesswoman Rose Marie Bravo step up buying back licenses and transforming Burberry into the luxury house it once was. By 2011, Burberry had risen as one of the

leaders for global luxury, generating revenue of £1.5 and gaining a 27% increase over 2010, surpassing luxury giant LVMH (Shannon, 2017).

But a critical strategic mistake was made in 2014, when Christopher Bailey, who had previously worked for Gucci, became, not only chief creative officer by chief executive officer. This left him less time to focus on the product, which lost the interest of consumers. Since then, Burberry has decreased in sales growth and retail revenues declined by 2% in 2016 (Shannon, 2017).

The company seemed to notice this error because a new chief executive officer, Marco Gobbetti, was appointed. Gobbetti counted with tremendous amounts of experience in his resume, as he had already been CEO of Moschino, Givenchy, and Céline. This allowed Bailey to focus on his creative role, where he constantly incorporated iconic brand symbols like the red, black, and tan check, previously feared for being considered cheap, now a staple for luxury (Shannon, 2017).

Figure 60 "Spring/Sumer collection 2018"

Source: *(Banks, 2017)*

To change the public image of the brand, advertising efforts were also taken, where the focus was on underground artists, photographers, and stylists instead of well-known celebrities and aristocrats. It enforced the feel of uniqueness they so desperately wanted to reclaim (Shannon, 2017).

Still, other issues arose, like the missed opportunity of a great leather goods and accessories offer, which is notorious for its big margins, and the struggling market of America, which represented a quarter of the business and where sales were declining by 11%. To the point where experts suggested the brand should retire from wholesale, focusing on their own brand stores (Shannon, 2017).

At this moment in time, the brand's positioning was anything but clear, creating a general confusion within the market as well as consumers, who saw it as an "affordable luxury" option. Mario Ortelli, the then global head of the luxury goods sector at AB Bernstein, wrote publicly to Gobbetti: "To drive sustainable growth and margin expansion going forward as a £2.8 billion brand, you must decide whether Burberry will elevate to become a true aspirational brand, or to expand the brand with an

accessible offer and focus on profitability. Currently, you have elements of both – and this unclear brand positioning is limiting your brand momentum and pricing power (Shannon, 2017)."

The repositioning would require effort from the brand to reduce entry-level products, upgrading their in-store experience, closing non-strategic locations and more. A long-term strategy for long-term benefit (Shannon, 2017).

4.3 THE 2018 ERASE OF IDENTITY

For 2018, Burberry created a new strategic five-year plan focused on leather goods, which, at the time, accounted for less than 40% of revenue, in contrast to other competitors form the segment. To increase their sales in this category, the firm acquire the company CF&P, Italian specialist in leather goods, and employed a team of a hundred in-house craftsmen (Shannon, 2018).

Another of the strategy's objectives was to get a hold of their brand image, directing the distribution to a retail-led approach by closing smaller stores in non-strategic locations and opening new ones in high-visibility influential locations. This led to the closing of thirty-four stores globally (Shannon, 2018).

The objective, of course, was to elevate the brand from the perspective of being accessible that it previously had and that experts warned about, intending to compete with the bigger European fashion houses with wider margins and stabler growth. And even though the change expected long-term profits, short-term losses were also expected. Expectations were met with a 10% fall in Burberry's shares upon the announcement. The brand spent a significant amount of its capital refurbishing its stores in an anticipated response to the drop (Shannon, 2017).

Burberry's signature product remains the trench coat, which is an element that management did not want to eliminate. At the same time, to compete with larger luxury houses and complement the new leather goods offer, the brand expanded their product portfolio through an accessories line, imitating the rest of brands of the segment (Shannon, 2017).

Not long after the changes started happening, the firm appointed a new creative director, Ricardo Tisci, who previously had worked for the brand Givenchy. The premise of his work for Burberry was to deliver faster and more regular drops that would keep the customer engaged but decreasing availability thus increasing exclusivity (Shannon, 2018).

With the strategy came the biggest change in the visual identity of the brand since it was founded. The previous logo, which had not been changed in 20 years, had become replaced by a single wordmark created by Peter Saville (Steven, 2018).

Born in 1955, he is considered one of the most notable British graphic designers. He briefly had his own design agency, which quickly closed in 1990 to join the design agency Pentagram. Has specialized in fashion and worked previously with brands like Jil Sander, John Galliano, Christian Dior, and Stella

McCartney. He got his foot into the fashion world by attending Paris Fashion Week in the 80s. This was the start of a fructiferous career, as collaborations started flooding. Firstly, working with Yohji Yamamoto; then, moving onto John Galliano, producing work for Dior; he also redesigned the Givenchy logo, worked with Raf Simmons and Paco Rabanne, redesigned Calvin Klein's logo in 2016 and, later, Lacoste's 80th anniversary logo before being commissioned Burberry's redesign (BOF Team, 2023; Chitrakorn, 2018).

The designer retained the "London England" from the original logo, maybe to keep positive brand associations from their origins, but the rest was erased (Whelan, 2019). All decorative elements were gone from the wordmark with just a swoop. And they weren't just decorative elements, they were symbols of the brand's long history, specific references to their origins that nobody else had. Along with the logo, the brand revealed a new monogram reading TB, for Thomas Burberry, inspired by a previous 1908 logo that Tisci had revised in the firm's archives (Chitrakorn, 2018; Steven, 2018). Saville assured that the new logo design was a way to evoke the heritage of the company, adapted to what twenty-first century Burberry should be (Steven, 2018).

The rebranding did not only replace the logo, but a series of other elements, like their iconic check print that had prevailed as a non-seasonal pattern, globalized signifier of Britishness for decades (Lloyd & Schaber, 2019). Instead, prints of the new interlocking TB monogram started appearing in the clothing, everywhere in the collection that dropped in May (Reuters, 2019).

BURBERRY

Figure 61 "Peter Saville's Burberry logo" Source: *(Logos-World, 2023)*

Figure 62 "New 2018 Burberry print from the new monogram."

Source: *(Block, 2018)*
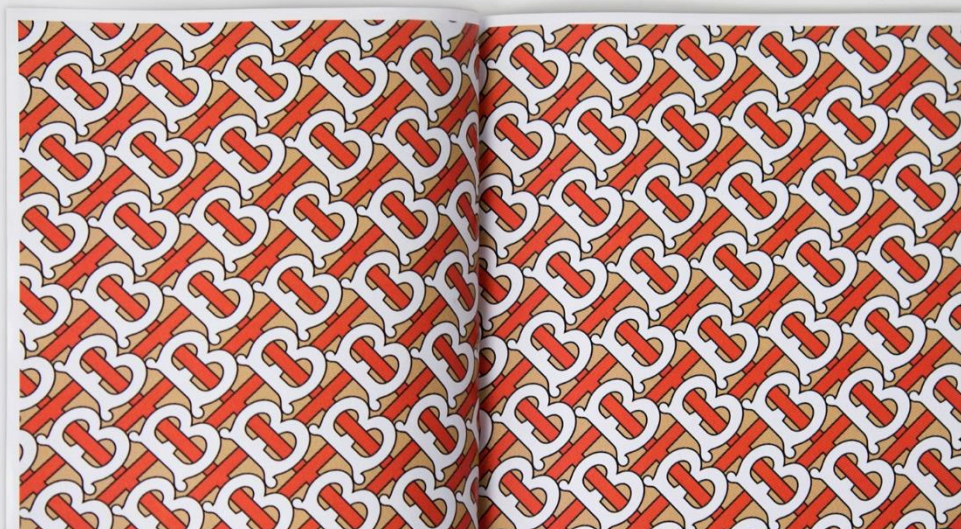
The new creative director's debut collection received mixed criticism, some saying it lacked focus, others saying it lauded wearability, something the brand has always been known for (Sherman, 2018). He approached the collections through a streetwear point of view, with heavily logoed bags that tamed the desire of consumers for noticeable brand symbols but that pushed away more conservative Burberry customers, used to the embedded heritage of the firm (Pearl, 2023). Even when the collections were aimed to a younger audience, some reviews were that the chosen monogram looked old and not modern (Reuters, 2019).

It became evident that Tisci wanted to overrule the previous design by providing new options. The risk of doing so being overdoing it and thus cheapening the image of the brand. As discussed, products with logos and signifiers on them gather better profit. Further enhanced by the revival of the 90s logomania that was starting to spike (Reuters, 2019).

4.4 THE 2023 STEP BACK

In October of 2021, Burberry announce the departure of Marco Gobetti, being replaced by Jonathan Akeroyd as CEO. With him, a new creative director rose to the position in September of 2022, Daniel Lee, a year after he had left the house of Bottega Veneta (Pearl, 2023). The two intended to continue with the idea of boosting accessory sales, introducing fresh products and solving Burberry's positioning problem (O'Connor, 2022).

There was an evident need to clarify the brand's message and continue with Gobetti's plan to elevate the firm. Daniel Lee was not an oblivious choice, as he had already brought Bottega Veneta back to life and to the spotlight. And while Gobetti and Tisci did their own take on contemporary "britishness", the new management wanted to explore identity through relatable topics without losing the brand's DNA (O'Connor, 2022).

To elevate Burberry, Gobetti set the goal of earning more than half of revenue from accessories, like the rest of the firms in the segment, as well as reinforcing its handbag offer and double the sales in footwear. In terms of clothing, Lee intended to launch a more relatable and wearable line supported by an investment in advertisement and marketing efforts (O'Connor, 2022).

In the beginning of the year, weeks before the new creative director makes his debut collection at London Fashion Week, the brand announced yet another rebranding not long after the last one. Prior to the reveal, all the accounts for the firm had been wiped as to signal a new era (O'Connor, 2023). The redesign brings back the equestrian knight symbol and overall is very reminiscent of the previous visual identity that held 167 years of brand heritage (Pearl, 2023). And not only that, but presents it in a totally new color palette, highlighting a deep royal blue (Teasdale, 2023).

Figure 63 "Burberry brings back the Prosum icon"
Source: *(Par, 2023)*
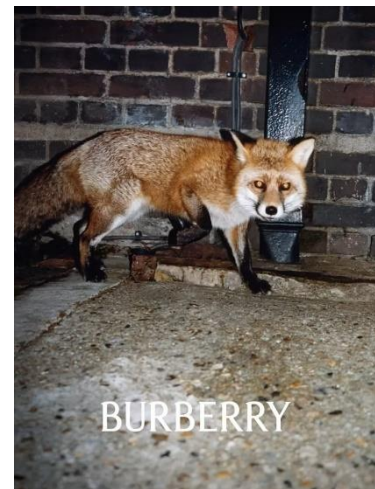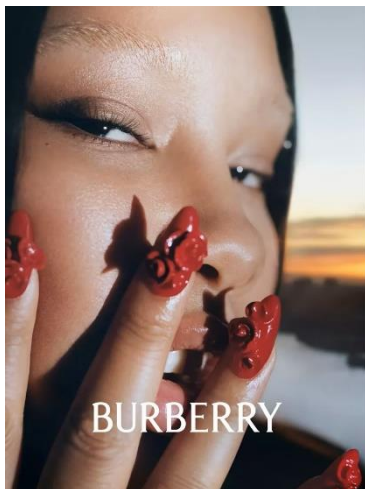
Figure 64 "New rebrand campaign images shared by the brand on Instagram" Source: *(Williams, 2023)*

Some have viewed this as the first death of the sans-serif trend (Teasdale, 2023), a retreat from the sleek, bold font style of the designer Peter Saville, revealed only five years prior. The logo, nonetheless, is not an exact copy of the last one, but a polished version where the serifs are subtler (Pearl, 2023). The new typeface regains the serifs in a more elongated version. In addition, the campaign was an ode to British essence and was shot in iconic London locations like Trafalgar Square and the Albert Bridge, featuring well-known British personas (O'Connor, 2023).

Unlike it happened last time, consumers have accepted this change positively, happy to see the knight and horse one again. The recent product launches bring back the traditional heritage-driven design, which seems to resonate with usual luxury buyers that steered away from flashy brand signifiers (Pearl, 2023).

V CONCLUSIONS

The research displayed has demonstrated the incompatible nature of the 'Blanding' trend as an efficient branding solution for luxury fashion.

The evolution of the sector, commonly known as *'Haute Couture'* has thrived because of the idea of power and recognition, allowing the human being not only to live but to possess aspirations in their lifetime. With time, luxury fashion became a possibility beyond the royal families and aristocrats, reaching the public and monetizing the craft. This has led to the emergence of many recognized couturiers, whose firms still survive to this day.

Because of their longevity, experience, and expertise, said firms count on a series of qualities that distinguish them from any other fashion brand. These qualities identified have been summarized in six elements, they are: brand identity, brand signature, heritage, exclusivity and differentiation, price, and, finally, product integrity and innovation.

How these elements affect the customer goes beyond the surface, through intricate emotional and sensory influences that result in a clear image of the brand in the consumer's mind. It is a perceived value that builds on brand equity, an important intangible asset that is translated into sales, and, therefore, into benefit for the brand.

Every single one of these qualities is able to reach the customer because of branding. As has been discussed, branding used to be just a means to differentiate one product from another. Nowadays, the term encompasses much more, playing into the idea of the brand. It does not focus on a physical material object but an idea and personality that is unique to each fashion brand.

It curates intrinsic aspects such as mission, vision and values that influence external perception and creating a unique language that characterizes each brand. The language's purpose is to evoke positive associations that lead a person to a purchase choice. Two main aspects make this possible, the capability of differentiation and the capability of consistency.

In an oversaturated market where many of the products offer the same benefits, the need for differentiation becomes clear. The brand needs to stand out in some way to become the preferred choice for the public as competitors would do so as well, especially in luxury fashion, where the reason for purchase is much more based on desire than functionality.

If the luxury firm does not create a branding strategy, consumers could either not form an opinion on it, consequently forgetting it and not considering it an option; or they could form their own mental image from external sources, which is dangerous as a negative image is very difficult to shift.

One of the many branding efforts that is used to achieve brand loyalty is a visual identity system. A comprehensible representation of the brand that includes every visual element the brand uses to communicate, the single most recognized one being their logo, which is the principal signifier of identity of any brand. The generation of a visual identity system culminates in the elaboration of a manual

detailing each aspect of it and the standards they must follow. The manual assures consistency, which, as it has been said, is one of the possibilities that ensures the success of a branding strategy.

The Sans Serif invasion or, how Brunfaut denominates, 'Blanding', is a phenomenon present during the last decade where visual identities of various brands have been changed to revolve around a minimalistic, bold lettering, black and white approach. The trend originated from big technological companies, where their personality is based on efficiency, speed, cleanliness and contemporary visions.

The disconnect happened when this style started appearing in the luxury fashion sector. In a segment where brands had always had a clear definition of identity, suddenly started looking and feeling the same, with mass produced visuals and stories where previously reigned the made-to-measure. In ten years, approximately, around eighteen high-end firms replaced their visuals with predetermined fonts and bland signifiers – when some of these hadn't been changed for a century –, two of them changed again during those years to reaffirm the trend and only one, Burberry, has returned to differentiate itself from the rest.

Some of the causes discussed are the relevance of premium mediocre and the social media influence in purchases. The first one deemed a cause due to both the brands and the customer. Nowadays, because luxury is so accessible, the public looks for social and individual gratifications by indulging in luxury consumerism, usually flaunting it on social media to gain some type of status. Although the sense of luxury is false due to the products purchased being of lesser quality, the sentiment remains, and it brings an incredible amount of benefit to fashion houses.

That is why most of them replaced their logos with a much simpler version, because it is easier to design with it, to emboss, print and create logomania patterns. This does not only erase every important aspect of identity in luxury but devalues the brand according to examples already seen during the nineties. 'Blanding' is then inherently harmful to a luxury house's growth.

To prove misalignment of identity and brand purposes and branding strategy, a comparison table has been produced to visually determine if the branding strategy *'Blanding'* meets the needs of luxury fashion houses.

ELEMENTS OF THE LUXURY FASHION FIRM		BLANDING
Brand identity	The physical attributes of the brand reflect the mission and vision.	X
	It creates a deeper connection with the customer through a distinct personality.	X
	It shares the brand culture and its values.	X
Brand signature	It relies on well-known brand signifiers that add value and connection.	X
Heritage	It comes across as authentic, which aids on brand positioning.	X
	It reflects the heritage and history of the brand.	X
Product Integrity and innovation	It puts quality over benefits and quantity.	X
	Results innovative.	X
	Results culturally relevant.	✔
Price	It reflects the pricing strategy by being perceived of higher quality.	✔
Exclusivity and differentiation	It gives the sense of exclusive.	X
	It is unique to the brand.	X
	It allows visual differentiation from other brands of the sector.	X

Table 1 "Achievement of luxury elements by 'Blanding' strategy" Source: *own elaboration*

Proving, therefore, the hypothesis raised: 'Blanding' is a consequence of today's social media marketing and democratization of luxury, being a trend that is not sustainable long-term for the luxury fashion house as it does not align with luxury's principles.

VI   LIST OF FIGURES

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