

Book review of Prof. (Dr.) Mahul Brahma's *The Mythic Value of Luxury*

Prof. (Dr.) Buroshiva Dasgupta

Director, School Of Media Communications, Arts & Design
Sister Nivedita University

Headline: In search of myths in luxury

The author Prof. (Dr.) Mahul Brahma has been a luxury commentator for over a decade, and has written *The Luxe Trilogy*, comprising of *Decoding Luxe*, *Dark Luxe* and *Luxe Inferno*. His approach towards studying luxury has always been academic, and he has a tendency of looking at luxury from various inter-disciplinary lenses, such as Economics, History, Sociology and Philosophy. In *The Mythic Value of Luxury*, he has critically explored the notion of luxury from an anthropological perspective.

The objective of this search was to unearth a secret --how some luxury brands can stand the test of time and survive for centuries, while others fail to sustain that luxe or dazzle. In his search, he started studying myths and how myths survive.

A quote from the book will explain this connection between myth and luxury: "The word luxury comes from the word luxe, which means "dazzle". What creates that dazzle? The core element of that dazzle is a concept called "mythic value". This concept was developed by the social anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss. Myths are future-proof, small wonder that they are able to live for ages. What makes myths live through ages is that they embody contradictions."

The author says that mythic value is created when two contradictions find a way to co-exist. The greater the contradiction, the higher the degree of the mythic value, and the higher the mythic value, the greater the brand value.

A non-luxury example of mythic value is a creation of Auguste Rodin. It is his famous bronze sculpture *The Thinker* or *Le Penseur*. The reason: it is the embodiment of the greatest contradiction of all time – Mind and Body. Rodin conceived a model in the last century that went on to shatter the great divide between intellect and physical prowess. As Rodin himself described: "What makes my Thinker think is that he thinks not only with his brain, with his knitted brow, his distended nostrils and compressed lips, but with every muscle of his arms, back, and legs, with his clenched fist and gripping toes."

Myths are still widely interpreted in conflicting ways: in terms of collective dreams, the outcome of a kind of aesthetic play or the foundation of ritual.

The book explains the notion/concept of mythic value from the perspective of the luxury brand Cartier, which has been able to maintain its dazzle for over a century. This is the real-life story of the Maharaja of Patiala and his crown necklace. The Patiala Necklace is the seventh largest diamond by De Beers, of 234.69 carats and adorned by 2,930 diamonds.

An Indian native donning the most expensive Cartier crown necklace with the biggest De Beers diamond that you can ever imagine... This image is an embodiment of two contradictions -- East meets West. Moreover, diamonds are a girl's best friend. But, a man's best friend? So this image carries with it another contradiction – Man and Diamonds. In his first book of *The Luxe Trilogy*, called *Decoding Luxe*, Dr. Brahma had used this story to note the love borne by Indian royalty for luxury brands during the 1920s. The image of the Maharaja of Patiala, who commissioned the largest order to the epitome of Western brand Cartier back in 1926, has been ingeniously showcased across all the major international showrooms of Cartier. Cartier executives, in fact, are trained to specifically mention the story to key clientele, to make the client buy into the "mythic value" of Cartier's luxury

heritage. The client is thus made to feel one with the legacy of the brand that it carefully has chosen to showcase, as if the product is the conduit to the imagined community of royalty.

In his second book, *Dark Luxe*, the author has shared another interesting example of mythic value in the story “Death of a Phantom”. An Indian Maharaja is found buying the epitome of reputation in Western culture – a Rolls Royce within the story. And then converting it into a garbage collector for the city. Had a European done the same with a commodity from a luxurious Indian brand, by contrast, it would not have raised any brows. Again the author asks the readers to experience the visual appeal of the East deconstructing West by embodying it.

These visuals when analyzed deeply show that they capture an embodiment of contradictions. And these contradictions together attribute a mythic value to these brands that makes them iconic in the process. No wonder these legendary stories have been alive for over a century and still able to generate awe.

Such tales of luxury in its deep history have always been a story of embodying contradictions. The greater the contradiction, the greater the appeal of the brand.

The new contradictions – experience versus e-commerce

From the 1920s, the book takes a plunge to the modern times. Luxury brands need to innovate and change with the changing demographic of consumers who are now mostly comprised of millennials. The contradiction today is experiential luxe versus UI/UX of luxe e-commerce.

Most luxury brands have started investing heavily in social media to generate a market for millennials, or rather “millennial millionaires”, a phrase coined by Mahul in the third book *Luxe Inferno*. So suddenly UI/UX has become an important brand parameter. A mix of both worlds is the way ahead. Also, ensuring personalised services to key clientele is an important element for creating loyalty.

Therefore, in the new world order for luxury, innovation towards mediation will play a key role. Innovative formats like Zero Inventory Stores or Pop Up stores are very much in vogue, creating the mix of e-commerce and physical stores. Around 800 stores have been lined up for formation in the next five years by the top 100 firms. There is also a significant scope of refinement that AI and ML can bring into the picture. Analytics can be used to examine the clothing of the customer, for instance, and options can be subsequently suggested from what is available in the stores. In this regard, AI expenditure is all set to rise to USD 7.3 billion in 2022 from USD 2 billion in 2018.

The book narrates that with the rise of millennial millionaires, technology has a greater role to play in mediating the contradictions of experiencing luxury and using e-commerce. SAP is working with Harrods at the moment to develop technology for creating a personalised shopping experience.

Luxe will be creating experiential e-commerce using technology.

The new myth will be powered by technology mediating between the age-old heritage and the future.

The Measure of Mythic Value

The author has dedicated a chapter towards measuring the mythic value of luxury. The degree of the mythic value will determine the Luxe Quotient and the Luxe Factor. The greater the degree of contradictions that a brand embodies, the greater is its mythic value. Attendantly, the greater the Luxe Quotient, the greater will be its Luxe Factor. This is where perception plays a critical role.

Let us quote from the author again: “Why are contradictions called contradictions? Because in our belief systems and conditionings from our family, society, geography, ethnicity, among other factors, we are more comfortable with some combinations and uncomfortable with some. The ones we are

comfortable with fall in the conventional quadrants and the ones that don't fall into the unconventional quadrants. For example, we plot classic and contemporary on the Y axis and young and mature on the X axis. The quadrants of young and contemporary as well as classic and mature are the conventional ones. We are quite comfortable with these combinations. However, classic and young as well as contemporary and mature fall into unconventional quadrants. These are the quadrants which are of interest to us. Our belief systems have made us believe in certain comforting combinations and thus the uncomfortable ones give birth to contradictions”.

How to create the mythic value of a luxury brand

The degree of the mythic value of luxury holds the key for the plausible sustainability of the myth of luxury brands. Therefore, every luxury brand needs to look deeper into its *raison d'être*, and identify its intrinsic traits.

So how to create and communicate mythic value in luxury brands?

Mahul notes that:

1. The first step is to identify brand attributes as well as brand associations.
2. The second is to identify the opposites of these attributes. So if one attribute is youthful, the opposite would be vintage.
3. Now it the time plot the opposites and identify new windows of opportunity. For example, if the other two opposites are economical and expensive. Then if the norm or quadrant where the brand is operational is youthful and economical, the brand now needs to find a new window of opportunity that cannot be a conventional quadrant, for example, vintage and expensive. It has to be an unconventional quadrant, for example, youthful and expensive, or vintage and economical, which implies something that looks impossible.
4. It is only once you have identified the window of opportunity, for example, vintage and economical, that the brand and communication planning can begin.
5. So the new positioning and the communication thereof will be in accordance with the new attributes determined while detecting these new windows of opportunity.

Conclusion

The Mythic Value of Luxury is a very unique take on luxury. The author has tried to answer a fundamental question with the help of anthropology. So the study of myth has helped him find a possible explanation on how luxury brands survive the test of time. The author has been researching on the subject for a few years and also has held a TEDx Talk on it. In spite of its academic framework, the tenor and language of the book is lucid, and is accessible for many readers. The author narrates a research in the form of a story, filled with anecdotes, which makes the book engaging.

The book opens the possibility for a larger scope of research –namely, is luxury a myth?