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Selling luxury

Sensory labour and communication in the perfume store

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Between the Material and Immaterial

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Selling luxury

Guided sensory communication in the perfume store

Magdalena Petersson McIntyre

A woman is not all the time the same.
 Sometimes we are very cooperating,
 But sometimes we are very difficult,
 But being difficult is possibly being cooperating, no?
 So let's have a pact, just you and Catherine Deneuve,
 Don't ever change anything,
 There are no words for this mystery,
 We know what it is . . .
 Chanel!

The foregoing words by Catherine Deneuve introduce Sofia Coppola's 2019 video collage for Chanel.¹ Using clips of models, iconic designs and celebrities, logotypes, diamonds, catwalks, Marilyn Monroe and Chanel No 5., the film guides consumers to the perception of the Chanel brand as something complex yet constant. Luxury is presented as somewhat difficult to put words to, like the mystery of woman. A feeling evoked by film glamour and handcrafted products. Films such as Coppola's guide consumers to learn to appreciate luxury and to equate that lesson with the brand in question. When videos such as this one are played on large screens at perfume sales outlets, they form one of several means by which the meaning and value of luxury are communicated to consumers.

This chapter examines perfume and cosmetics stores as mediated physical experiences where the meaning and value of luxury is communicated to consumers. Although the sales of luxury goods, in general, and perfumes and cosmetics, in particular, increasingly takes place online (Rocamora 2017), physical stores continue to be an essential site for the communication of luxury. Just like the above-mentioned film clip, the store itself can be described as a

composition of different slices of meaning that address the human senses in order to convey a message. The materiality of the store, including the store's design and layout, the packaging, the brands and the ad campaigns that are on display, all communicate the meaning, value and feeling of luxury. Furthermore, and as I will show, the sales assistants of the stores play an important role in guiding and educating the consumers to why the products on display are luxurious and why luxurious products are needed.

Perfume has no clearly justifiable practical function in the modern world: soap, shampoo and scented creams have long since replaced any practical reason why one might use perfume (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994). Therefore, there is a strong need to explain the value of scent to consumers, and few consumer goods are more (overtly) packaged and advertised than perfume, a fact that has led many scholars to think of perfume in terms of the semiotic value it communicates for luxury fashion houses (Barthes 1983; Baudrillard 1983). Many scents and cosmetics are licensed products (i.e. produced under licence), and a thousand new perfumes are launched each year (Thomas 2008; Herman 2013). Scent has thus been a lucrative way for several luxury brands to increase their profits. While perfume was originally considered a luxury good, the development of synthetic scents has transformed the industry (Catterall 2017). At the same time, perfume has played a significant role in maintaining or increasing the value of luxury brands. In fact, reference to luxury remains the most prominent value in marketing a fragrance. As noted by von Wachenfeldt (this volume) luxury objects are, on the one hand, material objects and, on the other, represented objects. To understand the worth of luxury commodities we need to both understand their material form and disclose their mythological nature, their constructed meaning as a desirable object.² Visual imagery mediates the contents with the purpose of explaining to consumers how they should interpret the products. Thus, the visual communication of a scent can be understood as a tool that is designed to assist the consumer in understanding that what lies inside the packaging is a luxury (Petersson McIntyre 2019).

This chapter is about how the sale of luxury relies on guides that instruct consumers on how to interpret the goods. Drawing on Cochoy (2008), these guides are seen as mediators who teach and translate the unique essence of each product in order to recommend suitable practices of consumption (Petersson McIntyre 2018). Guides may be material, in the form of packaging, or visual, in the form of films and images. They may also be human, in the form of sales assistants who, through face-to-face interactions, present themselves as 'experts'. The shop assistants take on a pedagogical role by teaching the consumer about

the product. Guidance thus acts as a means of persuading customers to buy the goods. Perfumery is the art of selling a whiff of luxury to the masses, but the art of choosing a particular perfume makes both the seller and buyer feel exclusive. While guides may well have a justified function for many different consumer goods, the perceived necessity for a guide (in the form of a person who demonstrates products and shares information that is not readily available for all) is also *a way of charging goods with the value of luxury by creating an air of exclusiveness*. Consequently, perfume – because of its elusive character – is the perfect luxury product. The need for a knowledgeable guide in the context of a perfume store elevates choosing a scent into an act that is both complicated and special. The purpose of the chapter is thus to examine how sales assistants instantiate the role of a guide in order to persuade customers to purchase perfume and cosmetics, and how this guidance is an important part of making perfumes and cosmetics into luxury goods.

On the consumer side, the mass marketing and production of perfume have led to an increase in affordable luxury and are intertwined with a development where, as Armitage and Roberts describe, a life in luxury is being thoroughly embedded in contemporary consciousness (2016: 2). The consumption of perfume is thus an affordable way to consume the glamour of a particular luxury brand. However, the value of luxury is always relational and has no absolute meaning (Armitage and Roberts 2016). Calefato (2014: 3–4) presents luxury as ‘multi-discursive’ and should be understood in relation to its discursive context. When associated with fashion houses or part of preparing the body for a fashionable performance, perfume produces meanings that are based on fashion but is not equated with it (Partington 1996). Thus, perfume finds itself in the discursive contexts of ‘luxury fashion’, ‘affordable luxury’ and its own context of ‘olfactory connoisseurship’.

While the study of luxury is often related to ‘visual culture’ (Armitage 2020), the power that sensory stimulation has in the context of selling luxury is no secret (cf. Kjellmer 2009). Consider, for example, the feeling of high-quality silk on the skin, the pleasant click of a Chanel lipstick container as it closed or the aroma of a scented candle that imbue a cosmetics store with a certain ambience.³ Sensory marketing is used across a wide spectrum of product marketing and as observed by Howes (2007: 288) ‘multiplying the sensory channels through which the “buy me” message is communicated enhances the likelihood of the message being registered and acted upon by the customer’. In the context of luxury, sensory marketing also relates to what Lipovetsky (2003) has termed ‘emotional luxury’, a term that refers to luxury as indulgence in the self. Furthermore, multi-sensual

forms of communication are particularly present in marketing a fragrance. The elusive character of smell has prompted the use of somewhat ethereal concepts of 'mystery' and 'magic' (or even 'science') to be invoked as signifiers of scents. For example, the effects of pheromones on other human beings are readily used to market fragrances. Importantly, these different forms of marketing affect the workers who are exposed to them on a daily basis. As I will show, guiding customers largely depends on the sensory enchantment with goods.

The following account builds on visual ethnography with a combination of text analysis, in-depth interviews, observations of people and what they do in perfume stores, and physical objects, such as perfume bottles and packaging (Pink 2007; Wagner 2015; Sturken and Cartwright 2001). By observing how objects were placed in stores and how people interacted with them, I was able to both read consumer goods, such as bottles and packaging, as texts and ask the sales assistants about their experiences and interpretations of the goods. The observations in turn meant that I could place the interviewees' stories in a wider context. I was, for instance, able to notice that while, on the one hand, the sales assistants talked about the importance of treating all customers equally and to show them the products in order for them to make an informed decision, on the other hand social and material techniques based on exclusion were applied. This methodology thus combines attention to the communication of material objects with the ways in which these objects are made sense of in relation to relations of power. Ten in-depth interviews with sales assistants and store managers working at different stores in Sweden were conducted, as part of my investigation of how workers in stores experience luxury. During the interviews, I asked the interviewees to describe and show luxury and to talk about their everyday experience of selling perfume and cosmetics. The interviews were transcribed and anonymized. The stores included in my study represent three different commercial segments: (i) 'affordable luxury' as offered by duty-free stores; (ii) perfume and cosmetics counters inside department stores; and (iii) small, specialized perfume stores with a focus on 'olfactory connoisseurship'.

Perfume, cosmetics and skin care – luxuries on display

The studied stores all had a similar layout and design. They all have a window display, a strong scent of perfume, theatrical lighting, an abundance of objects and visual imagery that make a first impression on the consumer. Perfume bottles are placed carefully on pedestals or behind glass walls and cases, not

unlike art objects one might adore or even collect. The *mise en scène* resembles a museum or art gallery, but the objects are more approachable than *objet d'art*. Long lines of similar bottles, differentiated only by a slight change in colour tone, create an atmosphere of exclusivity. These are rare and complicated objects – almost scientific in nature. Photographic images of celebrities, often from Hollywood, gaze upon the browsing consumers. Young, beautiful women with perfect skin in different settings, including flowery environments, metropolitan cities, a tropical paradise or just close-ups of faces and bodies – sometimes with theatrical references – can be seen all around. Keira Knightley covers parts of herself with a bowler hat for Chanel's *Coco*, and Lily-Rose Depp is playfully presented on a trapeze swing for the same brand. More frequently, black and white photos are used to depict the male models, often Hollywood celebrities with stern expressions and clenched jaws. Adam Driver appears for Burberry, Matthew McConaughey for Dolce and Gabbana, and Brad Pitt for Chanel. While the women look beautiful and playful, the men appear as the embodiment of wealth and success, an image which is underscored by their expensive suits, crisp white shirts and high-end watches. These visual representations guide the consumer's interpretation of the scents and communicate what aspects of the scents should be defined as luxurious. Shiny glass counters, thick carpets, full-size mirrors, along with elaborately stacked piles of packages balancing on top of one another, brand names always visible, interspersed with the occasional special offer also contribute to the stores' atmosphere. Although one might believe that one is merely browsing, looking and touching are known to increase consumption. Note too that the restricted spaces found in some shops further imbue exclusivity in some of the products. Display counters and rope dividers are strategically placed and used to both guide and restrict the consumer's pathway as they navigate through the store.

'May I help you'? The question comes just as visual and olfactory perceptions are stimulated. The sales assistants are either quite busy or present themselves as somewhat relaxed. They are dressed in uniform or in fashionable clothing. The women all appear to wear carefully applied make-up. They are willing and helpful and ready to release a tantalizing whiff from a sample spray bottle for the browsing customer, even though not every consumer might experience it in the same way (cf. Zukin 2004). When the sales assistant sports a clean white lab coat, she reinforces the message that 'science' lies behind the development of these exclusive scents and products. The presence of the sales assistant suggests that the customer knows that they are being watched. This is not a supermarket where you might move around as you wish. The fact that specific goods need to be

demonstrated and recommended to the customer further reinforces the feeling that the products are rare and exclusive. Like curators of a fine art collection, the sales assistant guides the customer through the process of finding a scent that perfectly captures their mood or feelings or the personality of the person whom the gift is intended for. Without possessing an in-depth knowledge of scent, there is little for the consumer to go on, and they generally appear a little lost in this context. They wander around the store, and many will take up the offer of help and look interested, perhaps hoping for inspiration to buy a particular product to find a luxury bargain. The sales assistant willingly informs the prospective customer about the product's content, identifies the perfume's scent notes and explains why it is luxurious.

The store – an assemblage of guides

The role of a guide or teacher (as described earlier) bears similarities with Bourdieu's (1984) views on 'cultural intermediaries'.⁴ Cultural intermediaries are people who work in cultural industries and the media or in sales, marketing and the fashion industry. They are producers of symbolic goods and services that have a significant role in the reproduction of consumer economies. For Bourdieu, the role of a cultural intermediary is primarily concerned with the concept of 'taste' – a contested area on which battles for legitimacy and distinction are fought. Bourdieu uses the term 'mediation' to refer to the role of promoting consumption where cultural intermediaries perform the pedagogical work of informing and shaping consumer tastes. However, for Bourdieu, this function primarily concerns the reproduction of the social order by educating the lower or middle classes to copy the tastes of the elites and thus simultaneously endorse the economic interests of the ruling classes. While the work of a sales assistant in the luxury retail industry may certainly be understood in terms of conveying the tastes and lifestyles that favour the economic interests of the owners of luxury industries, mediation processes may also be understood as producing value in more ways. Drawing on Smith Maguire and Matthews (2010), I argue that the value of luxury is added to perfumes and cosmetics by interconnecting material objects, visual communication and people. In such a context, *cultural intermediaries* are defined by their role in mediating between production and consumption.

This view is inspired by the theoretical perspective of actor-network theory (ANT). ANT proposes that 'agency' is not an exclusively human capacity but a

capacity that can be revealed in all forms of ‘actants’, including human beings, physical things and technologies, as well as images and meaning. This view thus differs from Bourdieu’s as ‘taste’ or meaning doesn’t only trickle down from elites but is created in interactions between different actors. The act of selling or persuading customers is performed by human beings as well as by advertising, display and packaging (Cochoy 2016). For instance, Cochoy and Grandclément-Chaffy (2005) describe how a product’s packaging becomes a mediator that changes the relationship between the product and the consumer by removing the immediate perceptual senses from the product and thereby forcing the consumer to rely on indirect, written and visual information about the product (cf. Hawkins 2013) ⁵.

Packaging has often been described as ‘the silent salesman’ (Hine 1997) a term that aims at bringing attention to the important role of containers for shaping practices of consumption. At the same time, naming packaging ‘the silent salesman’ illustrates that part of the role of being a salesperson is to explain the benefits and create a frame of reference of the product in question, and that this function that is generally taken for granted. In the following, I will show how sales assistants mediate the contents of a perfume’s packaging by not only explaining its meaning and character to the consumer but also actively changing it, thereby qualifying these products as luxury (cf. Karpik 2011).

Working with luxury

The requirements on workers in many (customer) frontline, service and hospitality occupations frequently involve the embodiment of attractive appearances, a phenomenon that has been described as *aesthetic labour* (Nickson and Korczynski 2009). Even though more male sales assistants have been employed in the 2020s (in contrast to previous decades), such service work generally continues to be coded as a feminine occupation (Misra and Walters 2022). The term ‘labour’ (in *aesthetic labour*) refers to the economic gain stores enjoy from these activities, including the embodiment of servility and feminine attractiveness that, on the workers’ behalf, is usually left unpaid for, that is, servility and feminine attractiveness are not explicitly listed as part of the job description but are nonetheless required elements of the job. This form of ‘labour’ or ‘embodiment’ can be built on general ideals of gender, class and beauty, but they are also often explicitly branded ideals. (Johnston and Sandberg 2008; Williams and Connell 2012; Korczynski 2005). Accordingly, the

interviewees reported that they were expected to apply make-up to themselves using the brands on offer, love the perfumes they were selling and consume them for personal use. These requirements were often self-regulated and referred to by the interviewees as unspoken expectations. Several of the interviewees had been told 'not to bother' to come to work if they were not wearing make-up. As Molly, a store manager, said: 'You have to wear make-up to sell make-up. They have a saying in France that I like: "There is no such thing as an ugly woman – only a lazy one"'. These requirements were normative in many ways and informed staff recruitment.

Work in retail has been described as a blurring between production and consumption since a worker's own consumption also produces value for the store when they use the product to persuade customers to buy it (cf. Pettinger 2004). Smith Maguire and Matthews (2010) maintain that the biographies, attitudes and embodied capital of cultural intermediaries serve as occupational resources and guarantors of credibility. Alternatively, as Bourdieu observes, 'they sell so well because they believe in what they sell' (1984: 366, in Smith Maguire and Matthews 2010: 408). Furthermore, service works scholars point to the discrepancies within retail work, workers are pretending, to varying degrees that they consume the products on sale, and the more expensive the goods are, the more difficult it becomes for workers to identify as consumers. Stores apply different techniques to deal with such discrepancies, such as gifts and systematic discounts on products that motivate workers to consume the goods on offer. These techniques are designed to eradicate any potential discomforts that might arise when social differences become too obvious. Selling luxury takes some of these aspects further, as class differences between customers and sales assistants are generally bigger, and so is the difference between the price of the goods and the salaries of the workers. However, while workers in affordable or medium-priced fashion outlets are generally encouraged to wear the products sold in the stores to work, workers in high-end stores sometimes have to buy their work clothes somewhere else, due to the exclusivity of the goods. Still, selling luxury involves the enactment of a style and manners that correspond with an air of luxury, in general, and with the promoted brands, even if purchased in a more affordable store (Pettersson McIntyre 2014). Consequently, while a worker's self and their body become an essential part of the communication of luxury brands and thus function as a form of advertising, it can differ from the way this is organized in other segments.

The embodiment of products and brands (as delineated earlier) primarily relies on workers being enchanted by the goods and desiring them for their private

consumption (Petersson McIntyre 2014). Or as Howes (2007: 284) argues: 'For capitalism does not work by surveillance and the extraction of the labor power and value of the worker alone; it also works by generating spectacle and creating consumer desires of all sorts in people, including the worker'. The interviewees described the work of selling perfume as 'glamorous' and many of them talked of the opportunities of being surrounded by luxuries. During the interviews, the sales assistants often showed me perfumes that were newly arrived and said: 'I really love this scent, we all do', or 'I am going to buy this one for myself.' Many of the interviewees spent a considerable proportion of their pay on goods from the store. Some interviewees even said they had tried to curtail their shopping habits and that working in a store entailed being exposed to temptations that ended up costing them a lot of money. One of the interviewees, Tilda, said that the day before we met, she spring-cleaned a cupboard at home and was almost ashamed by the fact that she possessed so many fragrances that she does not use. She packed them up in a large bag, which she gave away to her sister. 'You want it for the moment', she says, 'but if I have not used it in six months, I will clear it away. I don't have room for it'. Personal gain in the form of commission and access to discounts and gifts were referred to as benefits of the job and many of the sales assistants perceived their access to and knowledge of the goods that they sold as resources that gave them an advantage in their private life (cf. Du Gay 1996). The work enabled them to acquire an aesthetic and social capital that constituted one of the attractions of this type of work. As Ivana enthused: 'They want us to use their products. I think that is really, really great!' Thus, work in luxury retail relies on the embodiment of a lifestyle in a way that is complex and can neither be seen as purely exploitative nor as empowering, but rather as constitutive of late capitalist or consumer culture subjectivities.

Communicating luxury to customers

Guiding consumers to different brands and explaining why these should be perceived of as luxury made up a large part of daily work at the store. Luxury appeared, on the one hand, as something taken for granted, sparkly and shiny, expensive and with a brand name known to connote luxury. On the other hand, luxury was defined as something personal, sensory and experiential. Guiding customers to the meaning and value of luxury routinely involved combining these two versions into one, often by sharing personal consumption stories. By focusing on the personal feeling of having an expensive branded perfume bottle

placed in your home, the interviewed sales assistants connected the visual and sensory experiences of luxury. As Elisa described: 'Very expensive perfumes are luxury, or a whole series of a scent including shower cream, body lotion, etc. You can line it up at home a look at it.' Several of the interviewees explained that work was a matter of 'conveying everyday luxury' to the customers: 'The little extra something that you enjoy for yourself.' Furthermore, 'expensive' was not perceived as luxury in and of itself but was conceived as such when it could be related to a personal indulgence or something extraordinary. As Elisa continued: 'Sure, exclusive cars and houses are luxurious, but not in the same way [as perfumes and cosmetics], and I can't afford them anyway.' The personal experience of luxury was generally related to the goods on sale in the store, which illustrates how these stories were mobilized in the interaction with customers and used to educate customers on the meaning of luxury.

During these interviews, I was initially surprised to note that several of the interviewees stressed that body lotions were particularly luxurious products. I disagreed with their assessment since I noticed that body lotions are often reduced in price and given away as complimentary in gift boxes where the perfume or scent was the desired, focal good. It might be the case that they were merely repeating a sales pitch they use with their customers, a technique to persuade customers to buy a product with low sales scores. Body lotions have a certain air of the 'unnecessary' to them, at least in the context of perfume, and promoting them was merely *part* of explaining to customers that body lotions are luxurious and how customers should think about it. Anita made this point in the following way:

It is wonderful to smell good. It is so fantastic! You might purchase a body lotion, or a shower cream – a Dior shower cream . . . and to explain to the customer the feeling and then hear back that they agree and they keep buying it. It really is fantastic! Nivea may be fantastic too, but it is not the same. To be surrounded by a wonderful scent when you are in the shower is true luxury.

Anita's account illustrates how the role of a guide relies on mediating between consumption and production. By using her own consumption experiences as a resource in her sales pitch, she educates the customer to make a purchase. She educates customers on how they should think about and relate to these products and how they can be used. Anita explains that she tries to convey the feeling of luxury when she talks to customers and that she uses a lot of body language and parables. 'Sometimes some parables pop up when you talk to a customer, and some immediately understand what you are thinking', she says, 'while other

customers do not at all'. Anita's story also illustrates how she does not only convey a message created by someone else but actively makes didactic choices for her message to be well received (Figure 3.1).

The power of gifts

Perfumes are often bought as gifts and many customers turn to the shop assistant for advice and guidance.⁶⁷ During the interviews, the sales assistants showed me products and said that they 'would love to receive this as a gift' or 'I would love it if my boyfriend gave me this.' Products with a high price were routinely described as suitable gifts, because they might be products that one would not usually buy for oneself. The interviewees taught customers that a gift is a luxury when it is something one would not buy for oneself. Inessential products were also described in this way, a practice that reinforces definitions of luxury as things that are inessential, that merely provide pleasure and comfort (Armitage and Roberts 2016: 2). The interviewees used their personal experiences and taste to show customers what a suitable gift might be. By referring to personal wishes these stories functioned by suggesting the customer make a purchase by surrogating the assistant's delight of the potential gift in place of the actual



Figure 3.1 A sales assistant smells the contents of a jar, while a customer appears to be waiting for guidance on how to choose. Su Arslanoglu via Getty Images.

receiver. Through sharing private fantasies of gifts with customers, the assistants thus guided customers towards making purchases. This type of gift culture reinforces the role of a guide or teacher, all the while the assistants confidently share their own wishes and desires with their customers.

The power of gifts also figured in more ways as the sales assistants would often receive 'gifts' from travelling suppliers. These gifts could range from test bottles to samples to actual goods. Providing sales staff with free samples indicated that the suppliers recognized the sales staff for their crucial role in selling their products. The suppliers also knew that if the assistants used the products as consumers, they would educate customers by using their own experiences. This amounted to a more effective sales technique than just showing the products to the customers, an example of how the goal of the sales assistants and the goals of the management were not always the same. Store managers sometimes frowned upon this practice since such gifts might give particular suppliers an advantage. However, some store managers used gifts to motivate workers to endorse products and brands that were in line with their sales goals. For example, a store might set a sales goal for a particular brand for a week, and the store manager would then not want the sales staff to actively promote other brands. As Wilma described:

My job is about guiding people to making the right decision. To help customers find goods that suit them and mirror how they feel. I usually show them five scents and then ask what they like. But I also have to try to sell the 'scent of the month' and follow my personal sales goals set up by my manager.

Wilma's description of her job shows that there were conflicts of interests around the gifts. The joy of receiving a gift was used to teach customers about the same joy. However, when the sales assistants acted 'too good' or identified 'too much' with the goods and brands, the role of a guide sometimes transgressed managers' will and they became a threat. Management practices were applied to counter the effects of when workers become too confident in their roles.

Becoming Marilyn Monroe

An important part of being a guide was the display of in-depth knowledge about the companies whose products the interviewees sold. They also felt that this knowledge added value to their work. The story behind Hermès heritage was cited to me by several of the interviewees, who also informed me of the

meaning behind the symbols and heraldic images used on Hermès packaging. The personal histories of product owners, founders and their families, including Versace and Gucci, were also often brought up and discussed in detail. These stories were also referenced in conversations with customers. For example, Tilda told me how she had learnt a great deal from customers about the heritage of a particular brand. In turn, she has shared this knowledge with other customers, which made her feel that she was an expert on the topic, a connoisseur or a legitimate representative of the luxury brand in question. Such feelings of competence were often concretized by reference to a person, for example, Marilyn Monroe, whom many referred to as embodying a 'classic feeling'. Marilyn represents an embodiment of a scent that is used to reference the character of a scent, typically Chanel No 5, of course, since it has been mythologized that Marilyn preferred this scent. This practice of learning and sharing details about luxury brands and their history formed the foundation of a personal identification with the brands and helped the sales assistants feel pride in representing these brands and the knowledge associated with them. This work constitutes a form of emotional, aesthetic or even sensory labour since the assistants guide customers to how a particular fragrance will make them feel – how they might become Marilyn:

It is like learning to appreciate fine cheeses. When you were little, you thought cheese tasted and smelled awful. Now you think it's the best there is. And you can even have some jam too. More and more you understand how much energy and time they spend on creating a fragrance, a bottle and a package and the materials. Everything really belongs together. A light pink liquid usually gives off a floral, light, fresh scent. A dark color of the liquid and a dark packaging usually contain a spicier scent. [. . .] Fragrance is a memory that we have had throughout the ages and therefore 'they play on it'. The fragrance memory is the longest memory we have and, therefore, there is a lot you can do with it.

In this quote, Tilda draws an analogy between being an adult customer and being a child, before she knew about the art of perfumery. The quote illustrates how workers learn and repeat the storytelling that lies behind each luxury brand but also how this storytelling can be experienced as something enjoyable, that gives satisfaction. The quote also references the active role they have in mediating between production and consumption. The sharing of in-depth knowledge of products and brands was an important part of the creation of a luxurious atmosphere where customers gained the feeling of access to exclusive knowledge.

This mediation did not always convey the same message as the packaging and advertising and the interviewees often expressed some form of disappointment or a sense of fatigue with the importance placed on brands. As Elisa observed:

They have lost some of their charm for me. Before, I often dreamt of receiving perfumes as gifts, but nowadays, I'd rather travel and go to restaurants to treat myself to the little extra [...] I can imagine that many customers think of a Chanel lipgloss as a luxury, but for me it's not!

The active role of sales assistants is also shown in the observations by Williams and Connell (2012), who noted that a worker's enchantment with brands and products rarely lasts, given the working conditions in retail. After some time, they see through the air of luxury, and the charm that a brand may have previously exuded wears off. For example, Wilma said she believes that customers base their choices on brands and that she is disappointed by the fact that brands play such a prominent role in her customer's choices compared with the actual scent. 'Many customers discard a scent they like [when she showed it] when they don't recognize the brand name.' Wilma explains that navigating such sales situations is a balancing act. She wants to entice the customer to buy something, not scare them off: 'A customer might think that a fragrance is light and fresh, but it is the spiciest scent we have. Then you just have to agree and not reprimand them. After all, the customer is always right.'

The 'fatigue' the sales assistants mentioned may also be related to the meaning that luxury has taken on in contemporary consumer culture. For instance, Armitage and Roberts (2017) are critical of current tendencies to associate luxury with brands and prices rather than with the sociocultural dimension of luxury. In order to mass-produce luxury, they argue that it has been necessary to develop, or codify, an understanding of luxury that has relevance across the globe. 'We know that something is luxury because we can interpret all the various forms of codified knowledge about it, but we do not *know how* it is luxury' (p. 42). The stories the interviewees shared about their disappointment and disillusionment in selling luxury can be seen as a form of longing or nostalgia for a sociocultural understanding of luxury that is not exclusively influenced by branding – they are not passive conveyors of elite tastes. There is still very little space for them to change anything, which leads to disillusion.

In the following section, I discuss how the sales assistants use sensory guidance to communicate the feeling of luxury to their customers. In particular,

I examine how the interviewees translated their personal experiences of the goods and luxury brands that they sell into guidance for their customers.

All that glitters is gold

Working in a perfume store does not only involve interaction with one's customers. Packing shelves, placing objects in an eye-catching way, and making orders and counting stock make up a large part of the daily work that a sales assistant performs. Sometimes a decorator from head office or the store manager might do this work, but the sales assistants often wish they had more time to be engaged in the creative part of working in a store, including making attractive displays. The arrangement of bottles and cartons plays a vital role in attracting the customer's gaze, especially perfume bottles that are, as mentioned previously, often described and displayed as works of art. Goods are also placed in ways that play with the tension between abundance and rarity. The store designs are an enactment of what Howes (2007) calls capitalism's glitter; 'a fabulous spectacle of consumer plenty and accessibility' (284) where the 'buy me!' message is called out.

Light reflections that attract the eye were abundant in all the studied stores and when I asked them to describe what luxurious packaging looks like, most of the interviewees mentioned gold, platinum, sparkling stones or something shiny, made of either glass or metal. Objects that shimmer or consist of faceted glass with worked details that attract the eye were also spoken of. In addition to the products and their packaging, the sales assistants also commented on design details, such as a logo printed on a lipstick holder, bottles with an engraving or the fact that the product was handmade. Elisa talked about how the details makes her want to know more about the products: 'Now, there are many bottles that are, I do not know how they do it, but they facet the glass in some way so that the hose in the bottle itself is not visible. I think it's a bit cool and that gets a reaction like "Wow how did they do that?"'

The importance of seeing a good for the creation of desire in that good is well known (Howes 2007; Bowlby 2000). Details invite consumers to interact with the products and as noted by Cochoy (2016), 'curiosity' draws us towards goods and is one of the favourite tricks of market seduction. To awake curiosity in customers was a technique that was frequently used by the interviewees, often by showing customer details in the products and explaining their meanings to the customer. In particular, the invitation to touch was frequently used to create an interest in the goods (Figure 3.2).



Figure 3.2 Selling luxury by simultaneously inviting touch and preventing touch. Photo: Magdalena Petersson Mc Intyre 2022.

Touch – don't touch

The interviewees frequently talked about how 'a beautiful bottle attracts the eye first, and then touch'. They used this observation to explain to me how consumers think. Beautiful bottles were related to how they felt in one's hand. Touch was used to guide the consumers by drawing their attention to details in the packaging and contents thereof in conjunction with explaining the benefits of the product. A focus on touch is nothing new; as Howes notes, 'even if the primary sensory mode of consumer culture was (and remains) that of visual display, the non-visual senses were not left to one side' The development of 'sensory marketing' has meant that the message 'Look, but don't touch!' (Howes 2007: 287) has been replaced with 'Touch me! Buy me!'

An important aspect of selling luxury is how touch simultaneously creates the feeling of exclusiveness by coupling the invitation to touch with different forms of exclusion and inclusion. For example, the interviewees showed customers how soft, pleasant to touch and desirable a particular bottle was. As Tilda explained: 'You show how smooth a bottle is, nice to hold in your hand, this one has a metal

bow . . . nice to touch, with soft round shapes, very luxurious and desirable. Even if the scent is awful, you want the bottle on your shelf.' The sales assistants were encouraged by managers and during sales courses to use sensual stimuli to guide customers. If you hold something in your hand and like how it feels, the step to making it yours (i.e. deciding to buy it) becomes smaller, they explained. Tactile objects were described as detailed and luxurious, thereby providing an entry point into talking to the customer about the luxurious quality of the product. When touch is invited and encouraged, and the object is something precious, touch conveys luxury. Elisa elucidated this point with the following:

You know when something is hand-made, like Acqua di Parma. I love their stuff. All the emblems are pasted by hand. It's like an old, ancient fragrance house. So, they come for Christmas with great scented candles and they cost maybe 70 euros. I would never buy a scented candle for 70 euros, but I would be happy if I got it, because I know how much it is worth. Know the story behind it, if you say so. But just when you know that things are . . . it is not done on a conveyor belt but it. I think it is a bit, it is a bit luxurious.

For luxury, however, equally important to touch is to not touch or the communication of a feeling that touch is exclusive. Restricted spaces, such as locked glass cases and rooms within rooms featuring 'untouchable' objects, create an air of uniqueness that conveys exclusivity. By showing bountifulness for a few chosen ones, sales assistants convey the feeling that the customer is being shown something precious. Conversely, not being allowed to touch creates a division between those who are and those who are not invited to touch. Cartons and plastic wrapping stop some from touching, while others are attracted to products with touch.

Touch reoccurs in the form of the touch of *someone else's hand*, as in goods that are handmade. For example, handmade glass bottles with hand-printed labels figure as a special tactile element. These are objects that have been touched and that you, in turn, may desire to touch. The touch of a person's hand is exclusive. The result of someone else's intimate labour is perceived as unique, in contrast to goods that are mass-produced.

Luxurious ingredients

The role of a guide was especially clear with products whose ingredients or functions were not known to customers. As mentioned earlier, gifts were one such area, another concerned products that were strongly marketed as containing

a special ingredient, while at the same time the benefits of that ingredient were not obvious. Natural ingredients have often been used to communicate luxury in fragrances and in the context of skin creams, precious stones, metals and other luxury substances (even caviar!) play this part.⁸ The so-called 'diamond creams' were often brought up during the interviews as luxurious. Cosmetic accessories such as diamond peeling pens, jade rollers and 24-carat face masks were also frequently offered in the stores. However, precious stones and metals are marketed not only as symbols of purity but also as enhancing the performance of the products, as 'active ingredients' – ingredients that make the user more beautiful with the help of technology and chemistry. While those cues obviously placed the creams in the realm of luxury to the sales assistants, customers found it less clear. Tilda explained the benefits of a diamond cream in the following way:

The skin becomes as strengthened as possible. Gold and diamond dust have an incredible effect of lustre on the skin. Especially in daylight, the lustre comes out. Many customers want to buy this lustre in a bottle and the feeling of radiating. The packaging is shaped like a diamond drop, faceted, and the cream is inside it. It is very visually appealing. Many wonder what it is and it gives you the opportunity to start talking about its benefits. [...] I have sold quite a few of them. It is really fun! Gold is used in tooth fillings because it is anti-inflammatory. We have small microscopic inflammations in the skin and gold repairs it and you age slower.

The most exclusive diamond cream on offer in the stores was by the brand La Prairie. La Prairie describes their *Platinum Rare Cellular Life-Lotion* in the following way:

Haute couture horlogerie, joaillerie – those métiers that elevate craftsmanship to a high art – exist in a world apart, one which revolves around the stellar constellation of daring creativity, masterful savoir-faire, the most exquisite materials and an exclusive encounter with the extraordinary.

In the creation of its skincare, La Prairie applies the same principles as those of maisons, from the painstaking selection of its raw, precious ingredients to the expert formulation of its products and the sublime design of its vessels. Perhaps the La Prairie collection most exemplary of these values of artisanry, the Platinum Rare Collection offers a splendid experience synonymous with pleasure, with a dream spun out of desire – just like the most decadent creations of a true luxury house.

The fusion of luxury savoir-faire values with exceptional skincare benefits defines the very essence of haute-rejuvenation – La Prairie's high art of reigniting a youthful appearance. Through this philosophy, the Platinum Rare Collection redefines rejuvenation as we know it. Haute-rejuvenation not only embodies the traditions of savoir-faire unique to La Prairie – audacious innovation, bespoke craftsmanship, the use of the most precious, rare ingredients and a refined, enchanting experience – it propels them to the next level.

The Platinum Rare haute-rejuvenation experience starts with the latest innovation to come from the Swiss laboratories of La Prairie: Platinum Rare Cellular Life-Lotion. A new beginning for your skin, it offers an unparalleled formulation drawn from the source of life. Inspired by the eternal beauty and strength of platinum, it is where haute-rejuvenation begins.⁹

All possible cues of luxury – fashion, pleasure, decadence, eternal beauty, precious metals, craftsmanship, Swiss laboratories and art – are invoked in the advertising for La Prairie's creams. Youthful skin also emerges as an eternal cue of the benefit of luxury, and the 're-juvenation' and 'formulation drawn from the source of life' rather associates to vampires, and to something sinful. As pointed out by Calefato (this volume) with reference to Barthes (2006) gemstones are 'infernal objects' carrying diabolic symbolism, while gold is tied to money. Undoubtedly, the product is shiny and expensive, and it also invokes a feeling; the advert guides customers to think that the inside and outside cannot be separated. Gold and diamonds are applied to the skin, transforming the user into a divine being or at least a royal personage. Reference to Louis XVI also features in the description of La Prairie's creams since platinum (a metal rarer and more expensive than gold) 'was to be the only metal used at Versailles to decorate the tables and coiffeuses of the court'. Once it is aligned with haute couture and luxury fashion houses, customers may be convinced that the price of 1,500 euro for a face cream is perhaps motivated. The high price of the cream adds to the exclusivity of the product, signalling that it is not for everyone.

However, not only high-end creams use diamond as an ingredient, but several other creams also use *diamond* as either a product name or an ingredient. While *Yonelle Diamond Cream* does not explicitly list diamond dust in its list of ingredients, for instance, *Peter Thomas Roth 24K Gold Lift & Firm Prism Cream* does list 'colloidal gold' in the content declaration. Creams with diamond dust or the word *diamond* in the product name often claim to contain anti-ageing effects, another example of how science is used in luxury products. As shown earlier, when it comes to scent, variation connotes science, but in skin creams it is performance. Thus, a connection is made between eternal minerals and eternal beauty that can

be achieved through the application of modern skincare technology. The market communication around diamond creams thus guides consumers to read their products in terms of form of excess combined with an elitist idea of elevating the user from the masses; if you apply this product to your skin, you will sparkle too.

Although ads and packaging function as guides, sales assistants have the role of explaining the benefits of the products to customers. Tilda explained that it is meaningless to add diamond dust to a product if the sales assistant cannot communicate to her customers the benefits that diamond dust has for the skin. 'In that case, they would rather buy a diamond ring', she observed. By guiding their customers what the ingredients are and how they benefit the individual user, the products and sales assistants work together to communicate the value and meaning of luxury. A belief in the (purported) benefits of the creams was an important aspect, and the sales assistants used both visual marketing and their own experience to guide the customers so that they could learn that the most precious materials in the world will transform you into a better person, an 'upgraded' you. Luxury is presented as that which transforms a person into an improved or better version of that person.

Conclusion – mediation of luxury

In this chapter, I have examined perfume and cosmetics stores as mediated physical experiences of luxury. The elusive character of smell has forced perfume brands to invoke guides to explain how we should experience their products. The use of diamond dust, precious stones and metals in skin creams has correspondingly meant that an explanation of the benefits of such ingredients becomes necessary. These guides may be human, in the form of sales assistants, or non-human, in the form of visual marketing materials, packaging and store displays. In physical stores, these guides all work together to communicate the significance of the products. By referring to the practice of guiding as mediation I have explained how physical stores and sales assistants actively contribute to the meaning-making of luxury. Furthermore, I have shown that the prominence and necessity of guides in this context imbue the product with a level of complexity and exclusivity that suggests luxury. Sales assistants mediate the goods on offer by explaining their meaning and character to the consumer, and this mediation helps to qualify these products as luxury. The immaterial value of luxury becomes material through the guiding words, gestures and explanations that sales assistants provide.

The sales assistants gained knowledge of the products and brands by watching campaigns and learning about the history of brands. They guided consumers on how to touch tactile perfume bottles by holding them in their hands and talking about how smooth they felt. Inside information and personal consumption stories were shared with certain customers, which further help to create a luxurious experience. The interviewees consumed the goods on offer, and they used their own experiences to create value for the products. By sharing their dreams and experiences with their customers, the interviewees not only put words to luxury but teach customers how luxury can be enjoyed. Luxury was also communicated with spatial and tangent restrictions, such as the presence of the tension between touch and don't touch.

By understanding guiding as a practice of mediation, I have pointed to the sales assistants' active role of creating meaning and value, even though their power is limited. Seeing them as mediators means that they don't only reproduce dominant tastes. Even if they convey the meanings of luxury created by brands, they don't just let it pass without contribution. Importantly, the sales assistants were also consumers and acted as consumers in the stores.

Thus, they also extended the contents of the jars, bottles and cartons far beyond the control of the goods' original producers and brand managers. While they were happy to represent brands and tried to be correct in their discussion of the brands they sold, there were also instances when they were critical of the branding and advertising that went with the products. For example, they sometimes longed for meanings of a fragrance and luxury that transcended the stock advertising message. Consequently, I have revealed that the communication of luxury's value, meaning and feeling primarily takes place in the interactions between sales assistants, consumers and the visual and material culture that can be found in perfume and cosmetics stores. We thus conclude that the meaning of luxury is not determined by branding, persuasive sales techniques or consumers but is an outcome of mediation between production and consumption.

Notes

- 1 Sofia Coppola *In Homage to Mademoiselle*, 2019.
- 2 See also Hiljding and Susaeta, this volume, for discussion on the relation between tangible and intangible luxury.
- 3 See also von Wachenfeldt, this volume, for discussion on how the senses play a major role in the communication of the luxury object.

- 4 See also Pouillard, this volume, on sketching as work of mediation.
- 5 See also Rocamora (2016) for discussion on mediation vs. mediatization.
- 6 See also Calefato, this volume, for discussion on the relation between gifts and jewellery.
- 7 See also Björner and Liu, this volume, for discussion on gifts and luxury brands.
- 8 See Calefato, this volume, on the symbolic meaning of precious stones and metals.
- 9 <https://www.laprairie.com/en-int/editorials-article?cid=origin-of-haute-rejuvenation>, 21 March 2022.

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