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The evolution of the podcast as a marketing tool in fashion luxury brands

Dra. Paula Gárgoles

Universidad Panamericana Ciudad de México

pgargoles@up.edu.mx

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5768-2573>

Dra. Isabel Garcia Hiljding

ESNE Escuela Universitaria de Diseño, Innovación y Tecnología, España

isabel.garcia@esne.es



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ABSTRACT

March 2020 changed the history of the world. And it also changed the fashion luxury industry. A virus attacked the whole world, whole nations were in lockdown and time stopped. This study's aim is to examine how the brands used their podcasts as a marketing tool during the periods of pre-COVID and post-COVID. The

four selected fashion luxury brands were: Chanel, Hermés, Dior and Gucci. Additionally, this study also aims to identify the frames, the longevity, the duration, related media and the language used and to compare them before march 2020 and after in order to understand how the podcasts are becoming a successful strategic

marketing tool for luxury brands and if these brands have changed and modified their content due to the pandemic.

In conclusion of the study and after analyzing the four podcasts of the world's leading fashion luxury brands, it can be said that we have not detected signifi-

cant changes in the way the podcast is managed by the brands or the content broadcasted, between pre- and post-COVID episodes.

Keywords: marketing, podcast, luxury brands, pandemic, COVID.

1 INTRODUCTION

March 2020 changed the history of the world, as well as the fashion luxury sector. A virus attacked the whole world, whole nations were in lockdown and time stopped. This study's aim is to examine the podcasts used by fashion luxury firms divided in pre-COVID and post-COVID periods of four selected luxury brands: Chanel, Hermès, Dior and Gucci. Additionally, this study also aims to identify the frames (source and creativity), the longevity, the duration, related media and the language used and to compare them before and after March 2020, in order to understand how the podcasts are becoming a successful strategic marketing tool for luxury brands and if these brands have changed and modified their content due to the pandemic.

The luxury industry is idiosyncratic. Luxury is more than the material offering (even if the offering is a service). Luxury brings symbolic and experiential value in addition to its functionality (Berthon et al., 2009; Chung & Kim, 2020). Luxury brands, unlike mass brands, do not communicate their advantages to their consumers, nor do they push them to buy, but rather the opposite. We can say that luxury brands are early adopters, while mass brands are their followers, in terms of innovation in the strategies they follow (Bazi et al., 2020; Grigorian & Petersen, 2014;).

When brands started to use digital communication, luxury brands were reluctant to change. Selling without consumers being able to touch the product

and experience the customer journey they were used to bewildered brands. The main reason for the skepticism of luxury brands in undertaking their digital strategies lies in the very attributes of luxury and the Internet: while luxury is synonymous with rarity, inaccessibility, and exclusivity (Jacob et al., 2020; Kapferer & Bastien, 2012;), the Internet is characterized by accessibility and democracy (Hennings et al., 2012). Kapferer and Bastien (2012) coined the term "Internet dilemma" for luxury brands in this context. Although they were "lazards" in ecommerce, luxury brands have been ahead in traditional communication and marketing strategies. In the case of podcasts, it is pertinent to note that mainstream brands are not using this digital tool to connect with their audience or to use it as a marketing tool even in a general way.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Podcasting as a marketing tool

The concept of podcast has its origin, on the one hand, in the device through which the podcast was mostly accessed at the beginning of its existence, the Ipod, which is the music player produced by Apple; and, on the other hand, in the term broadcasting (Dietrich & Bug, 2019). There are several opinions on what ex-

actly can be classified as a podcast. Krugmann and Pallus (2008) define podcasts as an audio file, mostly in MP3 format, which is freely offered to a target audience on the World Wide Web and can generally be accessed without time or geographic restrictions.

The term podcast was defined by Bonini (2015, p. 21) as “a technology used to distribute, receive and listen to on-demand audio content produced by traditional publishers such as radio stations, publishers, journalists and educational institutions, as well as content created by independent radio producers, artists and radio amateurs”. The main difference between podcasting and radio is their content. While the goal of a radio program is to provide interesting stories for a broad audience and address local issues in its service area, podcasts focus on special communities of listeners and are especially popular on niche topics (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008). Podcasts are not a simple replication or digital evolution of radio programs. Llinares et al. (2018) argue that a podcast is “a set of cultural works and practices of journalism, performance, art, comedy, drama, documentary, criticism, and education.”

Podcasts are emerging as a powerful marketing tool for the production and dissemination of audio content by various organizations and individuals (Spinelli & Dann, 2019). Companies have found in such media a different and closer way to maintain the relationship with their customers. As of 2021, there were over 1 million active podcasts with over 30 million episodes in over 100 languages (Whitner, 2021). The number of podcast listeners has increased year by year since 2010. The most popular device to listen to podcasts is the smartphone and, because of this, the biggest media companies noticed the increased popularity of podcasts and entered the marketplace (Adgate, 2019). Podcasts are one of the fastest growing media formats. According to a report by Emarketer (2021) on podcasts, between 2022 and 2023 Spotify will gain ground on Apple, reaching 37.5 million listeners worldwide. The same study predicts that by 2024, U.S. agencies will spend \$1.83 billion on advertising within audio content.

2.2 Podcasting as a marketing tool for fashion luxury brands

Digital media allows brands to connect with younger audiences, something that all fashion brands seek. In many ways, the luxury industry has been a “digital laggard” (Dietrich & Bug, 2019, p.31) most likely due to the important visual aspect inherent in fashion (Ahmed, 2017). Why the fashion industry remains a digital laggard, particularly in terms of using digital media to reach a wider audience, remains unknown for literature. In November 2017, *businessoffashion.com* published an article entitled “Fashion Wakes up to Podcasts” which asks whether the fashion industry can successfully conquer this fast-growing form of media: the podcasts (idem). The article’s discussion of the untapped use of podcasts within the fashion industry highlights the poor knowledge about the fashion industry and public relations.

There is currently little academic literature on the role of podcasts as a marketing tool in the luxury and fashion industry. One of the few papers on podcasts and fashion is by Brachter (2021), who claims that podcasts have the potential to be useful in building brands’ stories and awareness. According to the author, “podcasts serve as more long-forum platforms that allow detail and explanation by speakers. Brand goals for podcasts do not seem to be centered on the sale of products – particularly in the form of quick and concise marketing messages we are used to seeing. Instead, podcasts are meant to inspire and elaborate on the already well-known products and morale of the brands” (Brachter, 2021 p. 14).

While social media communication is immediate and fast, the podcast allows for more relaxed, longer conversations. In this sense, the tempo of the podcast is better suited to the tempo of luxury brands that need more time to do their storytelling. Podcasting combines the radio’s intimacy with the personalization of digital media forms to create a new and interesting space for media and cultural interaction (Wrather, 2016). Despite their audio and non-visual nature and limited reach, podcasts are becoming a popular marketing tool for luxury and fashion companies. In 2017,

Chanel launched its “3.55” podcast. In 2018 Gucci followed with “The Gucci Podcast”, Chloé started Radio by Chloé and Maison Margiela launched “The Memory Of...” with John Galiano. In 2019 Hermes debuted with “Podcasts from Le Monde d’Hermès”.

3. METHODOLOGY

The sample of podcasts analyzed was drawn from Interbrand’s ranking of the top 100 brands of the year 2020 (Interbrand, 2020). The luxury brands that appeared on the list were in order: Louis Vuitton (17), Chanel (21), Hermes (28), Gucci (32), Cartier (73), Dior (83), Tiffany & Co (94), Burberry (97) and Prada (99). The requirements for analyzing the brands were that they were luxury and that they had a podcast from at least the year 2020. After an exploratory search on Apple Podcast and various podcasting platforms, these four brands were found: Chanel, Gucci, Hermès and Dior.

A quantitative study was conducted analyzing the number of episodes between January 2019 and June 2021. In this way, we analyzed 14 pre-COVID months from January 2019 to March 2020 and another

14 months from April 2020 to June 2021. We research and compare longevity (Antunes & Salaverría, 2020); how long are the episodes [17]; dissemination (idem) and the language used. The podcasts have also been analyzed from a qualitative perspective: a content analysis has been carried out on the Creativity Category (Bratcher, 2021) and Source-based Frames (idem).

Regarding the Creativity Category, the content frame was analyzed and Bratcher’s (2021) categorization was followed. This is divided between Inspiration Frame, Design-detail Frame, and Signature or Icon Frame. With reference to the Source-based Frames, Bratcher (2021) distinguishes between expert and celebrity but after the analysis, we have also included the category of artist, since in many episodes, we have found a large number of artists because of the strong link that luxury brands have with culture.

4. RESULTS

The authors of the paper have analyzed a total of 172 episodes with a total duration of 3.531 minutes which are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Analysis of the podcast

	CHANEL	GUCCI	HERMES	DIOR
Longevity	Nov. 2017	May 2018	Feb. 2019	March 2020
Frequency PRE-COVID	Variable (series)	Variable (series)	Variable (series)	Variable (series)
Frequency POST-COVID	Variable (series)	Variable (series)	Variable (series)	Variable (series)
How long are the episodes? Average PRE COVID	23 minutes	24.75 minutes	11.4 minutes	30.75 minutes
How long are the episodes? average POST-COVID	25.9 minutes	30.5 minutes	16.25 minutes	27.02 minutes
Language PRE-COVID	French (15/37) English (19/37) Asian languages(3/37)	English (16/17) Spanish (1/17)	French (15/28)& English (13/28)	English 4/4

	CHANEL	GUCCI	HERMES	DIOR
Language POST-COVID	French (4/21) English (8/21) Italian(1/21) Spanish (1/21) Asian languages(5/21) Russian (1/21) Arabic (1/21)	English (19/20) Italian (1/20)	French (4/8)& English (4/8)	English 30/37 French 6/37 Italian 1/37
Diffusion PRE-COVID	Chanel web/Podcast platform	Podcast Platform	Hermes web	Own microsite
Diffusion POST-COVID	Chanel web/Podcast platform	Podcast Platform	Hermes web	Own microsite
Number of Podcast PRE-COVID	37	17	28	4
Number of Podcast POST-COVID	21	20	8	37
Predominant frame PRE-COVID	Inspiration frame	Inspiration frame	Signature o icon frame	Inspiration frame
Predominant frame POST-COVID	Inspiration frame	Inspiration frame	Signature o icon frame	Inspiration frame
Source-based frame PRE-COVID	Expert	Celebrity	Expert	Expert
Source-based POST-COVID	Expert	Celebrity	Expert	Expert

Source: the authors

4.1 Chanel Podcast

The Chanel podcast is a pioneer among fashion luxury brands and was created in November 2017. The podcast is titled Chanel Connections 3.55, in honor of the iconic 2.55 bag. Their podcast is, according to the brand, “a conversation with artists and friends of the brand, about their sources of inspiration and creation” [34]. They have issued 58 podcasts in total between 2019-2021: 37 pre-COVID and 21 post-COVID episodes. We can highlight the division into series of the podcasts and that all episodes of the same series are published on the same day. The frequency of publishing is variable

and the average duration of each episode pre- COVID is 23 minutes and 25.9 minutes for the post-COVID episodes. The predominant language of the podcasts is English, although there are also episodes in French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Arabic and Asian languages.

When analyzing the content of the episodes, pre-COVID and post-COVID, we can highlight a clear difference that happens from the Chanel Connects series that was aired in January 2021 and is composed of 8 episodes. In this series, people related to the brand and the artistic world of different aspects are interviewed

from “the living room of their home” or wherever they are at the time. In the introduction there is a space where they talk about the current situation and how the pandemic has changed our lives, although the content of the interviews at no time refer to COVID. The podcast of the firm has its own section on the website of Chanel where apart from being very intuitive, their followers and public can see the different series, a brief synopsis of each of them and there is an access to listen to the episodes directly from there. The website also contains images of videos of the recordings of the episodes, inviting the public to enter both visually and aurally in the universe of the *Maison*.

The Chanel podcast has an inspirational frame throughout the years. No difference in the frame is observed from pre-COVID to post-COVID.

4.2 Gucci Podcast

The Italian brand GUCCI, which has been part of the KERING group for more than two decades, launched its podcast in May 2018. GUCCI podcasts, consists of interviews between two or more people, whose common link is that the interviews are conducted with people who have a relationship with the brand and who collaborate with it. Podcast hosts can vary according to the subject matter covered in each episode. The analysis was carried out between the years 2019-2021; during that period the brand produced a total of 17 episodes pre-COVID and 20 episodes post-COVID. They are published monthly (although in some cases two or three episodes are published in the same month, or there is a month in which no podcast is published). The average duration is 24.75 minutes pre-COVID and 30.5 minutes post-COVID. GUCCI's podcasts are entirely in English, except for one episode that is repeated in English and Spanish, which is about the Gucci Osteria that has opened in Beverly Hills and one episode in Italian.

Gucci podcasts discuss social concern both before and after the pandemic. The themes that are most present in the episodes are sustainability, integration of all people in society, racism and equality. In one of the first post-COVID episodes, aired in June 2020, and offering an interview with David de Rothschild, an envi-

ronmentalist, there is a very short mention of the virus during the first part of the episode. During the coming episodes, the reference to the virus is non-existent, which may seem unusual, being a historical fact that has affected the entire world.

Therefore, we could conclude that the firm has not changed the frame, frequency or topics of their episodes due to the worldwide pandemic that started in March 2020. We can say that Gucci seems to have “drawn a veil” over the pandemic in its podcasts and it is not a tool of communication where this issue has been addressed.

4.3 Hermès podcast

Luxury brand Hermès started their podcast called Podcasts from Le Monde d'Hermès in February 2019. They have issued 36 podcasts in total: 28 pre-COVID and 9 post-COVID. The frequency of publishing is variable through 3 different series. The languages are French and English in which they duplicate episodes except for two podcasts which are in French only. Before the pandemic, the brand's podcast was a way to communicate the universe of Hermes through the people who have worked in the brand as its best ambassadors and its iconic products. That is why they gave voice to the designers, store director, cultural director of the patrimony of Hermès or the Manager of external relations.

After the pandemic, the brand moved to fiction. The series is called “Penelope's Investigations” in which a detective named Penelope investigates whose cases are linked to iconic objects of the brand such as the silk carré. They did not mention the virus and it seems that, with a fiction story, the brand as well as Hermes' fans are offered an escape from reality. For example, each episode takes place in a different country, at a time when travel was all but forbidden. In all the episodes, the podcasts are hosted on the corporate website and also on podcasting platforms such as Apple Podcast or Spotify. The frame of the podcast is the Signature or icon frame. Their way of elaborating branded content is very focused on the brand itself: the title is significant: The world of Hermès. The brand tells the story of the brand through its employees and its iconic objects.

Therefore, we could say that pre-COVID, the podcasts were interviews with internal experts: that is, people who work in the brand and post-COVID they have invented a fictional character of a researcher in which her cases are related to Hermès products.

4.4 Dior podcast

Luxury brand Dior started its podcast called Dior Talks on March 8th, 2020, International Women's Day. The date is part of the intention and message of the podcast: a feminist podcast. Maria Grazia Chiuri is the brand's first female creative director and since 2017 and since the beginning, she has positioned Dior in favor of feminism.

Just 4 episodes were launched before April 2020, and the rest (37 podcasts) were issued after. In Dior's case, it is difficult to set the differences between pre-COVID season and post-COVID. All of them are hosted on a micro-site inside the corporate website [36] and also on podcasting platforms such as Apple Podcast or Spotify.

In both cases, pre and post covid, the format of the podcast is through conversation with artists, collaborators of the *Maison* in which they talk about their work and the challenges of tomorrow. The most recurring theme is the role of art, always from a feminist perspective. In fact, of the 41 chapters, only 4 are interviews with men. The frame of the podcast is the inspirational frame.

With its podcast, Dior shows a brand committed to feminism and connected to culture and social issues such as gender. In no podcast they have mentioned coronavirus or the pandemic. Maybe the reason is because they were recorded before the events. There are always artists linked to the brand by some collaboration with a collection or friendship with the creative director. It is inspirational content through art and social issues of today's world such as the role of women in fashion and art [37].

5. DISCUSSION

It is striking to observe how the fashion luxury brands have not made significant post-pandemic changes in their podcasts. At the same time, in the fight

against the pandemic, luxury brands have pledged financial donations and manufacturing of medical supplies (Aloisi, 2020; Davis, 2020). At a quantitative level, in terms of frequency, Chanel and Hermes took a break of more than a year; on the other hand, regarding the duration of the episodes, there was no significant modification. On a qualitative level, there has not been a global evolution in languages and in the framework either. All have followed the same scheme that they had before COVID.

As highlighted in the previous section, each brand has had a different pre and post COVID evolution. In the case of Chanel, we can highlight several points: we have not observed any relevant change in the pre and post COVID episodes regarding the duration of the episodes, the languages or the frames used. In reference to these points, the brand in its podcast has not modified any aspect due to the pandemic.

Chanel returned to its podcast in December 2020, with a series of 10 episodes in ten different languages to issue its 2020/2021 *Métiers d'art* fashion show. In these episodes, no reference is made to the virus or the crisis experienced by the whole world. In January 2021, Chanel launched eight episodes of the Chanel Connects series, where the pandemic is discussed for the first time. In the introduction of each episode, the interviewer narrates how everything has changed and that the interviews are conducted from the dressing room, living room or office of each interviewee.

In the case of the Gucci brand, the pre and post COVID evolution could be called non-evolution. During the analysis of the episodes, 17 episodes were aired until March 2020 and 20 episodes have been aired thereafter. According to the variables analyzed, neither the length of the episodes has been substantially modified, nor the language used, which is predominantly English, nor the frameworks or themes covered in the episodes have changed.

In the first episode after the outbreak of the pandemic, the brand in its first interview in June 2020 makes a very brief reference to the virus. From the post-COVID episodes onwards, the subject matter remains in line with the podcast, the interviews are still about issues of concern to society and the brand, such as the

environment, racial problems, women's rights, etc., but at no time is the pandemic discussed, which of course has been a major global concern.

In the case of Hermes, an emission pause is observed from October 2019 to February 2021. If the previous and subsequent episodes are analyzed, there are no differences in the quantitative questions: duration, frequency and even in the qualitative ones: language and frame. In a deeper observation, an evolution towards fiction is perceived. The only thing that can be highlighted as a differentiator is a more literary line where the indirect protagonists are the iconic products of the brand.

Regarding the French brand Dior, no changes are observed between the pre-COVID and post-COVID periods. As we have mentioned before, it can be said that the Dior podcast started at the beginning of the pandemic, on March 8, 2020. In this sense, no changes have been observed between the first podcasts in March 2020 and the last podcasts in June 2021. All Dior podcasts have in common that they are interviews with personalities linked to art and with Dior or with her creative director.

As for the means of dissemination, Chanel and Hermès have decided to host their podcasts on their own corporate websites, while Dior has created a microsite for its podcast and in the case of Gucci has chosen to host it on podcasting platforms such as Apple Podcast or Spotify.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, after analyzing the four podcasts of the world's leading fashion luxury brands, it can be said that we have not detected significant changes in the way the podcast is managed by the brands or the content broadcasted, between pre- and post-COVID episodes. Only Chanel makes reference to the pandemic, placing its interviewees and in turn its audience in the new circumstances experienced as a result of the virus.

We can think that in the case of some of the brands, the episodes during the "transition" between pre and post COVID were already recorded beforehand, but following the analysis until June 2021, it is likely

that if they decided not to make reference to the pandemic it is because they chose not to. Following this line of thought, it is possible that the brands wanted to "protect" their audience in the podcast channel by offering a "Covid-free" content, almost like an escape to a world where the virus does not exist.

One of the limitations of the study is that the sample is small. Only four brands have been analyzed and the timeline is also limited: the analysis didn't cover the total number of podcasts published by each firm, but only the episodes broadcasted from January 2019 to June 2021. It has also not been possible to investigate the number of listeners and downloads of each podcast, so we do not know if the podcasts have had an impact. Another way this study is limited is by its lack of exploration on how audiences are interacting and engaging with the brands' podcasts.

For future research, we suggest looking at the evolution of the podcast in the fashion luxury brands and how the podcasts are embedded in the marketing strategies in the luxury and no luxury brands.

Both before and after the crisis, the four brands have used the podcast as a marketing tool to bring their audience closer to the brand and to culture in general.

Despite the fact that luxury and fashion brands have suffered a lot due to lockdowns, store closures, a decline in sales, etc., podcasts have continued their course in the four brands analyzed.

After this analysis, we can ask ourselves if fashion luxury brands have missed an opportunity to connect with their audience, or if they have chosen to accompany and entertain their audience without making any reference to the pandemic during a time marked by fear, sadness and uncertainty. \

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