

The role of luxury fashion brands in women empowerment: a historical perspective and proposal for modelling contemporary modes of participation

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Abstract

Aside from the long-standing - however increasingly irrelevant - oppositions between fashion and feminism or luxury and activism inherent in the doxa, it seems that luxury fashion brands are now acknowledged to have played and still play a key role in women empowerment. This qualitative research, based on a documentary study of eighty articles from mainstream and fashion media, deciphers the historic and contemporaneous modes of participation from luxury fashion brands to female empowerment. Its findings show that luxury fashion brands may employ three distinct practices that contribute to such empowerment: the freedom of movement, the appropriation of the symbolism of power and the expression of feminist values. Whereas the two first mechanisms may be qualified as indirect, in the way women empowerment is reached through clothes, the latter may be viewed as hybrid, since it is both direct – in the form of brand's discourse – and indirect – through the identity and social significance of clothes -. As its main theoretical contribution, this study allows to design a conceptual model of the role of luxury fashion brands in women empowerment. It further underpins the risk of perceived inauthenticity and suspicion of *femwashing* that may be faced by luxury fashion brands when engaging in feminist branding. Therefore, its managerial implications may be of great interest for practitioners as well.

Keywords

Luxury- Fashion -Women empowerment - Brand activism – Perception

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The original hostility between futile fashion and social activism is a thing of the past. Luxury fashion, it seems, has become a medium for protest, especially feminist protest. "Clothes increasingly are becoming a frontier for political activism", capitalising on "the power dynamics inherent in clothing", says Emma McClendon, assistant curator at New York's Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was the woman behind the "We Should All Be Feminists" slogan printed on a T-shirt in Maria Grazia Chiuri's first Dior collection in 2016. It was a catchphrase that propelled the cause of women into the world of luxury fashion. In the words of the celebrated feminist writer, "Change happens when you spread ideas" and "the idea of using fashion to make a statement about feminism is in itself subversive". Other artistic directors of luxury brands, spurred on by Chiuri, have transformed their catwalks into social manifestos and their creations into a medium for conveying their ideologies.

This phenomenon fits into a social context that is heavily influenced by various factors: the *#metoo* movement; the greater freedom of women's voices; an awareness about discrimination all kinds faced with the rise in extremism in the major democracies; the decline in the rights of women and minorities as a whole in the United States under the presidency of Donald Trump; the American Supreme Court's challenge to the right to abortion in June 2022; and, last of all, the appropriation of societal demands by pop culture and its artistic icons.

Following on from these two-fold observations, it led us to question about how luxury fashion brands contribute to women empowerment

In common with Barthes in his "Le Système de la Mode" (1967), we decided to explore this issue via a documentary analysis based on articles that have featured in the press. We highlighted the range of mechanisms that luxury fashion brands have used – and still use – to support female emancipation. Drawing on these findings, we have been able to define a diagram of how luxury fashion brands subscribe to women empowerment.

Literature review

Feminism, empowerment, fashion and pop culture

Notwithstanding the persistent stereotypes and hostility of some feminist movements (Hollows, 2000), it is acknowledged that the history of fashion cannot be separated from the history of women empowerment (Hollander, 1994, Titton, 2019).

For the purposes of this study, we elected to use Devi's definition of women empowerment as "an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life" (Devi, 1998).

It is appropriate to reconstruct how feminism has become fashionable again thanks to its appropriation by "pop culture" (Padjemi, 2021). This will lead to a better understanding about which versions of feminism have become the cultural norms that encourage a dialectic between "feminist fashion and fashionable feminism" (Sternadori & Hagseth, 2014).

From a historical perspective, it is possible to break feminism down into four waves (MacLaran, 2012). From 2010 onwards with the emergence of the fourth wave, a new form of feminism was integrated into the different movements of the third wave with the twin objectives of equality and parity; the co-existence of several types of feminism; and the acknowledgement of the complex connections between different forms of oppression regarding race, gender, disability and ethnic origin. At the same time, this wave sought the political, economic and social structural change demanded by the second wave: the Marxist movement and the right to have full control over one's body, especially regarding sexual and reproductive rights. In addition, this fourth wave drew on the media-friendly power of the internet and social networks, which helped extend the space of the feminist cause (MacLaran, 2015).

So-called "political" fashion has evolved into a major trend even in luxury fashion houses and "more and more fashion designers have been expressing their solidarity with feminism" (Titton, 2019). This movement has come about since the beginning of the fourth wave and the diffusion of the feminist cause in popular culture thanks to female performers who are extremely popular with younger generations (Padjemi, 2021).

The symbolic power of clothes and fashion

Sociologists recognise that clothes and fashion have a distinct social significance (Barthes, 1967; Davis, 1992), with Baudrillard arguing that this cultural significance transcends their function. Clothes, therefore, are a key feature of the identity construction of individuals and social groups (1972). Beyond their symbolic power, clothes play a role in social dynamics, and they could even be seen as a form of social anticipation that foreshadows history rather than following it (Monneyron, 2001). Fashion as a form of communication and identity affirmation results from a two-fold dynamic: imitation as a creator of social ties (Tarde, 1890) and differentiation (Veblen, 1899) as an indicator of tensions in social life (Simmel, 1904).

It is possible via the anthropological dimension to link clothes and fashion in a dual mechanism that transfers cultural meaning: cultural significance is first transferred to the clothes-consumer object via two phenomena – advertising and / or fashion. There is then a second cultural transfer mechanism from the clothes-object of consumption to the consumer, who self-attributes the meaning contained in the clothes-object of consumption by means of personal rituals, which will diffuse this cultural significance at the social level (McCracken, 1986).

Cultural mediation and brand activism

In post-modern societies, the citizen as consumer seeks to express their individuality through their consumption choices, which enable them to become part of the narrative (Batazzi & Parizot, 2016). Consumption is an opportunity to seek out emotions and feelings that help construct the identity of the consumer (Badot & Cova, 2003). It follows that the meaning projected by the consumer forms part of a multi-dimensional search for experience, social ties, personal expression and differentiation, all within a cultural framework (Holt, 1995).

Brands are also cultural forms, each of which may be described as a "way of interpreting and organising the world" (Cayla & Arnould, 2008). They help individuals define who they are, who they want to be and what others think of them (Kornberger, 2010). A brand's societal values are an inherent part of its cultural dimension, which in itself contributes to its identity (Kapferer, 1997). In general, these brands demand a role as an active medium of

communication, making their mark as cultural stakeholders (Marti, 2019). As such, some brands may also become a medium for political action (Dion & al., 2016), lay claim to a social engagement (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2021) or even evince a form of activism (Kotler & Sarkar, 2020; Michael, 2022).

Methodology

We chose to adopt an inductive approach to analyse the role of luxury fashion brands in female empowerment via a documentary study. We collected 80 articles from the mainstream and specialist press devoted to luxury fashion brands that address female empowerment and liberation, gender equality, feminism and female power. Written in French or English, these 80 articles – published between 2007 and April 2022 – are accessible online. They refer to around 20 French, English, American, Italian and Belgian brands that have promoted and contributed to women empowerment (historically or over the period under consideration).

We undertook a thematic analysis (Bardin, 1977) of the articles to ascertain the different practices brands employ to engage in women empowerment. As a result of this comprehensive approach, we were able to identify three distinct dimensions. Furthermore, our analysis uncovered a hazard that could adversely affect the process of asserting the brand's feminist values in the eyes of consumers: the perceived inauthenticity of their stated values.

Findings

Freedom of movement

Functionalisation of women's clothes concretize

L'Officiel Maroc declares that "from 1906, Paul Poiret helped eliminate the corset alongside Madeleine Vionnet" (*L'Officiel Maroc*, 08/03/2018). At the same time, the magazine acknowledges that it was Gabrielle Chanel who gave the movement substance by creating a type of "fashion that liberated women, was more comfortable and practical." In *Les Échos*, François Baudot, the designer's biographer, writes that "this Chanel style owes much of its longevity to its functional approach" (*Les Échos*, 06/08/2019).

The functional goal of a woman's wardrobe is still relevant today for luxury fashion brands, especially at Dior, with *Les Échos Week-End* stating that "the prêt-à-porter adapts to the bodies of women, and not the other way around" (*Les Échos Week-End*, 19/02/2021).

Appropriating the male wardrobe

In the late 19th century, as women participated in sporting activities, their wardrobes began to borrow more supple and informal fabrics – such as "tweed" – before sportswear for women evolved directly from men's outfits.

We learn from *Madame Figaro* that it was "from the moment Coco became involved in men's clothing in 1910, when she made tweed, jersey, sailor tops and so forth... and especially trousers accessible to all women, that feminism became a more substantial part of the world of clothing" (*Madame Figaro*, 16/10/2014).

Desexualisation of the body

The desexualisation of the body – epitomised in particular by the designer Phoebe Philo – is the most recent mechanism for liberating it. This desexualisation goes beyond the transgression of genres derived from appropriating the male wardrobe: it prioritises a more intellectual approach to the body from the perspective of the harmony between anatomy and clothes.

Philo, in the words of the *Business of Fashion*, "is the real feminist, simply because her political take is deeply embedded in the Céline recipe, and in how magically welcoming and inclusive it is of female highs and lows, and the many idiosyncrasies of the female psyche" (*Business of Fashion*, 05/10/2015).

Appropriating the symbolism of power

Appropriating the male wardrobe

The shoulder breadth or *carrure* of men's suits has always been a symbol of strength and power. To enable women as well as men to assert this symbolic power, Yves Saint-Laurent attributed a major role to the shoulders and *carrure* from the very first collections in his own name. He put the finishing touches to this approach by combining his suit jacket with trousers, which is also a symbol of the male wardrobe. *L'Officiel Belgique* explains that this tuxedo – called a "smoking" – meant that Saint-Laurent "was offering women not only the possibility of wearing trousers, but also of wearing a suit, which has been synonymous with power down the ages" (*L'Officiel Belgique*, 08/01/2021). It then concludes that "the birth of this iconic design in the hands of Yves Saint-Laurent changed the history of fashion and, more than that, it changed the history of women".

In addition to the tuxedo, Saint-Laurent systematised the enlargement of the female wardrobe by reinterpreting masculine pieces, leading to a form of gender transgression and establishing a new kind of femininity.

Desexualisation of the body

The desexualisation of the female body is the other historical form of appropriating the symbolism of power through clothes. While Paul Poiret freed women from the corset, it was Chanel who was the first to genuinely liberate the female body by erasing the forms. Several decades later, Martin Margiela, Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto were to challenge the eroticisation of the female body, working on an intellectualised body.

Yet it is Phoebe Philo who was to ground female power in an ascetic, desexualised vision of the wardrobe. Philo established her pared-back aesthetic from 2008 to 2018, influencing fashion throughout the decade. "An outspoken feminist, Philo always criticised the sexualisation of the female body in fashion", writes *Sleek Magazine*. "In Philo's stylistic language, minimalism has always been synonymous with 'empowerment'" (www.sleekmag.com, 19/10/2017).

The claim for an intensified form of femininity

A new emancipatory aesthetic, driven by the third and fourth feminist waves, stimulated the creators of fashion brands, with *Le Monde* declaring "a new way of thinking about feminism" (*Le Monde*, 28/02/2019).

Business of Fashion remarked for Spring-Summer 2017 that "feminine power inspires designers and is reflected in a modernisation of provocative sensuality that is without precedent", adding that Nicolas Ghesquière at Louis Vuitton presented "a very Parisian take on 'female empowerment', which meant an amplification of sex and glitz that had a Eurovision touch to it" (*Business of Fashion*, 06/10/2016).

Anthony Vaccarello's Autumn-Winter 2020 collection for Saint-Laurent, where latex was a prominent feature, claimed to be a fetishized and more controversial version of feminism (*International New York Times*, 28/02/2019). Here he followed the lead of Valerie Steele – a feminist and curator at New York's Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology – who believes that fetishism is linked not only to sexuality but also to power and perception.

Expressing feminist values

The participation to female empowerment of luxury fashion brands has manifested itself even more recently in the expression of feminist values.

The political message of clothes

"Protest, it seems, now comes dressed in clothes", proclaims *L'Officiel Maroc* (*L'Officiel Maroc*, 08/03/2018).

The most iconic item in the feminist wardrobe of the luxury fashion brands is without a doubt the T-shirt bearing the message "We Should All Be Feminists", which left its mark on Maria Grazia Chiuri's first show for Dior. In an interview with *Madame Figaro*, the Italian designer defended her genuine feminist approach and her emancipatory vision for the brand: "I really want to work on behalf of women. Not just by creating beautiful, desirable clothes, but also by using my own visibility to talk about women and assert the need, now more than ever, to be a feminist" (*Madame Figaro*, 17/02/ 2017). *Women's Wear Daily* hailed the sincerity of Chiuri's values and "her constant promotion" of women's voices, noting the positive impact on the brand's sales (*WWD*, 01/07/2019).

Business of Fashion, for its part, remarks on the gender equality championed by Alessandro Michele at Gucci (*Business of Fashion*, 25/02/22), a good example of which may be found in his Cruise 2020 collection. *Vogue Paris* summed up the "leitmotif of this wardrobe... in two words: freedom and equality", before giving details about the most political pieces: "The patterns, too, smelt of emancipation: an embroidered womb on a dress attacking the law banning abortion in Alabama; the slogan "My Body, My Choice" proclaimed in the 1970s; the numbers 22 05 1978, i.e. the date on which the law in Italy made the right to legal abortion official" (*Vogue*, 29/05/2019).

The brand's feminist discourse

Hand-in-hand with expressing feminist values through their aesthetics, luxury fashion brands also express their feminist ethics in the context of their brand values and culture.

Elle picks up on the words of Maria Grazia Chiuri, who argues that "the relationship of women to fashion has changed. They don't just want a pretty dress nowadays; they want us to send them a message that conveys values" (*Elle*, 07/2017). According to *Madame Figaro*, the artistic director of Dior "feels feminist in the contemporary sense of the term, which, she says, involves

embedding the fashion house in this idea of a real beauty shaped by life today. She wants to help women with their individual and conscious use of fashion" (*Madame Figaro*, 17/02/ 2017). *Stratégies* recognises the consistency of Chiuri's commitment, with "fashion shows in the form of manifestos, *Dior Talks* podcasts and the #Diorstandswithwomen videos" (*Stratégies*, 03/12/2020).

For *Les Échos Week-End*, fashion shows have become "effective spokespersons for a militant feminism" that "the activist millennial community validates" (*Les Échos Week-End*, 19/02/2021).

The risk of "femwashing"

The expression of feminist values is the latest practice employed by luxury fashion brands to promote female empowerment. These are expressed either through clothing designs or brand communication. And this expression of feminist values is fanning out from the world of luxury to more accessible brands. *Cahier du Monde* notes that "feminism has become one of the levers of fashion marketing... surfing on what is called 'femvertising' (feminist advertising). This trend, which emerged in the 1960s, aims to 'recycle' activist slogans to ensure that women become consumers" (*Cahier du Monde*, 03/03/2017).

As *Stratégies* points out, however, although "the millennials, the new generation of luxury, are sensitive to social and environmental commitments", "they cannot be fobbed off with marketing talk sprinkled with CSR" (*Stratégies*, 03/12/2020). The trade magazine for the marketing profession also cautions against "womanwashing" if "it is not in sync with the company's practices". Lastly, *Business of Fashion* reminds us that "protest is not a pose" – which is a danger when "the fashion industry adopts socio-political discourse", and which commits the industry to "impactful facts, not forgettable poses" (*Business of Fashion*, 06/10/2016).

Theoretical contributions

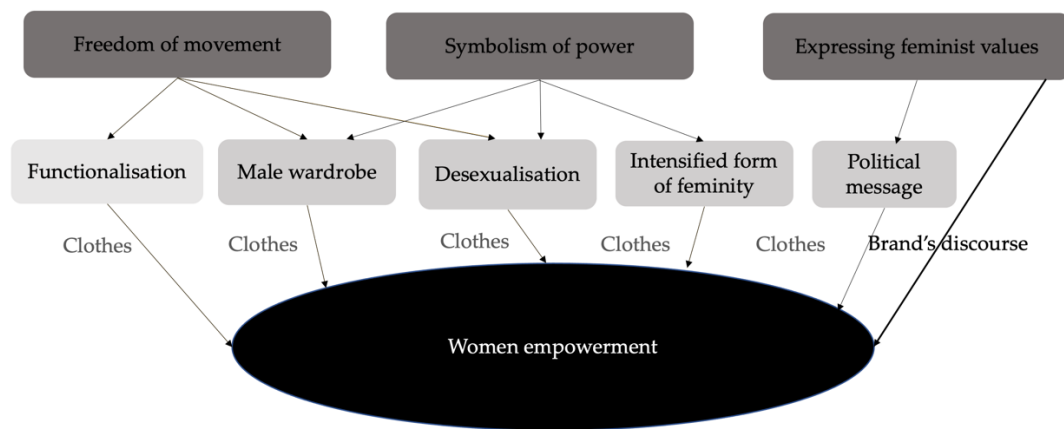
In spite of the burgeoning research into luxury fashion brands that has been published in recent years, very little work examines the societal contribution made by these brands. As to the links between fashion and feminism, up to now they have been the prerogative of historical, sociological and feminist research or so-called "fashion studies".

In our research, we study the role played by luxury fashion brands in liberating the female body and in societal struggles. More specifically, we have shown that luxury fashion brands employ three distinct practices that contribute to female empowerment: freedom of movement, the appropriation of the symbolism of power and the expression of feminist values.

Our analysis has brought to light the third practice: the expression of feminist values by luxury fashion brands. This, the most recent practice, is based on a hybrid mechanism: an indirect process (equivalent to the first two) built on the identity and social significance of clothes that conveys a political message and a direct process of feminist discourse about the brand.

This study means we can now design the first diagram showing the practices introduced by luxury fashion brands to liberate the female body and contribute to women empowerment (Diagram 1).

Diagram1 : Modelization of the role of luxury fashion brands in women empowerment



Managerial contributions

This study sheds light on the two key areas of managerial action needed to support discourse about feminist brands: the perceived authenticity of the discourse and the legitimacy of the brand.

Faced with suspicion about the sincerity of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) approach of luxury brands, which is backed up by the literature (Torelli, Monga & Kaikati, 2012), these brands cannot divorce their words from their concrete actions (Goldman et al., 1991; Repo, 2020). This is why programmes such as the Chime for Change movement promoting gender equality and fluidity (launched by Gucci in 2013) or the female mentoring work of Dior and Chanel via the Women@Dior scheme and the Fondation Chanel, are good examples of the practical involvement of these brands. The initiatives guarantee the authenticity of the brands' discourse.

In addition to the authenticity of the feminist values claimed by fashion brands, there is the issue of the brand's legitimacy (Dion, 2013) when appropriating these values. This legitimacy is assessed on two levels: from a pragmatic and moral standpoint, legitimacy is gauged from a historical perspective in particular (Weber, 1978; Capelli & Sabadie, 2005). It must be possible to link feminist discourse to the history of the brand. This is the case, for example, with the house of Saint-Laurent, whose founder has always celebrated women's freedom and worked to promote female empowerment. Alternatively or cumulatively, luxury fashion brands can rely on the persona of their creative director, when we then talk about "charismatic legitimacy" (Dion & Arnould, 2016). In this respect, we can cite the examples of Phoebe Philo at Céline from 2008 to 2018; Maria Grazia Chiuri at Dior since 2017; and Alessandro Michele at Gucci since 2015.

Future research

We plan to continue this research with a study of how female consumers perceive the expression of societal values linked to female empowerment by luxury fashion brands – particularly their impact on purchase intentions – together with the influence of brand legitimacy and the perceived authenticity of their discourse.

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