

COVID AFTERMATH: WILL OUR SHOPPING HABITS BE CHANGED FOREVER?

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Bags with an unmistakable colour, an undeniable logo. Delicate tissue paper emerging effortlessly from the corners as the bag graces your feet when you sit down for coffee. Sometimes unambiguous, more often, a brandish symbol of ones new purchase regardless of whether you've bought a keychain for forty pounds or a new leather bag for several thousand. Upon arriving home, the bag is routinely placed somewhere, nestled in a shrine of collected bags. Every time you see that bag, you don't necessarily remember the purchase. Still, you'll remember the experience- the golden bubbles of Champagne rising up the flutes at Hermès and served on silver platters. Green tea at the doors of L'Occitane. A door opened by gloved hands, or something even more extraordinary.

The way we once interacted with luxury brands has changed, and the traditional brick-and-mortar shopping experience has long left us. But now, physical retail spaces are holding their breath, and we don't know how long they can survive.

Stores that welcomed a pilgrimage of consumers for new products and sensory experiences closed with little warning. With a necessary emphasis on online shopping for both consumer wellbeing and a thriving industry, experimental retail gestures fall by the wayside. But taking a break from non-essential shopping reminds us of the gimmicks-for-sales that many luxury stores adopted, making us question the future of the physical retail space. We have to look at not only profitable gains, but way of attracting consumers, and frankly, the enticement of something seemingly inessential, but wholly justified. Therefore, maybe these gimmicks were something more?

"Pre-pandemic, it was already becoming clear that customers were looking for something more experiential," detailed BoF and McKinsey's The State of Fashion 2021 report, "that's why luxury companies were hyper-focused on creating experiences."

Christian Dior's in-store virtual reality headsets, themed cafe's and spas, from Chanel au Ritz Paris to Ralph's Coffee,

themed afternoon teas; and marketing measures made, especially for the smartphone-to-social-media generation. Like Chanel's 2014-ready-to-wear Supermarket show and Nike Air society, everyone can take a slice of luxury pie at no expense or, more often than not, a fraction of the price of a pair of gold-tone heels.

It's apparent with the tenet of the luxury market that these brands do not force product purchases upon consumers. Instead, they sell the myth of a brand, a story, and an entire world drawing consumers and potential consumers into a diverse net of otherness- films, interactive games, exhibits, talks and events.

We're going to be living with the effects of COVID for an unforeseeable amount of time. Job loses, production halts, shops thrown into lockdown, and hopefully back out again. While online is likely to thrive, the retail sector has suffered at the hands of this pandemic. BoF and McKinsey's report also outlines that: "the pandemic has forced a shift away from buying experiences to buying things, but brands should prepare for the return of the experience economy." And whilst this is rousing, is it possible?

But longing for the sensory experiences that make us choose a product for where it comes from beyond anything else, may remain just that as our shopping habits are threatened with change and the frivolities that come with luxury shopping may cease be experienced in such a way again. Brands are, however, adapting their digital spaces for the COVID era, with some a little more experienced in the digital space pre-COVID setting the scene.

Prada has collaborated with cinematic auteurs with films by Wes Anderson, Ava Duvernay and most recently, a series of films in collaboration with National Geographic entitled What We Carry- an amalgamation of a five-part film series, photo story and articles which together, explore Prada's sustainable journey spanning across five different countries. Whilst for the 2020 festive season, Hermès' L'orange de Noël invited people to send virtual orange tree decorations

to loved ones, co-workers and everyone in between. Videos of winter-clad figurines skiing on the brand's cashmere and silk ties, ice-skating inside a makeshift ice rink in the form of a Hermès silver bracelet decorated their website, and Penhaligon's hosted virtual games on theirs. Now a brand's homepage is a gateway into a realm of digital exploration, enticing you into their world more so than ever before.

According to BoF and McKinsey's report "digital is seen by a third of executives as a silver lining that presents the biggest opportunity in 2021." It's unwise for any retailer to ignore the assets that online can provide beyond the product-to-basket-to-home-delivery scenario, as useful as that can be.

For a brand to fully navigate an online space, it's safe to say that they will have to do more than logo-embellished tissue paper and next day delivery. Just as twenty-year-old e-tailer Net-A-Porter has flourished, or something a little more experimental. Arguments have, however, arisen over the overcrowded environment of e-tailing.

In an interview for Harpers Bazaar, retail consultant Robert Burke suggests that the market has become "fragmented". In the same interview, Heather Gramston, head of womenswear buying at Browns, explains the "saturated" nature of luxury e-commerce platforms. Online is not necessarily a simple path to steer into financial affluence, especially as the landscape of retail has been thrown into global uncertainty.

It's undeniable to say that shopping in-store may have always been about more than the purchase itself. The doctrine of luxury may remain. How we navigate it may change, but brands that evoke a sense of personal interaction and uphold physical craftsmanship and virtual experiences parallel to their physical counterparts may just be paving the way for the luxury market in a post-COVID world.

