

The impact of an artist's authentic identity on fashion brands in fashion design and art collaborations

Key words: fashion / authenticity / artist

Abstract

Authenticity occupies an important position in contemporary consumer culture¹ under the trend of mass production. This phenomenon resonates with the abundant research based on the ideology of authenticity in marketing and consumption that covers diverse fields, including fashion and art and such sub-cultures as hip-hop.² This research explores the application of the authentic identity of the artist in collaborations of fashion designers and artists based on cases studies of the luxury brand Louis Vuitton and the sportswear brand Adidas. In recent years, under their respective marketing strategies that relate to the authenticity issue, both companies have collaborated with artists and developed crossover items. The objectives of this paper are: first, to explore the authentic identity of the artist within the context of fashion and art collaborations, and, second, to investigate the commercial implications of fashion and art collaboration from the brand perspective.

1 Introduction

With reference to the research of Beverland³ and Botterill,⁴ the term 'authenticity' is understood to be linked to the following dimensions: originality, actuality, sincerity, innocence, exclusivity, self-presentation, something hand-made and non-commercial, and the moral authority of the creator. It is also connected to an object's history and to the place in which it is displayed. As a marketing strategy, authenticity can be fabricated for the purpose of brand building and consumer appeal. This method has, in fact, been applied by more than one brand⁵: that is, brands meet consumer aspirations for authenticity by contriving 'authenticity.' What the consumer perceives as brand authenticity is actually the image of authenticity or the

impression of authenticity, but not necessarily 'real' authenticity. Crafting authenticity through a deliberate brand program is an effective strategy for a new brand.⁶ As Fine⁷ said, the politics of authenticity can exceed 'the traditional status structure' and has the capacity to assign value 'to those with the least social and cultural capital'.

Closely bound up with individualism that features self-construction and self-discovery,⁸ authenticity currently contributes a lot to contemporary consumer culture⁹. It is significant for both brand and consumer. Authenticity constitutes an indispensable part of the unique and exclusive identity of a brand, constituting its 'marketing DNA'¹⁰ and substantially differentiating it from the brands of similar products. At the same time, today's consumers are expressing an aspiration for authenticity, which is exemplified by their strong desire for authentic brands and experiences.¹¹ This phenomenon has been widely identified in the literature on the application of the ideology of 'authenticity' in the marketing and consumption of everything from fashion and art to such subcultures as hip-hop, including the studies of Peterson¹² and Arthur.¹³

Although similar issues in fashion marketing have been explored by such writers as Botterill¹⁴ and Chen,¹⁵ to date, there has been little research conducted on the value of the authentic identity of the artist in the collaboration between fashion design and art. Although collaborations between fashion and art and other fields, including electronics and food, are discussed by Jang,¹⁶ his study only made the generalization that the crossover of fashion with the original concept of international artists feeds the fashion industry's constant desire for new things. In his perspective, if a fashion brand or designer makes a co-branded product by collaborating with a famous artist who has devotees, then its quality will be recognized and its sales volume guaranteed by these devotees. Perhaps owing to the motif of his research, Jang did not explore artistic collaboration in depth.

In its years of high-profile collaboration with artists, the luxury brand Louis Vuitton has indicated its belief that people value original ideas and has thus emphasized the development of original and unique products.¹⁷ The sportswear brand Adidas has adopted a similar

strategy by building around the idea of authenticity. In recent seasons, to back up the key values of authenticity and originality,¹⁸ Adidas Originals, an important division of Adidas, has actively developed co-designs with such international artists as Fafi, Smart, Skore, and Can2, most of whom are graffiti artists, in its Adicolor, Sleek Series, and End-to-End projects.

Based on the cases of Louis Vuitton and Adidas, this paper analyzes the partnership of fashion brand (or designer) and artist and takes up the issue of the authenticity of the artist and fashion marketing strategies. (In the context of this research, fashion covers the entire apparel and accessories industry. In addition, with a focus on the visual art spectrum excluding fashion design, artists in this paper include painters, sculptors, photographers, graphic artists, multi-media artists, and installation artists.) The specific objectives of this paper are, first, to explore the authentic identity of the artist within the context of fashion and art collaborative projects, and, second, to investigate the commercial implications of fashion and art collaborative projects from the brand perspective.

2 Methodology

Along with a literature review, this research applied two qualitative research methods: direct observation and case studies.

2.1 Literature Review

A comprehensive review of the literature related to this research was carried out to gather relevant data and information. Sources include articles, reports, papers, books, and newspaper editorials obtained from the Pao Yue-kong Library at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. A keyword search was also conducted through the Internet. The scope of the literature review included historical and contemporary collaborations between fashion designers and artists and an exploration of perceptions of authenticity and its relation to the artist and application to fashion brands.

2.2 Direct Observation

Direct observation is distinguished from participant observation, which requires that the

researcher becomes a participant in the culture or context being observed. In this method, we adopt a more detached perspective and directly observes what the subjects of the research are doing and saying.¹⁹

Basically, the observations in this research focused on inanimate objects. To a great degree, this method guarantees that the researcher is unobtrusive and does not bias the observations. This research examines two brands, Louis Vuitton and Adidas, which officially announced collaborations with artists in their fashion designs. The researcher observed their relevant marketing practices, promotional activities, and the patterns and styles of their co-designs by browsing their websites and relevant fashion magazines and editorials. This method allowed the positioning and guiding philosophies of their collaborations with artists to be further addressed. This kind of research also contributes to proving the validity of the research issues empirically and to obtaining up-to-the-minute information.

2.3 Case studies

A case study is the intensive study of a specific individual or context.²⁰ As a method, it has been around for a long time. Case studies allow the researcher to focus on either single or multiple examples.

Despite the limitations of generalizing from individual cases and the subjectivity of the researcher, a case study can still work as a scientific method if it is conducted with generally accepted practices.²¹ For example, the case that is studied must be contextualized and carefully described, and the data collection and analysis methods must be selected in a rigorous and unbiased way.

The focus of the case studies in this research was on the positioning and philosophy that Adidas and Louis Vuitton adopted in their collaboration with artists and how they reached their goals.

3 Overview Collaborations between Fashion Brands and Artists

Lipovetsky²² described fashion history as being divided into two periods: from the second half of the fourteenth century until roughly 1850 and from 1850 to the present. This research focuses on fashion in the second period and is in tune with our understanding of fashion today.

According to Stern,²³ the close relationship between fashion and art was established at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, collaboration between fashion designers and artists seems to be a relatively uncommon phenomenon. Although such collaboration was still rare in the modern fashion world, French designer Paul Poiret and Italian designer Elsa Schiaparelli are early examples. Poiret worked with the French artist Raoul Dufy, who drew modishly stylized drawings for him in the 1910s. According to Hollander,²⁴ it was largely this artistic collaboration that made the public aware of Poiret. Schiaparelli's designs in the 1930s constituted a series of collaborations with a group of Surrealists, including Christian Berard, Jean-Michel Frank, Salvador Dali, and Jean Cocteau, which gave her a special boldness.²⁵ The result of these collaborations were clothes that challenged traditional aesthetic norms and the usual construction and design of Western clothing, such as the Shoe Hat, the Mutton Chop Hat, the Tear Dress, the Lobster Evening Dress, and so on.

With this brief historical retrospective, we can see that today's collaborations between designers and artists are not new. Furthermore, with the arrival of postmodernism after the 1960s, art moved outside of official galleries²⁶ to mix with everyday life. In the years since, the issue of whether fashion is art has been increasingly debated by scholars and professionals. However, it is only recently that the phenomenon of associating with artists has become quite notable in the fashion market. Many firms have publicly announced their collaboration with artists through the press and events. For example, Louis Vuitton chose Japanese artist Takashi Murakami as a partner and jointly created bags and accessories, respectively, in 2003 and 2005. Marc Jacobs and the American artist Peter Max co-designed colorful sporty shoes in 2004. Others include Longchamp and artist Tracey Emin in 2004, Stella McCartney

and pop artist Jeff Koons in 2005, and Fornarina and graffiti artist Miss Van in 2006. In addition to product development, these collaborative activities have expanded to include the interior and exterior design of stores and window displays. Louis Vuitton, for instance, in 2006 invited the Danish artist Olafur Eliasson to design its Christmas holiday windows in more than 360 stores worldwide.²⁷ These cases indicate that artistic collaboration in the fashion field is a hot trend.

4 The Authentic Identity of the Artist Extended to Fashion Brands

4.1 The Artist as the Exemplar of Authenticity

Authentic self-formation is generally viewed as contradictory to mainstream society, which tends to oppress the quest for authenticity.²⁸ This means that authenticity is bound up with certain rebellious and transgressive attributes that are related to originality and creativity. This, in great part, accounts for why artists who have the image of ‘rebels or social pariahs’²⁹ are able to epitomize authenticity.

Since the nineteenth century, artists have been seen as the exemplars of authenticity,³⁰ owing to their rebellion against prevailing norms, their rejection of emotional restraint,³¹ and their dedication to the quest for new truths and original ideas.³² Abbing³³ believed that Bohemian artists were the first to try deliberately to express themselves and to put their souls ‘in’ their works of art, thus communicating their authenticity. In other words, what they created was not for the purpose of commerce, but rather to express their subjective conceptions.

4.2 The Commercial Value of Fashion and Art Collaborative Projects

4.2.1 The Importance of Authenticity in the Market

Authenticity plays an influential role in brands. It has been treated as a core component of successful brands³⁴ and even compared to a brand’s ‘marketing DNA’.³⁵ This evaluation can be seen in marketing and promotions.

Authenticity is an effective tool in attracting consumer attention in contemporary marketing campaigns. Today's consumers have a deep aspiration for authenticity, which is exemplified by their strong desire for authentic brands and experiences.³⁶ Products that make a unique impression and express an aura that can be consumed are attracting increasing numbers of customers.³⁷ With the presence of a powerful sense of 'authenticity,' an object, brand, or individual can create an alluring aura that attracts people with the experience of beauty, exclusivity, and uniqueness³⁸.

The enhancement of sales is the primary purpose of a brand.³⁹ The ability of authenticity to be used as a strategy to appeal to consumers lies, in great part, in a brand's image of being 'above commercial considerations.'⁴⁰ Faced with the consumer's quest for authenticity, managed authenticity is now used by more than one brand as a marketing tool to promote their products in a way that is 'perceived as invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value.'⁴¹ Beverland⁴² took luxury winemakers as an example: many luxury winemakers who sell their wine for US\$500 a bottle prefer to emphasize their tradition and craft instead of their knowledge of marketing. In this context, a non-commercial model is used to win over the hearts and wallets of consumers, and authenticity is an invitation and enticement,⁴³ rather than a barrier.

4.2.2 The Advantages of Forming a Creative Partnership with Artists

In terms of the application of authenticity in business, the benefits to a fashion brand of collaborating with an artist lie in the artist's image as 'the central agent of original self-definition,'⁴⁴ that is, an artist with a rebellious and transgressive image represents the epitome of authenticity. Therefore, cooperation with an artist allows a brand to embrace the magic power of authenticity to a great degree.

From the perspective of the consumer, this is made possible, to a large degree, through visual signs in which the artist's authenticity is transformed into fashion brands. In other

words, the visual artist has a technical advantage in attaching his or her authority to the visual objects of other fields because of their talent in visual creation.

4.2.2.1 Visual Signs as the ‘Signature’ of the Artist

Bendix⁴⁵ suggested that the core of authentic expression is that it is linked to the moral authority of the creator; the artist’s authenticity justifies the authenticity of the artwork. Echoing this opinion, Szmigin⁴⁶ stated that the artist’s individualized visual signs mark a painting out as authentic and therefore of more value. Both acknowledge the importance of the creator’s authority in legitimating works of art: artwork that is created by an artist with distinct characteristics logically has a unique privilege.

For similar reasons, artists can transfer these unique features to other fields by acting as product designers: the ‘signature’ of the artist gives a brand particular promise, a notable mark of distinction, just as it does in the world of art.⁴⁷ To explain this theory more clearly, Szmigin took Campari as an example. This brand and its products gained new significance by hiring a distinctive artist – the Futurist Fortunato Despero. By becoming involved with the design of products, the artist spreads the glamour of authenticity to fashion and other brands and endorses these designs as unique and original.

Visual designs, at which visual artists excel, directly and effectively incorporate an artist’s image into products and brands and thus convey an abstract sense of authenticity to the consumer. Equipped with the artist’s symbolic image or known sign, this sense of authenticity is more fully amplified. Because symbols work to represent the achievements of artists in their careers and distinguish them from other artists, they make the artist’s identity easier to recall.⁴⁸ Therefore, because of their public recognition, these symbols should help to increase the number of potential consumers and establish an emotional relationship among product, artist, and, hopefully, consumer.

4.2.2.2 Limited Editions Stress the Visual Signs of Artists

It is not uncommon for fashion brands to produce collaborations in the form of limited editions. Limited editions can be viewed as a way to further remind consumers of an artist's involvement and the rare value of his or her artworks because the restriction of production or purchase signifies the product's distinction from mass-produced products and, in turn, makes the issues surrounding the designs more notable. Limited editions also work as a strategy to 'cultivate' consumers. As Brown⁴⁹ said, 'the less available products are, the more precious they become.'

5 The Exemplification of the Research

The discussion above can be exemplified by the performance of Adidas and Louis Vuitton.

The evaluation criteria are based on three aspects. The first focuses on the features of co-designs (visual signs, sales quotas, and sales location). The second are the selling points of the promotion process, such as the originality and exclusivity of the items. These two aspects reflect a fashion brand's strategic exploration of the authenticity of the artist. The third are the achievements of the collaboration. Because the partnership between a brand and an artist is usually flexible and temporary, rather than stable and long-term, and the quota of collaborative items is quite limited, it may be appropriate to treat such collaborations as campaigns that aim to improve or update a brand image and promote a wider range of items. In other words, these temporary projects contribute to establishing a brand's characteristics and philosophy through which it aims to meet the aspirations of its target consumers. Therefore, the sales of the collaborative products should not be taken as the only standard of assessment in terms of how to evaluate such artistic crossover projects. The subsequent reaction to a brand and changes in its market share and consumer base should also be taken into consideration, as should the sales of the brand's entire line.

5.1 Adidas Collaboration with Artists

As has been discussed, authenticity can be understood in several dimensions, and thus the means of crafting authentic images are similarly diverse. Adidas, which uses the appeal of

authenticity as a promotional strategy,⁵⁰ has chosen to emphasize the originality of individuals and its history. This resonates with the assertion of the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder that 'each of us has an original way of being human, an authentic self.'⁵¹ This is incarnate in Adidas Originals, which was once the core of the Sport Heritage division of Adidas and then evolved into Sport Style.

Adidas Originals is positioned to 'convey the heritage, competence and authenticity of the Adidas brand.'⁵² Its targets are to increase its reach in the lifestyle market, the world of fashion hunters and style-setters,⁵³ and to improve customer loyalty by appealing to their fickle tastes.⁵⁴ Although the world's first Adidas Originals store opened in September 2001 in Berlin-Mitte, it was in 2006 that Adidas Originals got fresh inspiration and energy and began to express its authenticity and originality by teaming up with artists. The brand has collaborated with a number of artists around the world on several fashion designs. Here, the focus is on the Adicolor collection and the End-to-End project.

Adicolor in 2006

In Spring/Summer 2006, Adidas Originals introduced the iconic footwear concept of Adicolor to celebrate the touch points of self-expression, customization, and unlimited personal involvement.

The Adicolor collection launched a series of collaborations in the Innovative Colour range. The partners included eight artists and an artist group, including British graphic artist Peter Saville, American graphic artist Bill McMullen, San Francisco graffiti artist Twist, New York artist Cey Adams, Scottish artist Jim Lambie, French artists Claude Closky and Fafi, Japanese artist Taro Okamoto, and the artist group Surface To Air.⁵⁵

In addition to using the artists' names, these items – shoes and apparel – express each artist's prominent style, such as Jim Lambie's 'eye' in the Hideout collection and the flat face and flame-like shape in the Y2 Taro Okamoto collection. Moreover, these collaborations are all limited editions with regard to their production quotas and sales locations. For example,

only 5,000 pairs of shoes and 2,500 items of clothing were produced in the Taro Okamoto collection, and Bill McMullen's Adicolor New York City range was specifically designed for Foot Locker.

The End-to-End Project in 2007

In March 2007, in collaboration with Foot Locker, Adidas brought seven graffiti artists (Smart, Skore, Can2, Atom, Scien, Siloette, and Rime) together to produce a collection of footwear, clothing, and accessories known as the 'End-to-End project.' In this project, 'originality,' 'uniqueness,' and 'exclusivity' were emphasized in the brand promotion.⁵⁶ The fact that Foot Locker was the only distribution point gave further emphasis to the 'exclusivity' of these crossovers.

Armed with its distinct image in the market, Adidas took full advantage of the commercial value rooted in the originality and uniqueness of these artists. Promotion for the End-to-End project, for instance, demonstrated its efforts to 'cultivate' consumers for these limited-edition items. After completing the design of the End-to-End items, from March to May 2007, Adidas took a journey across Europe with the artists to celebrate the launch of the range. They traveled in 'the End-to-End bus,' which was adorned with exclusive pieces by the artists and contained End-to-End artifacts, products, images, and media. As a result, a huge buzz was created among the clued-up crowd.⁵⁷ The brand's subsequent performance indicates the success of the Adidas strategy, which took the authenticity of the artists as an enticement. After the first wave of End-to-End shoes and apparel, Adidas and Foot Locker continued their collaboration and released a second range in early August 2007. The seven artists who participated in the first wave were reunited for the launch of the second Adidas and Foot Locker collection.⁵⁸

The Originals range continues to thrive and expand its consumer base. Today, the Originals range contributes to 30% of the company's total revenue,⁵⁹ and the Adidas brand has become a trendsetter in the market for the sports lifestyle consumer.⁶⁰ As previously mentioned, this was exactly the aim of the development of the Originals range.

Additionally, as Adidas Originals is the core division of Sport Heritage, its artistic projects can also be evaluated according to the achievements of Sport Heritage, which has been a significant growth driver of the Adidas brand. In 2006, driven by double-digit growth rates in footwear, apparel, and accessories, the division contributed 22% to Adidas sales. Currency-neutral sales in the division grew by 13%. In Euro terms, Sport Heritage sales increased by 12% to €1.444 billion in 2006 from €1.290 billion in 2005. In the medium to long term, Adidas intends to produce up to 30% of its brand revenues in the Sport Heritage division.⁶¹

5.2 Collaboration between Louis Vuitton and Takashi Murakami

One can understand Louis Vuitton's broad and profound cognition on today's society and consumers through the writing of Kyojiro Hata,⁶² president and CEO of Louis Vuitton Japan. He believed that with the arrival of the twenty-first century, the industrial infrastructure and efficiency-first policies that were based on standardized mass production were about to reach their limit. Louis Vuitton needed to offer added value, something that would appeal to people's sensibility. The company also needed to focus on the development of original, unique products and know that people with their own opinions and original ideas would be valued.⁶³ It is therefore not difficult to understand why the brand has such a deep interest in collaborating with an artist who conveys an expressive lifestyle.⁶⁴

Louis Vuitton has collaborated with three artists, Stephen Sprouse, Julie Verhoeven, and Takashi Murakami, to develop its crossover collection. Its collaboration with the latter, a Japanese artist, is a good example to demonstrate how Louis Vuitton transferred the authenticity of the artist to its fashion brand and gained the economic benefit of the crossover.

In 2003, Louis Vuitton partnered with Takashi Murakami and introduced new signature designs for Spring/Summer 2003 based on the trademarked Louis Vuitton toile monogram. According to Eaton,⁶⁵ they created four basic collections of handbags and accessories in multicolored patterns and styles, as follows.

- (1) The 'Monogram Cherry Blossom,' featuring the Louis Vuitton toile monogram with cherry blossoms.
- (2) The 'Eye Love Monogram,' featuring a colorful Louis Vuitton toile monogram with a Murakami eye symbol.
- (3) The 'Monogram Multicolore,' offering an avant-garde version of the Louis Vuitton toile monogram in 33 colors.
- (4) The 'Murakami Characters,' featuring a collection of Murakami characters on the Louis Vuitton toile monogram pattern.

The four collections, particularly the 'Eye Love Monogram' and the 'Murakami Characters,' exude a distinct Murakami odor because of the signal print of the eye and the Murakami characters. In such collaboration, people cannot help but think about the artist when they enjoy the crossover products because of the individualized prints. These signal features help to connect the artist to the brand and thus legitimize or strengthen its authenticity and freshen up its image.

To draw the consumer's attention, these collections were featured in many fashion magazines. From January to July 2003, Louis Vuitton spent nearly \$3.5 million promoting and advertising these four collections, and their investment paid off. Between February 17, 2003 (the date on which the Murakami handbags were first displayed on the company's websites) and August 1, 2003, the total number of visitors to the www.louisvuitton.com website exceeded five million. As of February 1, 2005, more than 71,000 Louis Vuitton handbags and accessories from these four collections had been sold in the United States through Louis Vuitton stores and its Website for more than US\$40 million.⁶⁶

The subsequent expansion of its offerings showed the success of the collaboration. In 2005, Louis Vuitton launched a new line of leather goods in collaboration with Murakami: 'Monogram Cerise,' which features bright red cherries with smiling faces over the traditional brown monogrammed canvas. Murakami patterns on Louis Vuitton products clearly

continued to attract customers. The print that Murakami created for Louis Vuitton in 2003 reappeared in 2006 in the 'Love Monogram' Tambour watch, which was made available in an exclusive limited edition of 500 pieces. Each watch is numbered from 1 to 500 on the back of the case.⁶⁷ Also, the Multicolore bag collection, which was first launched in 2003, was still being promoted in the brand's stores in Hong Kong in the summer of 2007. This illustrates the brand's commercial concerns and the artist's commercial value in artistic collaborations.

According to Hata,⁶⁸ through its strategy of artistic collaboration, Louis Vuitton has successfully updated its brand image, further maintained consumer loyalty, and expanded its market share. Its variety of fashionable and sophisticated bags and accessories, produced in collaboration with artists, has brought to Louis Vuitton a modern-day renaissance. These new products have not only provided regular clients with the opportunity to rediscover the brand, but have also brought the company a totally new clientele.

6 Conclusion

In the context of fashion design and art collaboration, this research first explored the authentic identity of the artist: this authenticity is bound up with the rebellious and transgressive attributes that are related to originality and creativity. The artist, because of his or her image as a rebel or social pariah, is treated as the epitome of authenticity. By rebelling against the prevailing societal norms and rejecting emotional restraint, artists have been seen as exemplars of authenticity since the nineteenth century.

Second, the commercial implications of fashion and art collaborative projects have been discussed from the brand perspective. In addition to helping a brand differentiate itself from brands with similar products, authenticity is an effective strategy in capturing consumer attention. Because artists are seen to represent authenticity and originality, forming creative partnerships with them transfers these qualities to the brand.

Third, the success of such collaborative projects has been demonstrated through the performance of the sportswear brand Adidas (specifically its Adicolor collection and

End-to-End project) and the luxury brand Louis Vuitton (specifically its collaboration with Japanese artist Takashi Murakami).

7 Recommendations and Limitations

Due to limited time and resources, this research was mainly conducted based on the existing data of two brands, Louis Vuitton and Adidas, including their annual reports and design and promotion information. To further explore the issue, it is recommended that a future study include interviews with consumers and fashion professionals to provide additional perspectives.

Also, this research explored the impact of an artist's authentic identity on fashion brands by analyzing the performance of the two brands. This limitation in the number of examples means that a general understanding of the value of artistic authority in the context of fashion design and art collaborative projects remains unclear. Therefore, future research should employ more relevant cases.

Endnotes

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