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Storytelling and the making of a global luxury fashion brand: Christian Dior

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the storytelling strategies adopted by luxury fashion companies to build global brands from the 1990s onwards. Using the example of Christian Dior, it is demonstrated that heritage is a social construction based on strong narratives rather than the mere outcome of the history of a brand. Storytelling is a powerful instrument used in the context of creating global luxury brands over the last two decades. This makes it possible to emphasize the timelessness of a brand while disregarding the contradictions resulting from a change in its identity over time. As a consequence, this article argues that, although the use of heritage through storytelling is a useful tool for the practice of brand management, it is not an academic concept and should be avoided by scholars.

KEYWORDS

storytelling
heritage
Christian Dior
global brand
business history
John Galliano
licensing

INTRODUCTION

The luxury industry has been one of the fastest-growing sectors for more than two decades. According to the consultancy firm Bain & Co. (2017), the global personal luxury goods market increased in value from 85 billion euros in

1. In this article, we use the term 'Christian Dior' to talk about the person, 'Christian Dior SA' or 'CDSA' for the company and 'Dior' for the brand.

1996 to 250 billion in 2016. This dramatic expansion is due to various factors, including the globalization of markets, the transformation of the luxury industry organizationally and new marketing strategies (Colli and Merlo 2007; Kapferer and Bastien 2009; Bonin 2012; Donzé and Fujioka 2015, 2018). The major characteristic of this sector is the ownership of global brands. Indeed, along with the beverage industry, the luxury market was the first sector to implement the globalization of its brands (Holt et al. 2004; Jackson 2004; Da Silva Lopes 2007; Donzé 2017a).

Global brands are the core competitive advantage of luxury goods. The creation and worldwide diffusion of a strong and unified brand identity make it possible to attract a broad consumer base (Zhou and Belk 2004; Eng and Bogaert 2010; Truong 2010). As Kapferer and Bastien (2009) have revealed, global luxury brands share some key characteristics, including high quality and creativity, and the fact that they require delicate craftsmanship and reflect a European lifestyle and tradition. The concept of *heritage*, discussed below, embodies these different elements, and is based on the assumption that brands have a history and should use it to strengthen their identity. Heritage thus reflects a positive vision of a brand and its history. This article argues, however, that, while heritage is a powerful marketing tool, it is not an appropriate concept for scholars when it comes to analysing the evolution and production of global brands; instead, it should be approached as a social construction and considered as the result of a storytelling strategy.

This article focuses on the case of Christian Dior as a way to discuss the relationship between global luxury brands, heritage and storytelling.¹ The company was founded in Paris in 1947 and is one of the most valued and well-known brands in luxury fashion today (Steele 1998; Dior 2007; Jones and Pouillard 2009). Interestingly, however, although the management of Christian Dior SA today emphasizes that the company is built on a rich history, its heritage strategy is actually relatively new. As a consequence, the major research questions addressed by this article are as follows: why, when and under which conditions was storytelling chosen as a deliberate strategy for the Dior brand? How was this strategy implemented and what are the results?

The article uses a business history methodology to answer these questions, i.e. it looks at the development of the firm from an *ex-ante* perspective. Importance is attached to contextualization to discuss Christian Dior SA's decision-making and the strategic choices made by its managers, who, unlike scholars who understand this type of company evolution, do not know what the future will bring (Bucheli and Wadhvani 2013; Kikkawa 2013). The main sources for this analysis are the annual reports published by the firm Christian Dior SA (CDSA) and the French economic press. The article has five sections beyond this introduction: the second section presents a literature review on heritage management and the luxury business; the third section discusses the implementation of a global brand strategy by CDSA from the mid-1990s onwards; the fourth section looks back at the historical development of the company and the implications of its brand and identity management; and the fifth section discusses the results of the research; and the final section concludes the article.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The article builds on two major strands of literature. The first consists of work on the use of history by companies and heritage management. The historical turn experienced by organization research during the last decade (Clark

and Rowlinson 2004; Keulen and Kroeze 2012; Bucheli and Wadhvani 2013; Rowlinson et al. 2014; McLaren et al. 2015) gave way to numerous studies on the use of history by companies. Most scholars consider history to be a resource used by enterprises to communicate with employees, customers, local communities and other stakeholders (Suddaby et al. 2010; Foster et al. 2011; Smith and Simeone 2017). The purposes of these strategies vary from improving social relations within a firm, to building a new brand image or strengthening the bargaining power of a company with political authorities and labour unions.

Building a brand is often a major objective in the use of history by companies, especially for consumer goods (Beverland 2005; Jones et al. 2005). In particular, management scholars have developed the concept of 'brand heritage' (Hakala et al. 2011; Wiedmann et al. 2011) to discuss how companies include some historical elements in their brand management and how the emphasis on these elements can add more value to brands. Urde et al. defined brand heritage as 'a dimension of a brand's identity found in its track record, longevity, core values, use of symbols and particularly in an organisational belief that its history is important' (2007: 4). In this perspective, the notion of heritage is based on an objectivist vision of history (Hall 1980). Consequently, many scholars of brand management developed research with a strong practical orientation, the objective of which is to help companies and managers to identify and manage their heritage properly (Stewart-Allen 2002; Fisk 2006; Misiura 2006; Urde et al. 2007; Boccardi et al. 2016).

Fundamentally, however, history does not exist, but is instead a social construction that depends greatly on the observer (Marrou 1954; Hall 1980). Consequently, heritage should be regarded as an invented tradition, as some historians (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), anthropologists (Munz 2018) and economists (Barrère 2000) have emphasized. Companies do not necessarily need to look at what their history was, but should instead construct a narrative that may include some elements that are more or less strongly linked to their past. The luxury brand management gurus Kapferer and Bastien argue that 'what is important is not simply the history, but the myth that can be created around it, the source of the brand's social idealization [...]. If there is no history, it must be invented' (2009: 93).

The narrative technique used to build a heritage and manage a brand on this basis is called storytelling. Salmon (2007) demonstrated that telling stories to distract an audience was a technique developed during the 1980s in US politics and introduced later in other fields, particularly management. Storytelling has had a major effect on brand management (Neuhauser 1993; Twitchell 2004; Aaker and Singer 2011). The core of a brand's identity is not the quality of the product itself, but the story linked to the brand (Herskovitz and Crystal 2010; Pulizzi 2012).

Figure 1 shows the relations between the three concepts of history, heritage and storytelling in the context of brand management. The history of a company, a brand or a creator is the past, which includes a broad range of facts and interpretations, and can be reconstructed only partially through available sources (archives, products and testimonies, for example). To build a brand identity, companies select a few elements of the history – pieces that they sometimes call the 'DNA' of their respective brands – to form the heritage of the brand or company. This heritage is a resource that requires management, particularly through three major actions: product development (how products relate to former designs or iconic goods), storytelling (what companies

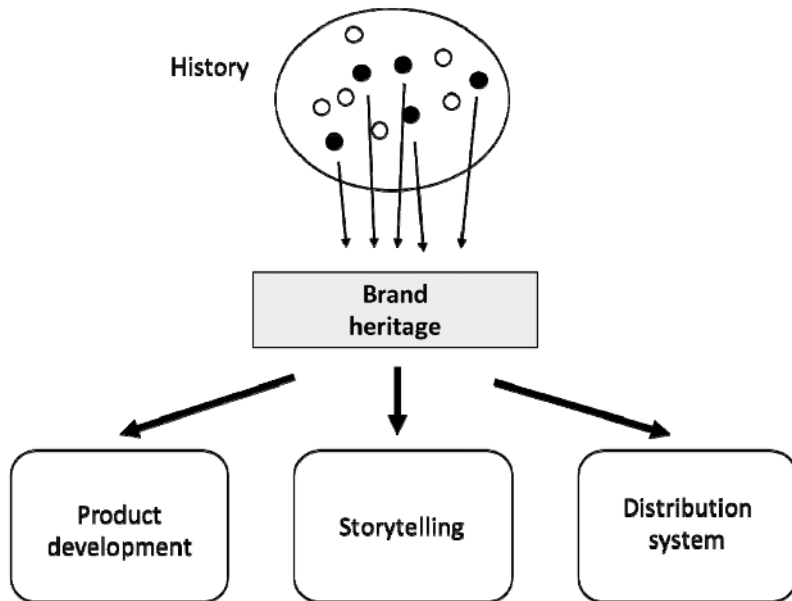


Figure 1: History, heritage and storytelling in brand management. Designed by the authors.

say about their own history in media, museums, events, etc.) and distribution (how a company stages a brand and its goods). This approach can renew the understanding of heritage management and so the use of history by companies, as this article will demonstrate through the case of Dior.

The second strand of literature to which this article contributes is the business history of luxury. Recent work in this field has emphasized that this industry underwent a deep transformation during the 1980s (Donzé and Fujioka 2018; Donzé and Pouillard forthcoming), characterized by the emergence of conglomerates and multinational enterprises (Moore and Birtwistle 2005; Bonin 2012), the expansion of Asian markets (Donzé and Fujioka 2015) and the mass consumption or democratization of consumption (Daumas and Ferrière le Vayer 2007; Albert 2015). Luxury thus shifted from a business consisting of small and independent family firms, the production of which was based on craftsmanship and sales targeting a wealthy elite, to a globalized industry based on large listed firms, with the main objective being to increase profits and value for shareholders (Moore and Birtwistle 2004; Kapferer and Tabatoni 2011; Bastien and Kapferer 2013). Brand management plays a major role in this context, making it possible for firms producing luxury items to communicate with global consumers and add value to their goods. Heritage has been one of the most important tools when it comes to building luxury brands since the turning point of the 1980s. Although most luxury goods are mass-produced, emphasizing timeless values attached to a brand, such as their high quality, craftsmanship and tradition, creates a notion of luxury and contributes towards the positioning of a brand up market (Christodoulides et al. 2009; Fionda and Moore 2009; Hudson 2011; Cooper et al. 2015; Larsson 2017). Most of the work on luxury branding does, however, have the same shortcomings as the literature on heritage management: it does not consider

heritage as a social construction (Donzé and Wubs 2018). The launch of a broad range of accessories to increase growth and profitability is another major feature of the luxury industry. That approach made it possible for brands that had traditionally targeted niche markets to expand beyond their core business (Moore and Birtwistle 2005). This was particularly the case for haute couture companies transforming into large multinational enterprises, which began in the 1980s. The new business model developed at that time focused on a brand heritage rooted in the tradition of haute couture and used that basis to diversify towards branded accessories (Donzé and Fujioka 2018). Christian Dior SA was a promoter of this diversification towards luxury through licenses and accessories, as we will discuss below.

Nevertheless, this article argues that heritage management was a new strategy adopted by luxury goods companies in the context of the transformation of the industry. Their expansion towards non-western markets, particularly in East Asia, and the democratization of consumption required a new type of brand management. Heritage was a major tool with which to build a global brand that is strongly linked to a timeless image of a European lifestyle. Christian Dior SA is a case in point.

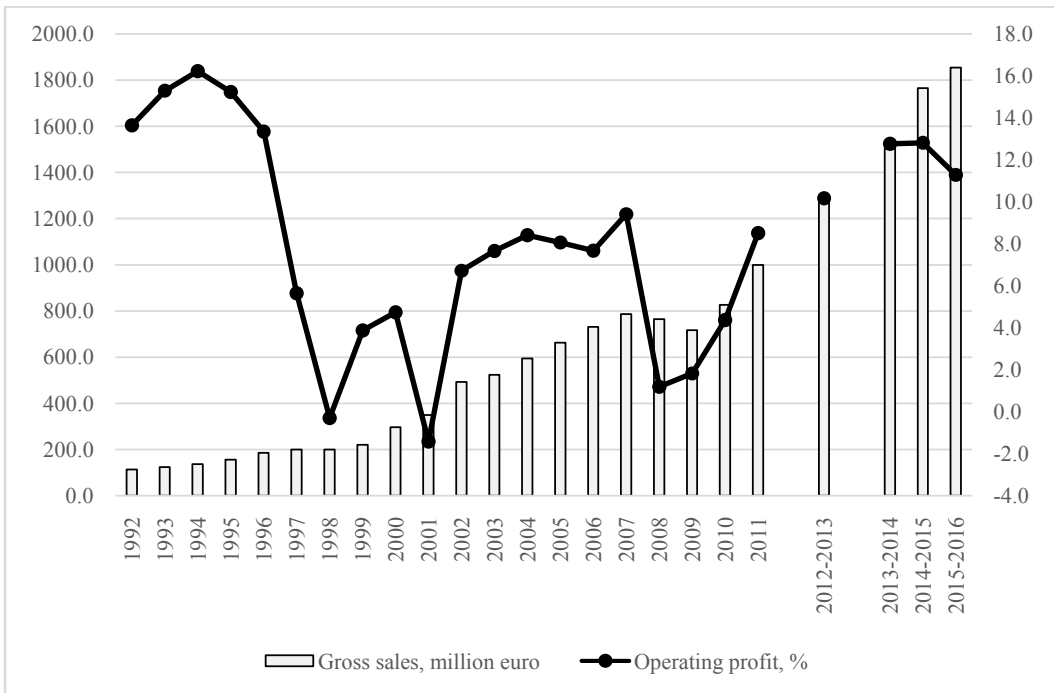
DIOR: THE MAKING OF A GLOBAL BRAND

Dior is one of today's most valuable luxury fashion brands. According to the consultancy firm Interbrand, it was one of six luxury fashion brands (along with Louis Vuitton, Hermès, Gucci, Burberry and Prada) in the top 100 most valued brands in 2017 (2017). Moreover, the company Christian Dior Couture SA, which manages all of the brand's products except perfumes and cosmetics (managed by Parfums Christian Dior, a subsidiary of LVMH), achieved rapid growth from the 1990s onwards, with gross sales rising from 102 million euros in 1992 to 296 million in 2000 and nearly 1.9 billion in the fiscal year 2015–16 (see Figure 2).

The success of Christian Dior Couture SA is the result of a new strategy implemented during the second half of the 1990s, which changed the nature of the company. Figure 1 reflects this transformation. Christian Dior SA used to be a small company with high profitability, as demonstrated by the numbers in the early 1990s. Annual sales were, on average, 132.2 million euros in 1992–95 and profitability was high (the operating income was 15.1 per cent of sales). Yet the new strategy transformed Christian Dior SA into a large company with high profitability. Its operating income since 2012 has been above 10 per cent of sales and represents a value that is almost twenty times larger than gross sales twenty years earlier. This is clearly a major financial success story.

This success did, however, take both major investment and time. The period 1997–2001 was a time of transformation and low profitability (an operating profit average of 2.5 per cent). Yet, since 2002, with the exception of the period of the financial crisis (2008–10), the company's results show a general trend of growing sales and profitability. What was the new strategy that made this possible? The transformation of Christian Dior SA essentially relied on three major elements: investing in retail; maintaining strong control of product diversification; and engaging star designers.

Until the early 1990s, most of the sales of Dior clothes and accessories were made by retailers that were independent of the company, with the exception being a few large stores such as the famous boutiques on Avenue Montaigne in Paris or in New York City. In 1992, retail amounted to only 28.2 per cent

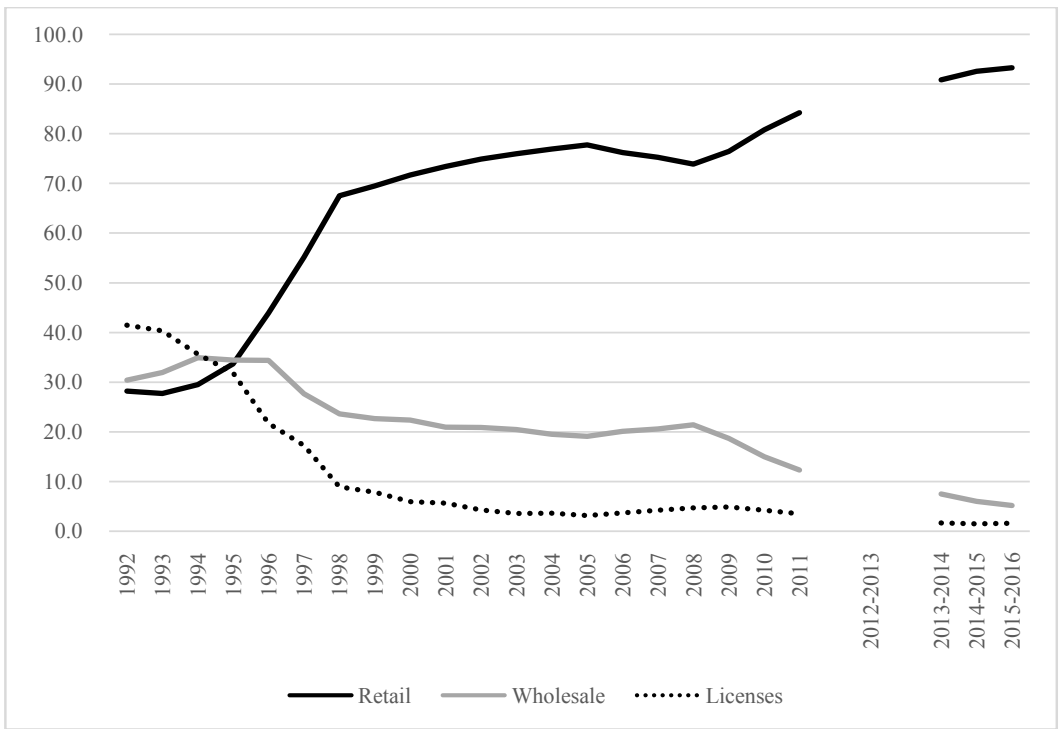


Note: Fiscal years correspond to January–December through 2011, May–April in 2012–13 and July–June since 2013–14. January–April 2011 and May–June 2013 are not included in this figure.

Figure 2: Christian Dior Couture SA, gross sales (million euros, left axis) and operating profit (% , right axis), 1992–2016. Source: Annual reports Christian Dior Couture SA.

of gross sales. The following year, the company's chairman Bernard Arnault declared that its growth would require 'the creation of a network of boutiques' (Christian Dior 1993: 8).

Consequently, during the 1990s, the company opened sales subsidiaries throughout the world to organize the direct retail of its products. It terminated contracts with local distributors and took control over retail successively in Malaysia (1994), Monaco (1994), Hong Kong (1995), Singapore (1996), Japan (1997), Taiwan (1997) and Korea (1997). It then opened tens of mono-brand stores around the world; it owned 73 in 1999, when the number was published for the first time. Figure 3 shows the impact of this new distribution strategy. The share of retail went above 50% of gross sales in 1997 and reached 71.7% in 2000. The number of stores being opened continued to rise rapidly until the global financial crisis following the collapse of Lehman Brothers, which is the largest bankruptcy filing in US history to date. The retail share peaked at 237 stores in 2008 and 2009, and then declined due to the closure of loss-making boutiques. Christian Dior Couture refocused on a small number of profitable Points of Sales, but still had 200 in 2016. Meanwhile, the average sales made by these boutiques were worth between 2.2 and 2.7 million euros in 2000–08, growing to 4 million in 2011 and 8.8 million in 2015–16. Along with the densification of the sales network, the share of retail in gross sales continued to rise after 2000 and has been above 90% since the fiscal year 2013–14.



Note: Fiscal years correspond to January–December through 2011, May–April in 2012–13 and July–June since 2013–14. January–April 2011 and May–June 2013 are not included in this figure.

Figure 3: Composition of gross sales as a per cent, 1992–2016. Source: Annual reports Christian Dior Couture SA.

Mono-brand stores have been important for all luxury fashion brands since the 1990s (Moore et al. 2010). They are not, however, only Points of Sale, but also contribute towards brand building and are an embodiment of the storytelling strategy. Christian Dior SA’s annual report in 1994 revealed the objective of these stores clearly:

The development [of these boutiques] answers mainly the will to provide Christian Dior’s customers with luxury stores that strengthen the prestige of the brand, to enlarge the diffusion of exclusive products, particularly for ready-to-wear and accessories for women, which are sold only in the company’s stores.

(Christian Dior 1994: 13)

Finally, it must be stressed that the architecture and design of these new mono-brand stores differed substantially from the Dior stores in the 1950s–1970s. While these old boutiques tried to imitate the classic Louis XVI style of the main Paris store, the new mono-brand boutiques, especially in Asia, were inspired by the latest modern art trends (Dufresnes 2006).

The second element of the transformation of Christian Dior SA’s strategy is strong and centralized control over product diversification. Since the 1950s, and for about four decades, the expansion of Dior in foreign markets

has essentially relied on license agreements and the local production of goods labelled as Dior (Okawa 2007). The major problems arising from licensing, however, were the difficulty of controlling the brand image and the impossibility of building a global luxury brand.

Accordingly, in the early 1990s, Arnault announced his plan to 'develop direct activities' (Christian Dior 1993: 8). The objective was not to stop making and selling accessories, which were a major source of profit and a way to expand the customer base of the brand. It was, however, necessary for headquarters to directly control how they were manufactured and distributed, and to launch goods that were standardized and uniform across the globe. Moreover, except for perfumes and cosmetics, these accessories were intended to be sold in Dior's mono-brand stores. Consequently, Christian Dior SA terminated licenses for women's ready-to-wear in Europe (1994), men's clothing and leather goods in the United States (1995), ready-to-wear and accessories in Japan (1998), and lingerie and stockings globally (2002). As a consequence, the share of licenses in terms of gross sales fell from 41.1 per cent in 1992 to 5.1 per cent in 2000 (see Figure 3).

Furthermore, from 2000 onwards, Christian Dior SA took control of several of its former partners' 'strategic licenses' (Christian Dior 2003: 15), i.e. for manufacturing fashion accessories sold alongside clothes in mono-brand stores. The company took a minority stake in Safilo, an Italian producer of glasses (2001), merged with a German manufacturer of jewellery (2005) and acquired 87 per cent of the capital of John Galliano SA, a company engaged in the production of various fashion and luxury accessories (2008). The production of all the brand's accessories was not, however, directly controlled by Christian Dior SA. The company did, however, benefit from its integration within the conglomerate Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton SE (LVMH). The parenting advantage (Moore and Birtswistle 2005) made it possible to use the facilities of other subsidiaries to manufacture accessories. Watches are a case in point (Donzé 2017b). In 1995, LVMH took over the small Swiss company that owned the license to produce and sell Dior watches. Then, LVMH reorganized the manufacturing of watches for its various fashion brands and founded a new subsidiary, Ateliers Horlogers SA, in Switzerland (Jeannot 2001).

Nevertheless, the diversification of accessories did not stop with the end of the license system. On the contrary, Christian Dior SA engaged aggressively in this cash-making activity. The launch of the handbag Lady Dior in 1995 was a financial success and paved way to the accessorization of the brand. However, the design and manufacture of accessories are controlled by Christian Dior SA's headquarters. Indeed, their standardization contributed towards the making of a global brand.

Finally, the engagement of a new generation of star designers was a major step in the transformation of Christian Dior SA into a big business. Arnault explained in 1994 that he wanted to 'strengthen and renew creation teams' (Christian Dior 1994). The Italian fashion designer Gianfranco Ferré was artistic director of Dior from 1989 onwards. He designed haute couture and ready-to-wear in a classic way, in the tradition of fashion designers that Christian Dior himself had followed. This was not, however, enough to increase sales and profits. Accordingly, in 1996, Arnault appointed the star British designer John Galliano as its new artistic director. Three years later, Galliano also became head of the brand's image and communications. Galliano was also the artistic director of Givenchy from 1995 onwards, another brand owned by LVMH. Through his eccentric catwalk and advertising campaigns, he

transformed the image of Dior and turned it into a glamorous and modern global brand (Duggan 2001; Jung and Ko 2009). In 2000, Arnault explained Galliano's role and impact: 'John Galliano has undoubtedly brought a new vision of fashion and his style is seminal. The commercial success was not long in coming. The sales of women's ready-to-wear has [*sic*] strongly increased since his arrival' (Christian Dior 2000: 4).

Galliano explained to French journalists the same year that the role of catwalks was to bring 'ideas pushed to the extreme' that are not presented in stores, but that have a major impact in the media (T. L. M. 2000). Galliano was sacked by Christian Dior SA in 2011 following a public scandal resulting from racist and anti-Semitic comments that he made in a Parisian bar (Chrisafis 2011). He was succeeded by Raf Simons (2012), a Belgian fashion designer who pursued a career as an independent couturier; Simons was succeeded by Maria Grazia Chiuri (2016), a fashion designer who specialized in the development of accessories and had worked previously for Fendi and Valentino.

Along with Galliano, two other fashion designers contributed towards the transformation of Dior. Victoire de Castellane was appointed as the first artistic director of Dior Joaillerie (1998). She had spent her entire career at Chanel and took the lead on the development of jewellery at Dior, within the context of the end of the license system and the control of accessories by headquarters. Also important was Hedi Slimane, a fashion designer who was involved in an avant-gardist cultural scene in Berlin and London and became in 2000 the first artistic director of men's fashion when Christian Dior SA decided to develop this segment more intensively. Slimane was succeeded in 2007 by his assistant Kris Van Assche, a Belgian designer who had also worked at Yves Saint-Laurent. These designers all belonged to a small community of fashion designers and made their careers working in the same famous branded fashion companies. They did not maintain the 'real' style of Christian Dior, but just designed fashionable products to which the company added its brand name.

The role of these designers was again emphasized by Arnault in 2001: 'Through its creative and very high-quality products that answer the needs of a young and sophisticated customer base, Christian Dior realized an astounding commercial breakthrough. This is uncontestedly the greatest current success in the global universe of fashion' (Christian Dior 2001: 4).

The transformation of the company Christian Dior SA from a small haute couture enterprise to a big business in the global luxury fashion industry was the result of the entrepreneurship of Bernard Arnault. It was made possible through long-term investments in retail and built on the construction of a new brand image.

Arnault and the management team of Christian Dior SA insisted on the brand's continuity over time and claimed the importance of heritage. The company organizes large public events for anniversaries such as the centenary of the birth of Christian Dior (2005), or the 60th (2007) and 70th (2017) anniversaries of the foundation of the company. These events were often hosted by museums, an approach that helped legitimize the narrative of the brand. Moreover, a Musée Christian Dior opened during the 1990s in the couturier's house in the North of France (Pronitcheva 2018). In 2006, Arnault argued that:

The values of elegance and innovation, which bear the Company since its creation in 1947, arouse still stronger emotions in a world looking for creativity and extreme quality. Renewing with the ambition of Christian Dior keen on exporting his fashion to five continents, today

2. <https://bit.ly/2QEtySc>. Accessed 20 February 2018.

3. <https://bit.ly/2soKFxv>. Accessed 20 February 2018.

the Company goes to meet new customers to offer them exceptional goods in prestigious and sophisticated surroundings.

(Christian Dior 2006: 4)

In 2010, he claimed that Dior's 'prestigious heritage [is to] create desire in enhancing women's beauty' (Christian Dior 2010: 2–3).

These assumptions are, however, rather vague and values such as elegance, quality and beauty can be emphasized by any luxury fashion brand. The lack of clarity of Dior's heritage is actually due to the absence of any link between the brand developed by Christian Dior himself in 1947–57 and the global luxury brand built by Galliano and his fellow designers. Christian Dior used to be a classical, conservative or even reactionary designer, according to French journalist François Giroud, who published his biography in 1987 (Giroud et al. 1987). The New Look, which relaunched French fashion globally after Second World War, was a world away from the modernist fashion introduced by the likes of Chanel during the inter-war years; those developments came as a continuity of the creative activities of designers such as Poiret, who shifted dresses from the corset to a simpler, woman-friendlier product (Steele 1998; Driscoll 2010). The bar suit, which embodies the extravagant, glamorous New Look and Dior styles from the late 1940s and the 1950s, shifted from modernist and utilitarian dresses and came back to some features of the corset and traditional fashion (rounded shoulders, thin waist and an A-line skirt) (Pochna 1996; Steele 2000). Since the 1960s, Dior's designers moved away from the bar suit and the New Look. Although some references of this style came back in the 1990s in the context of the construction of a new brand heritage, Galliano made his fame on the design of futuristic and innovative clothes (Ames 2008). There are therefore profound contradictions in style between Christian Dior and John Galliano, but this did not prevent the company from becoming one of the world's largest and most valued luxury fashion brands in the early twenty-first century.

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF DIOR

The management of Christian Dior SA today focuses on a few core values such as creativity, modernity and elegance. Although these values are rather universal and could be utilized by most luxury fashion companies, Christian Dior SA maintains that they were adopted at the birth of the company and have guided its development to the present day. The section dedicated to the history of Dior on the brand's website opens with the following:

Christian Dior changed the rules of elegance around the world with his debut collection in 1947. Today, this vision continues to be explored boldly and imaginatively.²

Storytelling starts with the New Look collection, which was presented by Christian Dior in the year that he founded his company (1947) and established his fame in Europe and the United States. New Look was introduced as a 'revolution' through which Dior created a 'legend', with the bar jacket being the symbol of this new style. Christian Dior SA's website states that 'over six decades after its creation, the New Look revolution and its spirit continue to inspire Dior. The New Look is a perpetual evolution'.³ This claim expresses the construction of a heritage through storytelling. While the successors of

Christian Dior up to the 1990s introduced their own style and led the company to different identities, the construction of a global luxury brand required another strong narrative and iconic products. Although the work of Galliano consisted mostly of a de-construction of Dior, he presented modernized versions of the bar jacket, as have his successors to date. The bar jacket was at the core of the brand heritage constructed in the 1990s, fitting into the context around the company's strategy for expanding on the global market and boosting profits (see section 'Dior: The making of a global brand'). In 1985, Christian Dior SA decided to organize a department of historical archives, which it later renamed 'Dior Heritage'. The department has supported Galliano to develop a few dresses with aesthetical references to the work of Christian Dior. It also organizes exhibitions and purchases of old Dior dresses from auctions and private collections (Young 2010). Moreover, the exhibition organized in Paris in 2017 for the 70th anniversary of Christian Dior SA's foundation showcased the bar jacket as its iconic product in the main hall.

This section discusses the development of Christian Dior SA and the Dior brand since the birth of the company. The focus is on the evolution of the brand and the expansion of the firm to shed light on the new brand management strategy adopted in the 1990s.

Christian Dior was born in 1905 and started his career as the owner of an art gallery in Paris, before engaging in fashion. He became a designer in the House of Robert Piguet in 1938, before moving to the House of Lelong in 1941. After the war, Christian Dior met the textile magnate Marcel Boussac, a wealthy industrialist who wanted to invest in luxury fashion. He gave Christian Dior the necessary financial backing to open his own business in 1946. While the professionals dispatched by Boussac managed the company, Christian Dior focused on creating products and public relations (Jones and Pouillard 2009).

He became famous globally with his first collection, which was advertised in 1947 and qualified by the fashion media as the 'New Look'. This fact indicates the close connection between Christian Dior and the press. The couturier was well aware of the power of media to build strong fashion brands. In the 1950s, he had the largest PR department of the entire fashion industry in Paris (Palmer 2009; Skillen 2013; Pouillard 2018).

Despite the New Look's success, Christian Dior's style was criticized by feminist and avant-gardist circles. In particular, Coco Chanel, who escaped to Switzerland in 1944 due to her relationship with a Nazi officer during the war, was an opponent of the New Look. She returned to Paris in 1954 and relaunched simple clothes for women (Steele 1998).

The New Look enjoyed major success in Western Europe and North America, contributing towards re-establishing Paris as the global centre of fashion against New York after the Second World War (Jones and Pouillard 2009). Christian Dior SA was profitable right from the start and remained so until the death of its founder in 1957 (Okawa 2007). It was undoubtedly the largest high-end fashion company in Paris: in 1952, it employed 902 people, while the second largest, Maggy Rouff, had only 235 (Jones and Pouillard 2009).

This success relied on an active international expansion strategy. In particular, the United States, where Christian Dior SA opened a branch in 1948, played a major role in the growth of the company. The American business was, however, different from the French version. Christian Dior SA did not sell high-end fashion in the US, but high-end ready-to-wear that was especially developed for American customers (Pouillard 2018). Adapting to the market was a key determinant of success. The strategy was later applied to

other countries and extended to accessories (perfume, hosiery, fur, ties, etc.). Christian Dior SA signed at least sixteen license agreements in France and abroad between 1947 and 1955 (Jones and Pouillard 2009).

After Dior's sudden death in 1957, his assistant Yves Saint-Laurent became the new designer of the house. His positioning, however, was very different from that of his mentor, i.e. he was less conservative and less traditional. Like Chanel, he was a modernist and wanted to explore new forms of fashion (Rawsthorn 1996). Saint-Laurent had a radical approach towards fashion that was not a good fit with Dior's customers (Mendes and de la Haye 2010). He left Christian Dior SA in 1960 to open his own company, and was succeeded by Marc Bohan, a fashion designer who started his career at the House of Jean Patou before moving to Christian Dior SA in 1957 (Okawa 2007). Bohan had a more traditional and conservative approach to fashion than Saint-Laurent and was the artistic director of Christian Dior SA until 1989 (Givhan 2015).

Under Bohan, the business model introduced by Christian Dior was further developed and formed the basis for the company's continued growth. The high fashion creations targeted only a narrow customer base and this division was unprofitable during the 1970s (Okawa 2007). It was, however, essential when it came to maintaining the status of the brand as a major representative of French fashion, which made it possible to extend licenses to new products and markets. Licenses were the real source of profit. According to Okawa (2007), accessories amounted to 29.6% of gross sales and 49.7% of profits by 1973, and 41.2% and 45.3%, respectively, in 1977. Moreover, in 1968, the manufacture and sale of perfumes was spun off in a new company, Parfums Christian Dior SA, of which the champagne house Moët & Chandon had half the capital (70% in 1971). This was a way for the Boussac Group to access capital, which was necessary because of the losses of the textile business.

Nevertheless, although licensing made it possible to increase the profitability of the company, it paved the way towards a changing brand identity around the world. The headquarters in Paris focused on high fashion and trusted licenses for the design, price and image of the goods that they produced. Dior's identity thus varied across countries. This became an important weakness in terms of building a global luxury brand when, in 1984, Bernard Arnault, a young French businessman, purchased the bankrupt Boussac Group to take control of Christian Dior SA and the department store Le Bon Marché, which was also owned by the textile company (Donzé and Wubs 2018). Arnault's vision was to strengthen, refocus and reposition the Dior brand, with the objective being to make it one of the most profitable fashion businesses and able to compete with Chanel, which experienced significant growth after the arrival of Karl Lagerfeld as artistic director in 1983.

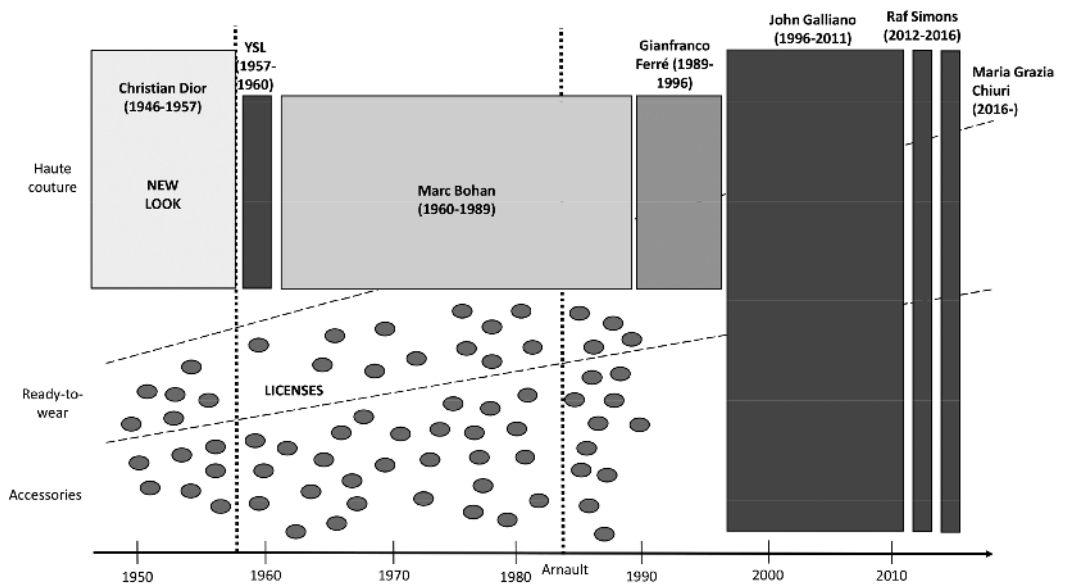
A new fashion designer was appointed who not only focused on making clothes (high-end fashion and ready-to-wear), as Bohan had done, but was also able to take charge of all developments regarding Dior's brand identity. The Italian designer Gianfranco Ferré, who was chosen as the brand's new fashion designer in 1989, established new codes regarding Dior's style (cannage pattern, typeface, Dior grey, etc.; Fury and Sabatini 2017). However, the real change occurred when John Galliano became Dior's new designer when Ferré returned to Italy in 1996 to start his own company. Galliano was not an exclusive couturier, but rather a fashion designer who was also engaged in developing accessories. He became famous for his fashion shows, shocking at many events, and contributed towards making Dior a global luxury

brand, as highlighted in the previous section. Although Galliano used some elements inspired by Christian Dior during his first fashion show, his style was a complete break from the original work of the founder of the house.

HISTORY, STORYTELLING AND BRAND IDENTITY

The overview in this article of the historical development of Christian Dior SA and the Dior brand since 1946 makes it possible to explain why the contradiction between the storytelling strategy adopted in the 1990s, which emphasized the importance of heritage, and the absence of continuity regarding brand identity was not a problem when it came to building a global luxury brand. The identity of Dior relies on a twofold relationship (see Figure 4).

First, there was a vertical relationship between haute couture, ready-to-wear and accessories. From the perspective of brand management and the construction of brand heritage, the consistency of the brand among these three activities is a major issue. These three sectors were developed independent of each other right from the start of the company. Christian Dior focused on haute couture, while licensees developed various goods for their domestic market autonomously. Until 1957, licensed goods and ready-to-wear benefited from the fame of haute couture. However, there was a lack of consistency due to the absence of headquarters-directed control over the Dior-branded products coming from sources around the world. During the second phase of the business, although Marc Bohan engaged in ready-to-wear in France, licensed goods became the core business of Christian Dior SA and the relationship with haute couture weakened. The brand identity became vaguer, less



Note: The degrees of grey show the proximity with Christian Dior in terms of style and positioning; the vertical extensions of the boxes correspond to the involvement of designers in ready-to-wear items and accessories.

Figure 4: Brand management of Christian Dior SA, 1946–2018. Drafted by the authors.

unified and fluid throughout the world. Finally, the new strategy implemented in the early 1990s paved the way to the end of licenses and a strong integration of the three sectors under the direction of star designer John Galliano. Accessories became standardized throughout the world and their design was strongly controlled by the headquarters in Paris. At the same time, a storytelling strategy was adopted to strengthen the brand identity, with this maintaining that Dior was built on the heritage of the New Look and the original creative work of its founder Christian Dior.

Second, the horizontal relationship between Christian Dior SA's various fashion designers emphasizes the absence of continuity in relation to style and positioning, that is, in terms of brand identity. Until the arrival of Galliano, this was not an issue as Christian Dior SA relied on accessories developed locally and haute couture was a small and unprofitable business. The emphasis on the idea of heritage emerged in the early 1990s. There are three major elements that explain why it was possible to claim the existence of heritage. At first, the wide development of accessories from the 1960s onwards contributed towards the vague image of Dior. Customers around the world did not have a clear idea of who Christian Dior was and what he did, meaning that they were receptive to storytelling. Next, this change benefited from the eccentric personality of John Galliano. He became a star in the global mass media and in terms of the expression of creativity in the high-end fashion industry, thus lending a charismatic legitimacy to Dior (Dion 2013). Finally, the storytelling strategy was adopted at a time when Christian Dior SA expanded its sales outside its traditional markets. The share of Asia-Pacific in retail sales went from 34.3 per cent in 1999 to 44.1 per cent in 2015–16. Most of these new consumers, particularly in China, had no knowledge of Christian Dior's history and contribution to fashion. They were, however, open to the idea of the brand embodying the tradition of creativity and took its heritage for granted.

Consequently, brand heritage as a social construction experienced a major change after the takeover of Christian Dior SA by Arnault. The strategy was to establish a global luxury brand that extends beyond haute couture. Some iconic products such as the bar jacket and a general idea of 'creativity' were taken from Dior's history to become core elements of the brand heritage since the 1990s. On the basis of this heritage, the company developed new products, including accessories, implemented a communication strategy (storytelling) that emphasized these values and set up a new distribution system (global network of Dior stores) in line with the heritage. The heritage strategy implemented during the late 1980s and the 1990s thus represents Dior's current competitive advantage in the global luxury market.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored how Christian Dior SA shifted from an haute couture house to a global luxury brand company. Our business history approach offers a fresh, new understanding of the evolution of the fashion industry during the second part of the twentieth century while shifting the focus from dresses and creators to management and business issues.

Beyond the case of Christian Dior, this article has implications for future research on the management and business history of luxury fashion brands. Its major contribution is to clarify and analyse the concept of heritage, which brand management scholars Pecot and De Barnier (2017) have stressed as an issue requiring close study. This article demonstrates that the idea of heritage

is a tool that companies use to build a strong brand image – not simply to create an objective or a verifiable reflection of the past. Storytelling is hence a corporate strategy for diffusing its brand identity based on heritage. It should therefore not be used by scholars to explain the history of brand management without taking a critical perspective. Moreover, the article has emphasized the need to adopt a business history approach, that is, analysing the evolution of a company and its brands from an *ex-ante* perspective that considers contextualization. Indeed, a brand's identity is a social construction that requires a focus on why and how it changed over time.

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