

# M(Art)Worlds: Consumer Perceptions of How Luxury Brand Stores Become Art Institutions

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## Abstract

Through an ethnographic study of how consumers perceive and experience Louis Vuitton flagship stores, we show that luxury stores are becoming hybrid institutions, embodying elements of both art galleries and museums, within a context of exclusivity emblematic of luxury. We create the term “M(Art)World” to capture the essence of this aesthetically oriented strategy. Participants take note of the company’s sleekly elegant architecture, interior design, and adroit use of lighting that are modelled after those of museums housing world-class exhibits. The store’s merchandize is artisanal, often produced in collaboration with artists. Objects for sale are displayed alongside actual art, rendering both products equivalent. Employees function as curators, offering guidance and knowledge, as well as goods for sale. We analyze how luxury consumers experience and evaluate the ways in which luxury stores operate as contemporary art institutions, and extrapolate those insights into managerial implications for other retail venues.

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## Introduction

The tenuous, uneasy yet inherently symbiotic relationship between culture and commerce has long been a research concern in the social sciences, and more recently, in the study of marketing and consumer behaviour (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010). By overtly embracing art as an integral element of its commercial core, the luxury industry giant Louis Vuitton has reinvented itself as a hybrid institution, part luxury fashion store and part museum gallery, creating what we term a “M(Art)World”—a market that contains art within its very identity. Through our ethnographic study of consumer experiences in Louis Vuitton flagship stores in Hong Kong, we

argue that in the international market for contemporary art, deals are made and prices set in constant interaction with a cultural sphere involving aesthetic judgement and social recognition. LV intentionally elides art and commerce, with each reinforcing the other’s intrinsic value.

According to Kapferer and Bastien (2009), art is the aesthetic and social guarantor of luxury: truly a marriage of culture and luxury. The view by consumers of LV as an art world, despite its obvious commercial orientation, underscores the importance of how stores like LV have evolved strategically into M(Art)Worlds. In this paper, we elucidate how consumers process artistic presence and presentation at LV stores, as they negotiate the new phenomenon of a hybridized brand.

In the past, luxury stores and museums co-existed in most major cities. Traditionally, non-profit organizations such as museums were considered “product-oriented” (Griffin 2003), while for-profit entities, such as stores and commercial art galleries, were seen as “market- and consumer-oriented” (Crane 1987; Joy 1998). Museums connote the “art world” (Becker

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1982), while commercial galleries are the “art market” (Crane 1987; Moulin 1986); scholars typically study these disparate institutions separately. Little is known about consumer experiences in commercial contexts that combine product and market orientations peculiar to the art world—particularly in the contemporary art world (Dion and Arnould 2011). In this world, two opposing conceptions of the market are at work: one based on the eternity of art (Hirschman 1983), the other on the process of perpetual innovation (Kapferer and Bastien 2009). In the context we explore, the focus is on continuous renewal, congruent with the strategy of many luxury retailers, who, while venerating their history and heritage, strive to also both fuel and satisfy the desires of today’s consumers. How do consumers experience the new M(Art) world of LV luxury? What are the individual dimensions of this hybrid retail experience?

In the following section, we review the literature on customer retail experiences, both within department stores and museums. We then provide an overview of our primary research site, the LV Hong Kong flagship store. After reviewing our methodology, we present and interpret our findings. We conclude with a discussion of the managerial implications of our work.

## Literature review

### *Luxury brands*

The market for luxury goods is booming (Kapferer and Bastien 2009), with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), including Hong Kong, becoming the second most important consumer of such goods (Degen 2009). Yet, we know little about the meaning of luxury or luxury brand consumption, despite the luxury sector being one of the most profitable marketing segments worldwide, and the fastest growing. The paucity of literature is regrettable, with occasional books and articles on luxury branding (Kapferer 1997; Kapferer and Bastien 2009; Twitchell 2002), and, for example, an issue of the *Journal of Brand Management* devoted to luxury brands (2009). We concur with Berthon et al. (2009), that luxury brands can be considered in terms of their materiality, the individual experience of such products, and their symbolic roles, as signifiers of wealth and taste.

Definitions of pleasure and beauty are central to any such discussion (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Creative directors at today’s luxury brands—the drivers of creating brand essence—are considered artists in their own rights. Without such leadership and charisma, luxury brands would be hard pressed to succeed (Dion and Arnould 2011). We build on their argument that successful brands are auratic, and show that luxury brands such as LV focus on core aesthetics. In a broader context, that core encompasses the collaboration of artists and the corporation-as-patron, engaged in a single pursuit: the production of a precisely engineered retail narrative.

Aesthetics and aesthetization have long existed in retailing and have become essential to the contemporary marketplace (Charters 2006; Schroeder 2002; Venkatesh and Meamber 2008). Venkatesh and Meamber (2008) define aesthetics as all forms of sensory experiences relating to the arts, including mundane objects. They note, following Schroeder (2002), that as

consumer culture increasingly becomes a visual culture, the movement towards aestheticization becomes ever stronger.

### *The rise of aesthetic consumption*

In the nineteenth century, department stores used visual merchandizing to transform products into desirable and expressive commodity signs (Featherstone 1991; Parker 2003). Merchants of the day created exquisite palaces of consumption (Parker 2003), featuring glass skylights that flooded stores with natural light. Weather permitting, consumers could finally see objects clearly: a new era in consumerism was born, setting the stage, as it were, for today’s luxury stores, which now mesmerize consumers throughout the industrialized world (Benjamin 1927/2002). Over time, department stores began to incorporate signs of luxury to attract affluent customers; customers came to expect sensory stimulation when they shopped. Today, the critical difference between department stores that make ordinary goods look extraordinary, and actual luxury brand stores, is that, in the former, the sign value of an object becomes more important than its aesthetic value. “Ordinary, everyday commodities (e.g., pots), reflected in their opulent surroundings, became signs of wealth and affluence” (Parker 2003: 363). In actual luxury stores, aesthetics reign supreme.

Moreover, luxury retail stores are designed to do more than promote sales—they must also promote their brand, by selling “the dream,” or “the experience,” with consumer perceptions of the brand’s quality and of the store image playing a significant role in this promotion (Martineau 1958). Puccinelli et al. (2009) describe atmospherics as both the tangible and intangible aspects of retail stores that strongly affect customers’ experiences (Bitner 1992; Mehrabian and Russell 1974). Three sets of consumer cues have been identified: design, ambient cues, and social cues (Baker and Cameron 1996). Consumers are aware of the multitude of variables that comprise the built environment; such awareness drives their approach and avoidance behaviour (Mehrabian and Russell 1974).

Focusing on consumer experience allows researchers to better understand how consumers use various store elements, both to create their own identity, and to pursue communal projects (Arnould 2005). The sociological literature (e.g., Ritzer 1999), emphasizes the top-down orchestration of the experiences consumers have within retail spaces, which ultimately reduces consumer agency to powerful symbolic forces within such spaces. The move to make cultural showcases while simultaneously selling the brand is highlighted by Sherry’s (1998) study of Niketown, and by Penaloza’s (1999) visual ethnography of NikeTown. Both authors explore the contours of the spectacle; they argue that rather than paralyzing consumers overwhelmed by its features, such spectacles have instead enabled consumers to co-create the performance.

Recent studies focus on the ludic aspects of consumption spectacles. Kozinets et al. (2002), portray the ESPN Zone as an exemplar of the multisensory dimensions and multiple mythotypes used in such spaces. The three distinguishing features of themed flagship stores they identify relate to the ownership of the store by the manufacturer, the sale of only the company

brand, and the focus on brand image. Just as in nineteenth century emporiums, these authors argue, experiences are heightened by and valued for their entrancing sign value. Borghini et al. (2009) and Diamond et al. (2009) argue that the ideology of a store—more specifically, a moral ideology—significantly affects consumers' experiences and purchase behaviours. The brand is central to the retail experience (Diamond et al. 2009), to the aesthetic universe supported by an aesthetic ideology and an artistic director (Dion and Arnould 2011). Dion and Arnould (2011) emphasize the importance of a charismatic creative director (e.g., Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton). The magical strategies of contiguity and contagion, blended with the marketing of adoration, provide a perspective on how luxury brand retailing strategies operate. We complement their work, by offering a consumer experiential perspective on brand seduction within the store.

While we agree with the essential role of material environment in creating a complex consumer narrative, our argument differs from those discussed above. We posit that LV does not use contemporary art as a theme, but, rather, that LV flagship stores *are* art institutions in their own right, and are experienced as such by enthralled consumers—resulting in those customers purchasing products in ever larger numbers (sales in 2010 at LV were the highest on record: in excess of 20 billion euros (*The New York Times*, February 4, 2011)). Such a worldview is shared to a certain extent by other luxury companies such as Cartier, Prada, Gucci, and Armani, which are also gradually embracing the “luxury is art” model (Okonkwo 2007).

#### *Museums and product orientation*

Museums typically emphasize the quality of their exhibits and the kinds of cultural experiences visitors have (Ames 1992). Museum boards and staff conserve tradition and cultural heritage, furthering the development of a city's cultural cachet. Most museums espouse a mission that involves preserving culture through making art available to the general public (Hooper-Greenhill 2005).

To generate new sources of revenue however, many museums are transforming themselves into multimedia commercial centres (Joy and Sherry 2003). Curators have become curator-entrepreneurs, as museums have lost their monopoly on presenting art based on the canon of art history, which has allowed viewers to be guided by their own perspectives (Behnke 2010). Alternatively, some museums are now much more market-oriented (Krens 2000; McTavish 1998). For example, Guggenheim shows are overtly commercial (e.g., shows devoted to Armani or Harley-Davidson). According to Charlesworth (2003: pp. 3–4), “Art is becoming indistinguishable from lifestyle culture, and the logic of fashion dominates how art is made visible.”

#### *Our focal brand: Louis Vuitton (LV)*

Founded in 1854, Louis Vuitton, now part of the Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy (LVMH) conglomerate, first became famous for creating luggage for European nobility. Louis Vuitton pioneered innovative flat trunks—trunks at the time were typically

rounded, the better to shed water. Because Vuitton trunks were covered in waterproof canvas rather than leather, they could be flat-topped, and thus could be stacked. To protect his brand against knock-offs (a plague from the beginning), Monsieur Vuitton printed his name at regular intervals on the canvas: the birth of the now-iconic logo. Today, LVMH is an empire of some sixty companies, each with its own family of brands, including Dior, Fendi, and Marc Jacobs.

LV flagship stores offer a quintessential site for the field study of the aesthetic transformation of retailing. In this paper, we focus on consumer perceptions of LV's strategy of casting art as vital to its success—the first such research to demonstrate how consumers decode and experience a luxury brand's positioning. We selected two LV stores in Hong Kong as our focus.

### **Methodology**

We collected data over a period of two years (2006–2007) in Hong Kong using an ethnographic approach (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). In collaboration with the principal investigator, a local ethnographer conducted additional interviews to provide insight into the language and culture. We interviewed twenty-five people in total, whose ages ranged from young adulthood to middle age; all were Cantonese by birth and current residents of Hong Kong. Twenty were customers, and five had at one time been LV employees. (See Table 1 for details.) An interviewer accompanied eight of the subjects to a LV flagship store in Hong Kong (on Canton Road and at the Landmark Mall), with interviews conducted directly thereafter. We interviewed the remainder of our participants at their respective homes or in cafes. The principal author also observed ambience, employee behaviour, and customer interactions with products and people at LV stores in Hong Kong, Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing (see Table 2). We also visited such luxury stores as Gucci and Prada in these cities, to assess competitors' operations.

In recruiting informants to interview, we began with two LV customers. They referred us to additional contacts, as did consultants we had contacted who had worked for LV in the past. This snowballing technique allowed us to assemble our twenty-five-person cohort. Participant interviews were structured to elicit detailed discussion about LV and personal consumption patterns. Interviews were recorded, translated, and transcribed. We used a hermeneutic method to interpret the data (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Thompson 1997; Thompson, Locander, and Polio 1989).

Our study is limited to participants who regularly shop at the LV luxury brand flagship stores in Hong Kong. Our research follows the logic of the interpretive case method, which allows us to make a theoretical argument that may not be generalizable to all customers and to all situations. As Thompson and Arsel (2004) explain, empiricist questions are not germane to the analytic goals of cultural analysis. For example, in this study, the question might be “Do all LV consumers view LV in the same manner as our sample of subjects?” Instead, as Geertz (1973) notes, cultural analysis allows us to provide thick descriptions of the conditions that enable our informants to attribute particular meanings to their patronage of LV flagship stores in Hong

Table 1  
List of informants.

Name	Age	Profession	Purchase pattern
Alicia	62	Housewife	Visits every 2 weeks; purchases every season
Emily	40	Consultant	Visits once a season; purchases twice a year
Samantha	44	Marketing manager	Visits twice a year; buys a lot at Chinese new year
Shirley	30	Financial services	Visits every month; makes small purchases, e.g., wallets, key chains
Jenny	35	Fashion industry	Seasonal visits; purchases
Valeria	33	Merchandizing manager	Visits every month; purchases smaller pieces
Carly	52	Grocery chain manager	Every month; some large and small purchases
Alexa	36	Housewife	Purchases every month
Christie	56	Editor	Every season purchase
Wendy	38	Entrepreneur	Every season purchase
Lucy	31	Fashion marketer	Smaller pieces every month
Fiona	22	Student	Small pieces at Chinese new year
Mindy	23	Student	Smaller pieces every season
Linda	45	Housewife	Mostly gifts
Priscilla	40	Jewellery company	Visits once a month; purchases at Chinese new year
Peter	22	Student	Small purchases at Chinese new year
Eric	40	Consultant	Every season; small & large purchases, e.g., cufflinks, belts, shirts
Vincent	38	IT manager	Visits often; small purchases once a year
Steve	28	Model	Visits often but makes small purchases
Sam	55	Entrepreneur	Wife purchases often
David	47	Entrepreneur	Visits and purchases once a year
Ron	23	Student	Visits often; occasional purchase
Ricky	43	Works for his dad	Occasional
Leo	45	IT manager	Every season
Jessie	39	Consultant	Visits every season to look and purchase

Kong. Do existing theories account for these cultural relationships? What novel linkages are suggested by this analysis? Back in the 1960s, Andy Warhol predicted that, “all department stores will become museums, and all museums will become department stores” (Twitchell 2004: p. 227). Although curators and art critics have waged an ongoing battle to elevate art above the mundane, Warhol systematically challenged their notion of art as the sole carrier of high cultural value (Schroeder 1999); today, as the lines between art and commerce increasingly and synergistically blur, we find that his prophecy was, as the phrase goes, right on the money.

#### Findings: M(Art)Worlds and the creation of luxperiences

The connection between luxury and art exists because wealthy consumers want exquisite and exclusive products (Kapferer and Bastien 2009). If the value and rarity of artisanal objects are luxury brand hallmarks, then what better way

to convey that hallmark than through art? The oversized vintage luggage sculptures highlighted in some LV stores exemplify this mission. Such sculptures pay homage to the work “Stack,” by artist Donald Judd. While they have no functional purpose, they serve to communicate the company’s history and commitment to the art of travel (Mull 2013).

The LV flagship stores in Hong Kong highlight museum curators’ emphasis on aesthetic values, scholarship, art history, and provenance (Belk 1995), and their focus on commercial art galleries, symbiotically coupled with their explicitly for-profit business model (Moulin 1986). Such symbiosis is essential: museums need to collect and exhibit *objets d’art*, and galleries need curatorial endorsements of what they buy and sell. Until recently, corporations, long collectors of art, had not routinely been part of the network of collaborations between art dealers and art curators in the West (Joy 1993; Joy and Sherry 2003). We demonstrate, through the example of LV, that corporations are increasingly taking on a curatorial role in such market-oriented activities.

Table 2  
Distinctions between department store, flagship brand store, premium brand store and M(Art) world.

Features	Department store	Flagship brand store	Premium brand store	M(Art) world
Focal object	Branded commodities	Branded goods	Superior goods	Branded art pieces
Store design	Display	Participation	Presentation	Curation and prestatation
Architecture	Utilitarian	Experiential	Hedonic	Artistic
Visual impact	Sensory	Sensory	Glamorous	Aesthetic
Customer orientation	Purchase	Participate and enjoy	Admire and desire	Appreciate and understand
Service personnel	Salesperson	Personal assistant	Personal assistant	Curator
Product orientation	Fashion	Fashion	Trend	Taste
Positioning	Market orientation	Market and some aesthetics	Balanced aesthetics and market	Aesthetic and custodial orientation

Because art is central to LV's brand and strategy, the corporation, on the one hand, takes pride in its history and heritage; on the other, art must spur profit. Consumers routinely experience LV stores as museums, even as they simultaneously experience a commercial enterprise. Several forms of mediation occur concurrently for consumers: the store is providing an aesthetic experience for those who enjoy art, and an educational service to assist them in acquiring art appreciation knowledge and skills (Duncan 1995). At the same time, consumers are viewing and perhaps acquiring artist-designed and handcrafted objects. LV, in common with other iconic luxury brands, is unequivocally artistically led and relentlessly audience-focused, with the brand the codification of the company's vision, values, and personality. LV leadership champions both the art and the audience; interactions with sales representatives are designed to seamlessly meet individuals' needs, and marketing campaigns are created to maximize personal meaning for consumers.

#### *A Murakami-designed luxury handbag: is it art?*

In 2002, Marc Jacobs, designer of LV, invited Takashi Murakami, an internationally renowned Japanese artist, to rework the company's monogram, a risky move commercially that was ultimately successful, leading to an ongoing collaboration between the artist and LV. As an Asian artist, Murakami carried particular cachet not only in Japan but also in the PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. Unlike other contemporary artists, Murakami is both artist and curator. His exhibit "Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture," was named the best thematic museum show in New York (2004/2005) by the American Chapter of the International Association of Art Critics. Given Murakami's celebrity status and prodigious artistic output, he is widely viewed as 'the most important player' in Japanese contemporary art (Favell 2012). Murakami himself is bluntly unapologetic about the use of his art in brand merchandizing. Asked by an interviewer if there were dangers in straddling the line between art and commerce, Murakami responded: "*I don't think of it as straddling. I think of it as changing the line.*" (BlouinArtinfo, May 17, 2007).

When Murakami exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, (October 2007–February 2008), he invited LV to open a store within the museum and sell products, including Murakami-designed handbags. LV also opened a fully operational store during a Murakami retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum between April and July 2008. In a strikingly bold move, LV hired actors to portray street vendors outside the museum; the inevitable aura of fakery attached to such pop-up sales notwithstanding, the actors offered authentic signed Murakami handbags, small leather goods, and art canvas squares featuring LV's new "monogramouflage" design (a design within a design) on canvas and denim printed canvas, even as the exact same items were for sale inside the museum store. In presenting such a tongue-in-cheek event, (its surprise element underscoring the resulting artistic cachet afforded LV), the company highlighted the ubiquitous counterfeiting of its goods. Prices inside and outside the museum were the same: \$6,000 per handbag for

the first fifty sold, and \$10,000 thereafter (*Women's Wear Daily*, April 3, 2008).

When we emailed our participants about LV's "street" vendors, some were not surprised. One, Shirley, said, "*I wish I had been in L.A. or New York to visit the exhibit, and to buy something from the LV store. . . the handbag would have acquired special meaning. . . [would] I [be] getting an LV bag, an LV bag created by the artist Murakami, or. . . a museum object?*"

In her response, the differences between art and commerce (museum and store) persist; the regular LV bag is an artisanal product, while the LV bag designed by Murakami is a limited edition work of art. The LV Murakami bags sold inside the museum have an additional level of value (Joy and Sherry 2003), making them hallowed works of art. Yet, bags from both inside and outside LV can be considered art objects, since contemporary global art is not confined to the creation of "objects" shown in museums (Belting and Buddensieg 2009). Art provides a different value to consumers: the value of otherness—to be elsewhere—in a different time and a different world (Chen 2009). When these very same bags are sold on the street, they lose the luster of the museum, but gain a different allure through their intrinsically illicit nature.

#### *Luxetecture: public sculpture, ornamentation, and technology*

Flagships provide a tangible symbol of a brand's durability. Moore, Doherty, and Doyle (2007) argue that luxury brand flagship stores support the luxury business overall, by creating an allure based on prestigious locations and elegant presentation. Luxury stores often mimic museum architecture, and become stores-as-museums, thanks to venerated architects such as Rem Koolhaas (Prada), Herzog and De Meuron (Comme des Garçons), the Phillips Group (Hermès), and Gehry (LVMH, Issey Miyaki).

Beauty, whether in architecture, interior design, or products for display only or for sale, is central to the brand's value (Dion and Arnould 2011). In the relatively new LV stores in Hong Kong and Tokyo, mesh panels are used as both area dividers and screens for large glass windows; a lighting strip above the panels provides focused light, blended with outside light to create a shimmering facade, a translucent gloss that transforms the store into an ethereal evocation of luxury. As one participant, Emily, noted, "*LV stores are made to look like special glass boxes—each a jewel in itself.*" Another participant, Fiona, said, "*The lights. . . appear like large sparkling bracelets throughout the store.*" Shirley described the LV store in Central: "*The store has facades that look very beautiful. . . The outer wall is quite cyber. . . the façade is made up of two layers of glass with the LV Damier [checkerboard] design in between the layers. . . the LV logo. . . is veiled in beauty. . . With the particular lighting that is a signature of the store, it looks dazzling. . . the store look[s] grand and modern. Customers want to see these stores as much as [they want to] look at the products they are selling.*" The architect Jun Aoki used glass overlays at LV stores to produce a third moiré effect, one that can be seen but is not literally there.

Architects such as Peter Marino and Kumiko Inui have worked with Murakami and Marc Jacobs to present new collections, imitating the “white cube” design of famous art galleries (Riot, Chamant, and Rigaud 2013).

As Pimlott (2007: p. 9) argues, “The interiors of these super boutiques (luxury) owed much to their ingenious lighting arrangements, highly polished material treatments, and iconic architectural containers: buildings that looked more like images. . .” Carlson, the chief architect of the LV store in Paris, confirmed (Vernet 2007: p. 63): “A double façade has allowed us to create mystery, a dream-like atmosphere based on visual distortion.” As Fiona observed, “*These layers are so intriguing, much like the kimono: the effect of hiding and revealing is so eye-catching. Now you see something. . .now you don’t.*”

The mythotypes of virtuality (a narrative involving technological sophistication), and ellipticality (a narrative that omits some detail, thereby provoking a sense of mystery), are experienced through this jewelled effect (Kozinets et al. 2002). As Fiona notes, “*We don’t just look at the sparkling façade—we imagine what it would be like to be inside.*” The term “cyber,” used by Shirley, is a reflection of how technological sophistication amplifies beauty, and is characteristic of many luxury stores. The Prada epicentre in New York is another prime example (de la Peña 2003). Audible are echoes of two of the four types of retail themes (based on environmental axes of malleability and tangibility) identified by Sherry (1998): cyberscape- and mindscape-employing associations and images of virtual environments, and more abstract fantasy elements.

The glass and reflective materials used in the store underscore the alignment of luxury retail with contemporary art. Another participant, Jenny, commented on the LV store in the Landmark Mall: “*The exterior of the LV store is very glamorous. . . Anything that is glossy or sparkling gives me the feeling of “gold” (precious). The ceilings are high and make the store feel spacious. There is so much to see and take in. . .it’s like going to a museum.*” LV stores are designed to evoke a treasure trove of desired objects, a metaphor intensified by vaulted ceilings—an unmistakable reference to nineteenth century arcades (Benjamin 1927/2002). As our participant Priscilla said, “*I think the store is like a castle. Not everyone can go inside. . . So it makes me feel more special, and I think of the store as a much grander place.*” Implicit in her comment is that gaining entry to the store is a privilege of class.

Another participant, Linda, said that high ceilings in the LV store in the Landmark Mall “*show that the brand is selling exclusive products. This [exclusivity] is even more pronounced when you go to the Canton Road store. The Hong Kong Museum is located close by, but the line-ups are at the LV store and not at the museum. The street [outside] somehow becomes entwined in all of these buildings, luxury apartments, luxury stores, and luxury hotels. I sometimes have been confused; was I on the street, in the store, at the mall, or back at my apartment? But this experience is not the mall experience on the central side, which is historically more Western in its orientation. The mall closes at a certain time and everybody goes home or to other parts of the downtown area where they experience nightlife.*” LV’s marketing strategy often includes deliberately locating its

stores on corners facing central streets (Okonkwo 2007). While stores may close at a certain time, the nightlife of the city allows viewers to see these luxury brand stores through a different lens. When asked to comment on the renovations at the LV store on Canton Road, Jenny said: “*It is best to see it at night from across the street. You see the very bright and big sparkling wall. It is a little disorienting because of the movement of light. It is a work of art.*”

*Luxemosphere: contemporary interior design, extravagance, and playfulness*

The stores’ imposing architecture and interior designs were not lost on our participants. After visiting the LV store on Canton Road, Shirley said: “*It is a huge store with special areas for specific goods. The jewelry section is special. . . It looks very exclusive. . .everything looks so beautiful and grand. . . there are lots of mirrors so it [the store] looks even bigger. There are many reflections when other customers pass by, so the store looks very energetic and lively.*” Just as museum spaces are arranged on an intimate scale to accommodate art on display (Joy and Sherry 2003), so LV provides a sense of familiarity through the creation of spaces. All senses are aroused through a precisely calibrated atmosphere of animation, movement, audio elements, and the like. Gibson (1996) and Okonkwo (2010: p. 20) use the term “luxemosphere” (coined by Luxe Corp. analysts) to refer to the prestigious and splendid universe created by luxury brands such as LV. The term “grand” is particularly important in Hong Kong, where housing space is at a premium. When we went with Shirley to the LV flagship store on the Central side, she was particularly seduced by the store’s staircase: “*The stairs are lit like a computer screen with constantly moving digital images. It is fun to run up and down these stairs. . . this is special to LV stores.*”

The stairs Shirley references are the work of the famous architect and interior designer Peter Marino. For LV, he created a series of staircases whose walls are alive with ever-changing digital screens (Tretiak 2009). Since the stairs feature exhibit spaces, viewers linger and enjoy the retail experience, marked by light and shadow, thresholds, views, textural changes, and dimensionality (Gombrich 1979; Templar 1992). Peter Marino’s vision of the New Bond Street LV store is to enter the Louis Vuitton world from the street outside by crossing a bridge, “*giving views of a dramatic glass staircase with 23 square meters of glass tread surface including LEDs to show frequently changing film and artistic animations that take you from the lower ground right up to the first floor*” (dezeen magazine, May 27, 2010, [www.dezeen.com](http://www.dezeen.com)).

Alicia, a participant, considered the impact of displays and space in the LV store: “*The Speedy bag on the coffee table is not for sale. It is like the vintage suitcases [LV signature suitcases] that are for display only. . . There are also. . .watches and belts, in special display cabinets, that are not for sale either. So it clearly shows they have tons of space for decoration. It is a museum.*”

Viewers like Alicia not only notice the features of the store, they also experience pleasure in such details as where two elements meet: for example, the museum quality/archival objects

displayed with the objects for sale in glass boxes. The “wasted” space in the form of comfortable seating also contrasts with the commercial aspects of the space, where products are displayed for sale. Such transition points are important. LV’s real estate strategy has been markedly effective in managing exclusivity, as reported in *Forbes* (Pomerantz, June 18, 2012): “. . . from its wood-paneled New Bond street store. . . to nautically themed stores accessible only by a private jetty in Singapore, where customers in yachts can disembark to pick up items from the latest collections.” In the Bond Street store, for instance, there is the new library, which accommodates rare art books, and where commissioned works of art by Anish Kapoor and Gary Hume are on display. Overall, this store looks like the home of a collector of rare art and artifacts. Wendy, a participant whom we accompanied to the renovated Canton Road LV store, recalled: “They [LV] have a gold color video screen [a digital painting] on top of the wall above the entrance. It is sparkling and glamorous. . . in the jewelry section, they use a lot of dark color cases and strong spotlights, which make the products stand out, just like in a museum. Here they also use marble and wood on the stairs, which look very grand and classic. But it is not intimidating; you climb the steps and you enter into a magical space.”

The golden digital screen is the work of the artist Fabrizio Plessi, who pioneered digital painting in Europe (Maertens 2009a,b). He designed a large LED screen with digital images of cascading molten gold that echoes other touches of gold within the store. He also collaborated with LV, designing the first digital bag, made of EPI leather and incorporating a miniature digital screen behind the bag’s cut-out LV logo, which displays the same cascading images as those showcased within the store. Needless to say, at \$50,000 each, the handbag is a limited edition work of art.

While the building is created in an axial manner, the facade and interior spaces are lavishly ornamented. The artistic details signal the appropriate rate of movement, offering subtle cues for people to linger and move slowly from one space to another (Joy and Sherry 2003). Emily, a participant, commented: “I love the fitting room. It has a sofa inside the room, so it is very big. Only a prestigious store can have so much space and make it look grand. . .” As Koolhaas (2001a,b) writes, wasted space is the signature theme of luxury. The concept of “luxury space” as “wasted space” has its roots in Veblen’s theory (1899; 1970: p. 45) of conspicuous leisure and consumption. To demonstrate wealth in the nineteenth century, it was necessary to appear wasteful—as it is today.

#### *(De)Luxe: luminosity and art*

The power of light to transcend the exigencies of temporal reality has made it an essential element of religious architecture. The word “luxe” literally means light; luxury products are envisioned in terms of their luminosity and beauty (Kapferer and Bastien 2009). As our participants repeatedly referenced, the narrative implicit in LV’s sophisticated use of light is one of artistry, exclusivity, comfort, and excitement; the word most frequently echoed by participants was ‘sparkling.’

Light as art creates the sense of LV as both merchant and art patron; for example, a lighting installation (by artist Olafur Eliasson in 2006–2007), appeared in all LV stores during the 2006–2007 Christmas season (Castets 2009). Eliasson’s exhibit “Eye See You,” comprised a gigantic eye that both confronted and confused passers-by, even as it further enshrined LV as both a commercial and an artistic endeavour for consumers. The installation reflected the eyes of the viewer, enshrouded in an otherworldly light and projected outward, even as the installation itself was a spotlight on the viewer. A participant, Sam, admitted that: “. . . it [the installation] was a little strange. The “eye” sees you even as you look through the window. But you cannot see anything inside. . . There is a mirror and the perplexing part was that you could see the image of your eye. This is the first time I saw art works incorporated into shop windows. . .” Eliasson has referenced windows that allow people to look in, and those that shut people out; he views the windows of luxury goods stores as boundaries beyond which you cannot see in, thus reinforcing the notion of the inaccessibility of LV products (Schaub 2009), even as consumers stand directly in front of the store. LV created a buzz about its contemporary art patronage, and opened the doors for artists of Eliasson’s calibre, whose work will become part of LVMH’s collection (Pimlott 2007). David, another participant who had visited the Paris flagship store, considered the impact of Eliasson’s installation: “When you went to take the elevator, you stepped into a pitch-dark and soundless space. When you got out of it, and saw the light, your eye had to do a lot of adjustment to the new context—especially viewing all the art on display in its Art Espace [gallery]. No sound and sight. . . that makes you think and feel a lot. It was totally disorientating.”

LV recently introduced a lighting system hidden in the ceilings, which streams light through narrow slits that cast a surreal yet elegantly flattering glow. Such dramatic light inevitably enhances consumers’ memories associated with the stores. A participant, Steve, noted: “In LV, each pair of shoes has a light box behind it, so it makes the product look more grand and attractive. . . When a product is under a spotlight, the color looks sharp. It is like in a museum and yet some of it is for sale. . .” The museum experience, as Beard (1992: p. 507) suggests, is defined as that part of the museum that belongs behind glass. The “Eye See You” window, as well as the creative use of lighting and spotlights, also makes viewers question their general understanding of space. The dimensions of height, length, and depth, the Euclidian dimensions by which humans experience space, are altered through time and the engagement of the individual with the objects. One negotiates the space on a constant basis, and in the process experiences it.

#### *Luxedesigners: creating aesthetic experiences via contemporary art objects*

Typically, there is cachet associated with luxury brand designers (Dion and Arnould 2011), with each brand reflecting the personality of its star designer, such as Karl Lagerfeld at Chanel, or John Galliano, formerly at Dior. For luxury goods to acquire the status of art, they must be created by recognized artistic directors (Dion and Arnould 2011). For instance, the Louis Vuitton

Tribute Patchwork Bag was conceived by Marc Jacobs “. . . as an idea that exemplifies contemporary art. It includes cubist collage, cut-outs, and conceptual art” (Gasparina 2009: p. 42), and is considered a handbag masterpiece (Gasparina 2009).

Although LV has collaborated with such artists as Sol Le Witt and Olivier Debre since the 1980s, it was only once Marc Jacobs was hired in 1997 that LV’s relationship to contemporary art gained supremacy (Gasparina 2009). Jacobs invited several artists to create collections, particularly of accessories, and to play with the materials and monogram of LV. The artist associated with LV most recently is Yayoi Kusama. Others have included Richard Prince, Annie Leibowitz, Stephen Sprouse, and Sylvie Fleury, and fashion designers such as Manolo Blahnik and Azzedine Alaia. Luxury brands’ association with artists is not new: in the art deco era, for example, famed designer Pierre Legrain created a dressing table with a shagreen top for LV; the arts and crafts artist Camille Cless-Brothier created a cloud line for perfume bottles in partnership with Baccarat crystal (Thomas 2007). The lure of owning such actual art is as strong today as in earlier eras. As a participant, Priscilla, said: “*You have to have them [objects in the collections designed by artists]. . . I love the bags that have all been created by talented artists. I would like one piece from every one of them. . .*”

The reference to collections highlights another form of participation in the art market: the role of collector, whether as a museum, a corporation, or an individual (Belk 1995; Joy 1998). As a participant, Mindy, touched on the excitement of modernity inherent in contemporary art: “*LV is trendy. . . My mother has an LV bag. . . I have a different one. . . but we are both in fashion. Marc Jacobs made such a difference. The company is. . . at the cutting edge in terms of design and very artistic.*” Relevance and uniqueness are what most collectors desire, and, as Belk (1995: p. 88) notes, collectors often seek “the chance to stand out as being unique by virtue of possessing rare, valued, and unique possessions.” Marc Jacobs (and his collaborators), serve as a guarantee of artistic validity, with Jacobs embodying a particular style. To maintain its high-value role in the fashion pantheon, an object requires a representative human icon, as does the market. This body (person and persona), must create interest in critics and curators, the forces that work collaboratively to the benefit of the chosen artist (Dion and Arnould 2011).

Availability affects consumer desire. A purchase postponed can, paradoxically, become a purchase ever more deeply desired. A participant, Alexa, said: “*This [wait time] is not uncommon at all. You see something on the website, but you cannot buy it immediately. There is a limited number and when it sells out, it is gone. Or if there is an attempt to create a few more, the emphasis is on its rarity value. I waited patiently for three years to get my bag. Its value has only increased because of this in my eyes.*” The strategy she describes is what Kapferer and Bastien (2009) define as one of the anti-laws of marketing: do not respond to rising demand. Time is a key dimension of luxury and art. Murakami’s work involves repetitive patterns (much like the LV logo), which he adapted to the fashion cycle, and thus kept consumers waiting for the next “new” thing. His style and colours were adapted to a production system able to produce goods on demand—a practice very much in keeping with luxury products and honouring an

artistic ethos (Riot, Chamant, and Rigaud 2013). Scarcity and rarity work well together in maintaining an object’s status as a luxury item (Kapferer 2013).

Another important aspect of luxury, as with art, is the price. Since the item is precious and is the creation of an artist, the price must be set at the value perceived by the client. There is a story to be told, an aura to be created, and a client’s fantasy to be managed. As our participant Valeria stated: “*If I had all the money in the world, I would have bought the bag for the price LV wanted. I can do this maybe once a year. The rest of the time, I would have to be careful.*” An LV handbag may, in time, acquire vintage value, but, despite Murakami’s status as a serious artist, there is no guarantee. Purchasing a handbag is a risk one takes, akin to buying contemporary art.

### *The experience of authenticity*

A number of participants talked about the quality of the finished object. As Carly said: “*Each item is a testimony to the devotion of the artisan, along with his/her creativity. You can see the signature. . . . But that is a sign of authenticity that it is a unique work, even though the company may create 300 copies of the same bag. The quality is outstanding.*”

Luxury companies tell important narratives about their creations, and customers like Carly appreciate them. The companies highlight the work done in ateliers by artisans who are limited in number, given the extensive training, apprenticeship, and commitment to craft that their positions require (Vernet and de Wit 2007). More recently Mull (2013) noted that LV had unveiled an “Atelier at Louis Vuitton Soho,” an in-store customization space. The Atelier displays antique LV items related to travel; an artisan is available to customize LV objects with hand-painted or heat-stamped monograms or family crests. The objects thus become sacred and rarefied.

### *Luxescape: curatorial attention and service*

In luxury stores, products are not always accessible to the customer, as a deliberate strategy. Self-service is not the norm, and, indeed, is the opposite of what luxury means to many participants (Duboisson-Quellier 2007). With Murakami on board, the LV store gained merchandizing tools customized by the Japanese artist (Riot, Chamant, and Rigaud 2013), and extended the artist’s motifs into an entire genre of products. Japanese pop art also made its modernist mark on LV; products created by such artists, as the authors note, lent the classically elegant stores an aura of surprising playfulness.

Okonkwo (2007) distinguishes a luxury brand store in terms of impeccable employee service. When we asked about LV employees, our participant Ricky enthused: “*The salespeople and their uniforms convey the grandeur and luxurious aspect of the store. The sales girls wear elegant make-up; they don’t sport smoky eyes or fake eyelashes. . . . Their uniforms make them look classy. They also wear brand accessories and have the right gestures and postures. The whole package makes them look very professional.*”

Luxury embodies attention (Rem Koolhaas 2001a,b), an attentiveness that deliberately respects one's privacy to gaze. Warhol was convinced that department stores that mimic museums are popular not for their content, but for their lack of content (Twitchell 2004). One goes, one looks, and one leaves. No decisions, no pressure. In LV stores, the underlying sales function is concealed via a similar lack of pressure to buy, an approach typical of luxury stores that creates a museum-like experience. As our participant Vincent said: *"When they know what you are looking for, they will only sell you the stuff that you like. There is no cross-selling or high-pressure selling—that's for mass brands. . ."*

As is the case for visitors to a museum, the experience is in the here and now. The customer enjoys personal attention, and becomes more culturally informed. Dion and Arnould (2011) note that salespeople must be very knowledgeable about the brand's history. Our participant Jenny commented: *"When you enter the store, you hear someone say hello to you. She also says you are welcome to look around and visit. . . This makes you feel like you are visiting a museum. The comparison is very appropriate for LV. It is a place full of ideas for people to appreciate and to look around. It is not just a place to shop. . . There is no mention of products. You can look around, [and] appreciate and enjoy everything in the store. On the other hand, if she [the salesperson] had said, "Feel free to look around and choose," there is a hidden meaning that you will make a purchase when you see something you like."*

Alicia spoke about how flattered and happy she felt by all the attention she was receiving. The retail mantra, "location, location, location" has been replaced by "service, service, and more service" coupled with "experience, experience, experience."

#### *LuxeArt foundation: the luxury brand as patron of the arts*

The luxury flagship store as museum combines the excitement of a spectacular entertainment destination with education (Pimlott 2007). Intimidation is often cited as an emotion caused by monumental architecture, such as that associated with traditional museums. Such museums are also object- and education-focused, paying little attention to the ambience and context within which visitors engage with art (Baumgarth 2009). Our participants experienced no such intimidation. Leo stated succinctly: *"The TST [Tsim Sha Tsui, an area within Hong Kong] store has an art gallery, and LV promotes it. I think it is good."* Another participant, Eric, noted that he liked a 2008 exhibition of photographs by the actor Chow Yun-fat in the TST store: *"I did not even realize that he created such masterpieces through photography. I learned something."* Although not every participant fully connected the idea of arts patronage with LV stores, and the possible extension of viewing its products as art, they all noticed the design elements and architecture of the stores with palpable pleasure. As Emily observed: *"Everywhere you see the logo and emblems interpreted in many different ways. The interlaced initials, the crest, the four-pointed star, the diamond, the flower, and the checkerboard motif are all over—on wood, on leather, projected on video screens, and on every item that is produced. This is not just about brand image. . . it is about*

*art as well. It is mesmerizing. . ."* Wendy talked about the LV aesthetic sensibility: *"Everything looks so grand, but is accessible. It is playful—for instance the digital images on the stairs. . . The brand is not only about making money. It has an artistic sense and has its own character. It cares about art. . . When the exhibition is over, the space remains empty until the next show is mounted. They don't put their products there. . . that [would] be [a] hard sell. I did not expect that. But it is not traditional art that they show."* LV's sponsorship of avant-garde art highlighted the brand as vibrant and always evolving. Another participant, Ron, mentioned the shock of the art space: *"What surprised me was the gallery. It projects a very artistic image. I think it is amazing that they have a large space like this. The rent is so exorbitant for every square foot. It's too bad that not everybody comes up and sees the exhibits. In the Canton Road store, they had an exhibition of Chinese artists. It is nice to learn about our art and to see that in a foreign store."*

While the fusion of Eastern and Western cultural motifs has a long history in Japanese design, its broad use in Western luxury brands is relatively new. By showcasing potentially unfamiliar art, LV acts as a bridge between cultures (Venkataraman and Nelson 2008), and reflects the inspiration derived from Asian cultures (e.g., Marc Jacobs' 2011 LV collection deployed Chinese symbols, of particular appeal to Chinese consumers (New York Magazine, October 18, 2010).

Moreover, the association with art makes the products look even more luxurious. As our participant Alexa said: *"To promote art, you need a bit of the commercial element. It's just like Marc Jacobs, who always works with some artists to make crossover products. I think art needs commercial stuff to bring it to the people. I will pay attention to the art. It is telling you that even LV is willing to associate the brand with the artist. So they have to be very talented artists. You can also see the other side. . . the products look more high class because of the art association."*

Corporate collaboration with famous artists highlights a clear aesthetic strategy in operation. While LV's selection of, for example, Murakami to create a version of the original monogram could be seen as threatening to the firm's identity, the company elected to give Murakami *carte blanche*. As Gasparina (2009: p. 45) writes, "The legendary monogram symbolizing the Louis Vuitton tradition has been defaced, tattooed, chopped, glued, covered, coated, annihilated, and discolored." The monogram's degradation (or exaltation, depending on one's view), reflects the company's desire to push innovation to the hilt. Some participants realized that the corporation had an arts foundation and was supportive of new artists. Our participant David said: *"Artists are also different today. They advertise their work on the Internet, and are involved in more than one type of art. They are not locked up in their studios creating brilliant works. They want to be known around the world, and if they establish a liaison with luxury brands, this would get them there faster."*

In David's comments, we see the reverberations of a new strategy for contemporary art, in which artists enhance their renown via exposure, in a synergistic relationship with the corporation, which in turn receives of-the-moment cachet by association. Consider the exhibition of photographs by Chow Yun-fat referenced earlier. In addition to hosting the

exhibit, LV also published a book of Yun-fat's photographs, *Moving Pictures*, in a limited edition of only one thousand copies, and sold the book only within its Hong Kong and Paris stores (thus demonstrating the luxury brand equation: scarcity + exclusivity = enhanced value) In this particular case, not only did the collaboration benefit both the artist and LV, it also benefitted the Hong Kong Red Cross, to whom all proceeds were donated (Saunders 2008).

While Sandler (1998) is highly critical of the current association of art with money, the value of name recognition, and the need for exposure that creates such recognition, retains its central role in the art world, as it must. Museums played that role historically, but, in the twenty-first century, are in the process of being superseded by luxury brands such as LV. The Louis Vuitton Young Arts Project (LVYAP), a three-year endeavour launched in 2010, centred on London's upcoming artists from low socioeconomic backgrounds who might otherwise have had limited access to the art world; the project partnered with five of the capital's major art institutions, including the Royal Academy of Arts and the Tate Britain (*The Guardian*, May 12, 2010). In 2011, as part of LVYAP, young artists developed and now manage an ongoing website, [www.REcreativeuk.com](http://www.REcreativeuk.com), where artists aged 16–25 can post their work and receive feedback from an online community that includes established artists and art critics, offering a point of entry into a previously rarified art world.

An appreciation for art by luxury brands emanates from brand CEOs themselves. Both François Pinault (Gucci) and Bernard Arnaud (LVMH), are significant forces in contemporary art. The François Pinault Foundation exhibits pieces from Pinault's 2000-piece art collection at the 18th century Palazzo Grassi in Venice, purchased by Pinault in 2006 specifically to house his collection. Arnaud is a driving force behind the Frank Gehry-designed Louis Vuitton Foundation for Creation in Paris, a museum and cultural centre slated to open in 2014. The Foundation's curator, Suzanne Page, is, unsurprisingly, the former director of the *Musée d'Art Moderne* in Paris. The Foundation is seen as a permanent commitment by the company to the perpetuation of creativity and originality in the city: Such endeavours display art within the framework of the luxury experience—in other words, on the shop floor (Maxwell 2011).

A particularly vivid example of the company's creative commitment in Hong Kong was the 2008 launch of the exhibition, "Louis Vuitton: A Passion for Creation" at the Hong Kong Museum of Art. Ironically, Hervé Mikaeloff, who advises and curates for LV and was in charge of one part of the show, "LV and Art," said he wanted to show works and studies created by the company and its collaborating artists without it being market- or object-centred. In a testament to LV's appeal, the Hong Kong Museum, covered with the LV logo, received significant public attendance and attention.

## Discussion

Consumer experiences in the flagship stores of LV are co-created and internalized through narratives of what we deem important experiential elements: architecture, interior decoration, cutting-edge technology, designer mystique, service

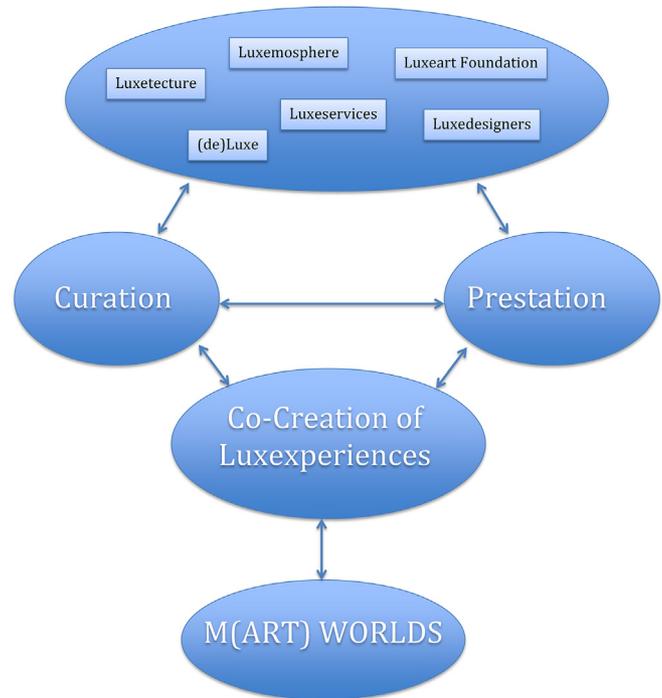


Fig. 1. M(ART) worlds and the co-creation of luxexperiences.

personnel, and an explicit connection to avant-garde art. We concur with Dion and Arnould (2011) that much of the actual work of retail is done by front-line employees and back-stage directors of merchandizing and window displays. However, like the customers that Kozinets et al. (2004) and Sherry (1998) discuss, there is an element of co-creation inherently involved, since customers are engaged with the art on display and a store's architectural features. Play, as in the case of a museum, is central (Hollenbeck, Peters, and Zinkhan 2008) to their experiences. Also, while LV's now former artistic director (Marc Jacobs) was undeniably central to LV's market position, the aesthetic ideology of the company and the brand remain prominent despite Jacobs' departure; a new artistic director will continue to work within the all-encompassing corporate aesthetic vision.

Fig. 1 depicts the key domains that contribute to the creation of "M(Art) World," a term that incorporates aesthetics at all levels, from strategic thinking to physical environments and strategies used by mass merchandizers. A hybrid institution, such as LV with its multiple roles as store, art gallery and museum, is in its essence a third space that can give rise to new ways of thinking and acting (Oldenburg 1991). The notion of M(Art) World involves three processes: curation, prestation, and co-creation. Curation involves acquisition, care, research, exhibition, design, layout, and the imagining and construction of discourses (Ames 1992). Curatorial attention is also paid to the display area's architecture and interior design. However, while all artifacts may signify particular meanings and activity, the aesthetic coding of their materiality provides them with the capacity to enchant. Prestation (Sherry 1983, 1998) offers spellbinding experiences orchestrated by highly trained employees. Staging, brand narratives, and employees imbued with an evangelical reverence for the brand all play their respective roles

in creating consumer loyalty. A tongue-in-cheek statement made by Twitchell (2004: p. 239) is apropos: “Taste can be marketed. Art is just another word for branding.”

Co-creation (Vargo and Lusch 2004) suggests that consumers take and shape what is given—place, people, and brand—to create their own meanings (Campbell 2005). LV selects its product line, in part with on-going collaboration with well-known artists; but without customers’ interpretations of and involvement with the place, people, and brand, LV would lose its ability to extend and sustain itself. While curation and pre-creation are central to the creation of adoration (Dion and Arnould 2011), the co-creation process is essential in understanding how consumers and brands collaborate, however subconsciously, in creating the mystique of the luxury experience.

While many luxury companies are using, or are beginning to use, an aesthetic strategy (Dion and Arnould 2011; Kapferer and Bastien 2009), the literature is fairly silent regarding how consumers experience such brands. While an ideology of beauty prevails from the point of view of management and employees, as identified in our discussion of curation and pre-creation, our contribution is to show how beauty is experienced and leads to virtual enchantment. As Walter Benjamin (1927/2002) argues, the “aura” of an object envelops and physically connects the perceiver to the perceived, blurring the boundaries between them, and suggesting a sensory, embodied mode of perception, a viewpoint that highlights the aesthetic experience in the context of luxury. The Greek meaning of ‘aura’ is literally ‘breath’—the perceiver is unconsciously not simply seeing but at a deeper sensory level experiencing both the object and the atmosphere surrounding it. As Simmel (transl. Bottomore T, and D. Frisby 2004: p. 473) suggest: “All art brings about a distancing from the immediacy of things; it allows the concreteness of stimuli to recede and stretches a veil between us and them just like the fine bluish haze that envelopes distant mountains.” “For Benjamin,” says Hansen (2008: p. 353) “the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but the object in its veil. Here, he (Benjamin) seems to suggest that the veil that surrounds the object transforms ordinary objects into visions or epiphanies.” Participants’ perceptions of LV architecture, for instance, are a signal to the company that the moiré effect created with walls, glass, metal, and light is markedly effective in creating and sustaining a fantasy. The interiors of space, comfort, and intimacy allow for surprises and delight, along with feelings of being soothed, and even being “at home” for our participants. The use of light in a metaphorical sense (the art of light), as well as in a practical sense of creating ambience, plays off the idea of art displayed in museums. LV creative directors are artists in their own right, and their collaboration with contemporary artists enhances the artistic value of both their efforts. The attentive services, combining the personal with the curatorial, offered by employees are stellar.

Finally, LV’s arts patronage positions the company as successful, but with a human face and community consciousness. Does such art patronage and the creation of art products help people become differentiated individuals? Does it give them the opportunity to realize and personalize themselves, and to have an original experience? From our discussion with participants,

the answer seems to be yes. Yet, there is a hesitancy because we believe that aesthetics itself must be viewed as part of what Foucault (1980) called the political economy of truth. We agree with Halsall, Jansen and O’Connor (2004: pp. 83–84) that aesthetic claims or explanations involve various institutional and cultural preconditions of a sort that rule out or at least challenge, canonical conceptions of art, beauty, human experience, the aesthetic etc., In such a context, these authors argue, it is possible for various institutions of aesthetics to become aware of their own limitations and historical situation.

If an aesthetic ideology is incorporated in actual and virtual stores, consumer interactions within these contexts make the appropriation complete. Depending on the consumer, the company can draw on their sense of play, desire, availability to be seduced, and awe to outline the contours of emotional community that can be generated by a luxury brand. The stories told or evoked through the boutiques, through sales, rituals, window displays, and art exhibitions, anchor luxury within the brand’s heritage as well as in the world of art. Consequently, the alchemy between brands and stories (Kozinets et al. 2002) move these products from the world of the ordinary to the extraordinary, and in the process evoke a universe of beauty.

Further, unlike the sharp distinction between people who view art in museums and people who buy art (Chen 2009), notwithstanding the growth of online luxury purchases, we argue that visitation is absolutely central to the eventual collection process. Much as curators create collections and exhibitions, the artistic directors in luxury stores perform a similar function. People come to visit and pay homage, but do not stop there. In our study, it is clear that being lost in reverie is a necessary precursor to possessing the desired objects (Kozinets et al. 2002). While objects provide a continuous source of value of the extended self (Belk 1988), visits to the luxury brand store, with its multisensory influences (Joy and Sherry 2003), leave traces in memory long after the visit has occurred (Hollenbeck, Peters, and Zinkhan 2008; Pine and Gilmore 1999). Customers have a strong sense of self-identification and attachment to the objects they purchase, rendering the visits more than circumstantial events (Chen 2009). Customers are not merely visitors to the store, although they may have been drawn in with the hope of seeing what new products are available in a given season. Such visits are not a momentary access to the objects without possession, as Chen implies in her description of visitors to a museum. Customers are there to look, but, eventually, if not immediately, they are also there to buy. In this context, we argue that an LV flagship store is both like and unlike a brand museum like the World of Coca-Cola (Hollenbeck, Peters, and Zinkhan 2008). In a brand museum, the focus is on the brand regardless of whether the brand managers humanize, globalize, localize, theatricalize, contextualize, socialize, or characterize the brand. When the brand is viewed as an aesthetic product (as a cultural artifact) worthy of appreciation, the visitor then sees the brand in a different light: “It becomes a piece of art in and of itself” (Hollenbeck, Peters, and Zinkhan 2008: p. 351), even if the brand item is sold in a grocery store. By contrast, a luxury brand object (e.g., a Murakami handbag) is already a work of art, designed specifically to meet consumer aesthetic needs.

Benjamin's distinction between a genuine aura and a simulated aura runs the risk of being a distinction between high and low culture. In his overt embrace of both, Murakami is a modern-day Warhol whose work celebrates pop culture. As Walter Benjamin suggests, and as is appropriate for the appreciation of a luxury object, a consumer experiences "dimensional perception into historical depths. Such perception goes together with an ethically and politically significant thickening of the perceiver's present, by virtue of which differing perspectives are simultaneously in play" (Eiland 2007: p. 134). This perspective also raises the issue of labour and environmental concerns within the luxury industry. Unlike fashion brands, luxury brands such as LV have been addressing sustainability issues since the early 2000s (Joy et al. 2012). While luxury brands are inherently hampered in their ability to embrace sustainability, given the extravagance implicit within luxury's symbolism and its consumer costs (Kapferer 2013), they nonetheless have the potential to lead on sustainability because of their emphasis on quality (Joy 2013).

Having identified the processes by which luxury companies like LV become "M(Art) Worlds", it is also appropriate to contrast them with department stores, and with flagship brand stores as well as premium brand stores. Table 3 provides an overall summary underscoring the fact that luxury stores like LV are best viewed as locations where the product is considered a work of art. In an interview (Skelly S, Travel Insider. Qantas. Com July 1, 2011) at the opening of the first LV exhibition at the National Museum of China in Beijing, the then chairman and CEO of LV (from 1990 to 2012), Yves Carcelle, stated: "*I don't like the word 'commercial,' to be honest, when you are in the creative world. You need to do what you think is nice. Sales come in addition. That's why you will not see anything commercial in the exhibition. People buy 157 years of history; they buy a sense of craftsmanship, the emotion of travel in the 19th century. We hope customers will feel more emotional about the brand. For me, luxury is all about emotion.*"

#### *Implications for retailers*

Through such art patronage as sponsoring major museum exhibits and commissioning art installations, LVMH has constructed an artistic identity. We see an obvious marriage of interests in the structural proximity that luxury brands have with art, and, especially, with contemporary art. The affluent desire expertise in art appreciation, as an expression of cultural refinement: they accrue such expertise in part via the luxury brand stores, where contemporary art is on display. For customers, their view of themselves as connoisseurs is both confirmed and sustained. LV continually raises its status and prestige through art, while nurturing the dream and the supremacy of the brand. As is the case in a brand museum, consumers who purchase LV products want to participate in a cultural experience and own a cultural icon (Hollenbeck, Peters, and Zinkhan 2008). But there is a difference: whereas you can buy a quintessentially branded commodity (e.g., a can of Coca Cola) with zero interest in its cultural provenance, provenance is uppermost in consumers' minds when they buy

an LV handbag, for example. Further, while brand museums are used by companies as retail tools to shift the brand to iconic status (e.g., Coca Cola or Heineken beer), such iconicity is already embedded in luxury brands; when showcased in a museum setting such as a store, these objects achieve a sacred status, approaching what Dion and Arnould (2011: p. 514) describe as a "model for appreciation and reverence." Consequently, managing the ideological meanings associated with the brand is central to the success of such retail environments.

The futuristic thinking associated with contemporary art in particular provides an edge of modernity to luxury brand companies such as LVMH. Art confers *gravitas* on luxury that, as Kapferer and Bastien (2009) note, luxury companies did not previously have. Today, Cartier has its Foundation Cartier, and commissions art for display in a dazzling space designed by the well-known architect Jean Nouvel. Chanel sponsored a travelling exhibit of art inspired by Chanel handbags, and Prada created the Prada Transformer, a shape-shifting tetrahedron exhibition space in Seoul, Korea, that has become an architectural icon.

To Moore, Doherty, and Doyle (2007), a flagship store has four strategic functions: market entry/market development, a conduit and support for partnership relations, a focus for marketing communications, and a blueprint for store development. In the international context, flagships exist to influence market awareness and perceptions through their emphasis on lifestyle, and to provide organizational contexts that transcend the product by selling the brand narrative. In our study, the flagship luxury brand store has an additional agenda. While a luxury brand may serve all the functions mentioned previously, its goal is also to have an aesthetic presence, with the objective of creating a culture interwoven with contemporary art and luxury: a product and custodial orientation.

From a retail theory perspective, utilitarian value and hedonic value are equally central to customer satisfaction, word of mouth, re-patronage anticipation, and loyalty. Hollenbeck, Peters, and Zinkhan (2008) report that production and entertainment have been encapsulated in retailing environments as part of their evolution. We argue that there are two aspects to hedonic value: a generalized enjoyment that one feels when looking at a painting or artistic object, and also a more profound or exultant experience when one encounters an aesthetic object (Holbrook 1986). We argue that our participants are entertained, educated, and transformed by their experiences in the LV flagship stores, but are not sated by the experience; they repeatedly come back for more. Consumers are both visitors and collectors simultaneously who experience the store, replete with art and aesthetic ideology, as a place to play and experience a moment out of time, even as their visit triggers desires to know more about, and to eventually possess, the objects they covet. Thus, at a very pragmatic level, we suggest that aesthetic experiences in the store, continuously revived and stored in memory, contribute to brand loyalty, in all the senses referenced above. Consumers have responded to LV's architectural and design taste- and trend-making; the company's flagship store

Table 3  
List of LV stores visited in Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China.

City	Store name	Type of store	Open date	Location	Address
Hong Kong	LOUIS VUITTON HONG KONG PENINSULA	Specialty store	1979	Kowloon HONG KONG KOWLOON	Shop ME1-7, 9 and E2-6, EL3 Peninsula Hotel Shopping Arcade Salisbury Road, Kowloon, HONG KONG KOWLOON
	LOUIS VUITTON HONG KONG LANDMARK	Flagship store	1982	Central HONG KONG ISLAND	G/F, Shop 7-17, Landmark Atrium, Central HONG KONG ISLAND
	LOUIS VUITTON HONG KONG PACIFIC PLACE	Specialty store	1983	HONG KONG ISLAND	Shop 236, Level 2, Shop 351, Level 3 & Shop 405, Level 4 Pacific Place, 88 Queensway, HONG KONG ISLAND
	LOUIS VUITTON HONG KONG 5 CANTON ROAD	Maison	1994	Tsim Sha Tsui KOWLOON	5 Canton Road, Tsim Sha Tsui KOWLOON
	LOUIS VUITTON HONG KONG LEE GARDENS	Specialty store	1997	Causeway Bay HONG KONG ISLAND	Shop B01, G01 & G10 The Lee Gardens, 33 Hysan Avenue, Causeway Bay, HONG KONG ISLAND
	LOUIS VUITTON HONG KONG DFS CHINACHEM	Specialty store	1999	Tsim Sha Tsui KOWLOON	UG1, Chinachem Golden Plaza, 77 Mody Road, Tsim Sha Tsui, KOWLOON
Beijing	LOUIS VUITTON HONG KONG ELEMENTS	Specialty store	2009	Tsim Sha Tsui KOWLOON	Shop 2048-2055, Level 2 Elements Kowloon Station, 1 AUSTIN ROAD, West Tsim Sha Tsui, KOWLOON
	LOUIS VUITTON BEIJING PENINSULA	Specialty store	1992	Wangfujing Dajie Dongcheng District	G2 Store, The Peninsula Hotel, No. 8 Goldfish Lane, Wangfujing Dajie. Dongcheng District
	LOUIS VUITTON BEIJING CHINA WORLD	Flagship store	2001	Jianguomen Wai Da Jie Chaoyang District	L116, China World Shopping Mall, 1 Jianguomen Wai Da Jie, Chaoyang District
	LOUIS VUITTON BEIJING SEASONS PLACE FINAN	Specialty store	2007	Jinchengfang Street Xicheng District	Shop L131-132 Beijing Seasons Place Shopping Center, 2 Jinchengfang Street, Xicheng District
	LOUIS VUITTON BEIJING PARK LIFE	Specialty store	2012	Jian Guo Men Wai Street Chaoyang District	Unit 127, Yintai Center Shopping Mall, No.2, Jian Guo Men Wai Street, Chaoyang District
Shanghai	LOUIS VUITTON BEIJING SHIN KONG	Specialty store	2013	Jianguo Road Changyang District	Unit M1026, No. 87 Jianguo Road, Changyang District
	LOUIS VUITTON SHANGHAI PLAZA 66	Masion	2001	Nanjing West Road Huangpu District	Shop 136, Plaza 66 Mall, 1266 Nanjing West Road, Huangpu District
	LOUIS VUITTON SHANGHAI PUDONG	Flagship store	2010	Century Avenue Pudong District	Shop L1-1, Block D, Shanghai IFC, 8 Century Avenue, Pudong District
	LOUIS VUITTON SHANGHAI HUAIHAI	Flagship store	2010	Huaihai Zhong Road Luwan District	Shop 105, Lippo Plaza 222 Huaihai Zhong Road Luwan District
Nanjing	LOUIS VUITTON SHANGHAI HONGQIAO L'Avenue	Specialty store	2013	Xianxia Road Changning District	Shop L101/LG101, L'Avenue Shanghai, 99 Xianxia Road, Changning District
	LOUIS VUITTON NANJING DEJI PLAZA	Flagship store	2007	Zhongshan Road Xuanwu District	Shop L101-102, L201-202, Deji Plaza, 18 Zhongshan Road, Xuanwu District

on the Champs-Élysées in Paris is, for example, the seventh most popular attraction in the city (*Interior Design* 2007). More such stunningly effective and overtly artistic presentation needs to be done. As Pomerantz (*Forbes*, June 18, 2012) argues, the Internet has created a more sophisticated and demanding consumer; the pressure is on for luxury labels to differentiate themselves with memorable shopping experiences, and bricks-and-mortar stores have become an essential component in building an emotional connection to the brand.

For any corporation to sustain profitability, and to remain fresh, a strong and distinctive appeal is essential to sustaining the fantasy defined by luxury. LV has iconic handbags such as the Speedy, and luggage in styles dating back well over a century, that symbolize and prefigure its values. While consumers venerate such icons, they are also drawn to their many variants and descendants, featuring changes both subtle and overtly modern. Narratives that continuously remind consumers of heritage and innovation encourage salespeople

to be ambassadors in the process of offering refined service.

While museums see their audiences diminishing, those same audiences are increasingly drawn to luxury stores. With its focus on contemporary art, LV has anchored its own significance in the contemporary world. New product development through continuous collaborations with artists can render luxury brand companies more viable in an economic context in which design is paramount.

The aestheticization of consumer experience and the concurrent commodification of aesthetic experience fuel the luxury market, with the ideal market sited at the intersection of function, behaviour, and aesthetics (Levy and Czepiel 1974). In an era of an ascendant experience economy, art will become ever more prominent in formulating marketing strategy (Dion and Arnould 2011). While this design-driven trend is perhaps most visible in luxury flagship brand stores, other companies are following suit (Brown 2009; Esslinger 2009; Martin 2009; Verganti 2009). By aligning couture, the ultimate showcase for a luxury fashion brand, with fine art, the artistic concepts of skill, heritage, craftsmanship, and authenticity are subtly transferred to products, whether clothing, accessories, or jewels. The bar is raised; luxury is brought in line with fine art (literally, in the case of Louis Vuitton or Dior, for example). Presented in a gallery context, the creation becomes, if only momentarily, an art piece, offering an element of surprise; a viewer sees an exquisitely crafted item from one discipline next to that of another (Murakami's pop art with Louis Vuitton's couture surely cannot help but raise a smile). The classic strategy of injecting fresh talent into timeless craftsmanship reinvigorates and rekindles desire in a new generation of luxury followers. In luxury, the Vuitton/Murakami collaboration is the benchmark. (Maxwell 2011). On a cautionary note, however, we suggest stepping back and re-visiting Hall's (1997) distinction between a semiotic and a discursive approach. While the former is concerned with the how of representation, the latter examines the effects of representation. There is a connection (Schroeder 1999: p. 642) between morals and matter.

#### *Suggestions for retailers*

Hybrid organizations such as LV have much to offer other luxury and premium brand stores attempting to formulate a successful aesthetic strategy. Consumers embrace not merely products, but also brand heritage and history. As Martineau (1958) observes, store image matters immensely to customers. Likewise, Grewal et al. (1998) argue that the perceived quality of a brand has a positive relationship to store image, which in turn affects purchase intentions. Luxury brands without an actual historical past can create one out of whole cloth, as it were, with their product line embodying a mythical heritage (e.g., the highly successful Ralph Lauren brand). Buying in to a compelling brand mystique enables consumers to co-create personal identities; art and heritage (whether actual or invented), are the tools of the luxury trade.

Expansion based on exclusivity will, as always, be central to a luxury brand's success. But how does a retailer balance exclusivity while generating increased revenues? LV has done so masterfully over the years, particularly when Takashi Murakami had his museum exhibit in New York—a strategy of in-store art patronage available to any corporation willing to assume some degree of risk (e.g., the edgy Eliasson installation in LV stores over the 2006–2007 Christmas holidays, rife with the (unrealized) potential to depress seasonal sales).

Luxury companies can stimulate art-related activities through supporting artists and funding art foundations, which can ultimately favourably affect their profitability. Like museums, luxury brands can feature such in-store amenities as oases of privacy in the form of cafés (whose offerings must enhance the brand via their exclusivity), and the availability of media, including online and print catalogues and fashion magazines, online product slide shows, and vlogs, blogs, and Twitter feeds (both those originating from the brand and those produced by artists, designers, and architects associated with the brand). We suggest, as Kozinets et al. (2002) argue, that construction templates be tailored to particular circumstances. In India, for instance, all Louis Vuitton stores in 2011 celebrated Diwali through a collaboration with the artist Rajeev Sethi, who created lamps made from banana leaves. Collaborations on products, especially like Murakami-inspired products, cannot be done frequently. Otherwise they become a standard recipe rather than reflections of the company's philosophy. Additionally, the corporation must match the vision of the artist with its own vision—no easy task. That said, building a strong collaboration with artists based on trust and continuity is essential, rather than aiming merely for a commercial coup. Luxury brand customers experience more than the store as a museum; they also experience actual museum exhibits. The communication of a brand as intertwined with art is central to the success of luxury brands such as LV and Gucci.

While we believe that the charismatic authority embodied in an artistic director is central to the operations and ideology of a luxury brand, stability is an issue—such directors can come and go, undone by time and chance. Putting too much emphasis on current artistic directors may be somewhat risky. As Dion and Arnould (2011) suggest, having the artistic director's role embedded within the company's lineage could lessen the risk. A director may leave, but the venerable company continues. A balance is needed in terms of aesthetic ideology, and emphasis on brand heritage and history.

Ralph Lauren, an American premium brand that lacks the history and heritage of an LV, for example, has done well in following in LV's footsteps. The company has committed to donating funds for the restoration of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris; the designer showed his 2013 collection in the school's courtyard. Other premium brands such as Yves St. Laurent and Giorgio Armani are similarly positioning themselves as art patrons via a variety of restoration projects, or by using their Paris flagship stores to showcase contemporary art (*Vogue Paris*, October 17, 2013). The Champagne brand

Dom Pérignon is using its new Instagram page to show off its collaborative project with the artist Jeff Koons; the limited edition Balloon Venus bottle and gift box were unveiled at a brand event during New York Fashion Week in 2013. Collaborations with contemporary artists can reposition a brand's image to appeal to younger consumers, while the limited availability of the product line will still draw brand loyalists (King 2013).

### Conclusion

Our focus in this study has been on how consumers experience the aesthetic strategies of luxury brands, in particular of Louis Vuitton stores, and of how deeply those experiences are shaped by the brand's highly successful incorporation of art and art patronage within its brand identity. The sensorially immersive experience of being in a museum, entranced and awed by beauty, is replicated in the context of commerce: objects that consumers can own are displayed alongside those they cannot, each presented, by any measure, as art, each with the potential for enduring value, each serving as a source of ongoing, primal aesthetic pleasure.

While the brand essence, inspired by creative directors, displayed at the store, and conveyed by employees, is central to the marketing of adoration, the techniques by which consumers are essentially bewitched play an equally essential role. While we concur with recent literature on the seductive effectiveness of themed retail environments, we believe that art is not merely a theme; art is central to the structure and process of the luxury brand. Luxury stores thus become contemporary art institutions, with consumers complicit in the construction of their own M(Art) experiences.

We also recognize the inevitable balancing act between art and the market. Art drives taste; taste drives consumption. As Stallabrass (2004: p. 62) writes, "What is glossily and cannily produced is another set of commodities, and the publicity and sponsorship arrangements through which they are seen and sold."

### Executive summary

Through an ethnographic study of how consumers perceive and experience Louis Vuitton flagship stores in Hong Kong, we show that luxury stores are becoming hybrid institutions, embodying elements of both art galleries and museums, within a context of exclusivity emblematic of luxury. We create the term "M(Art)World" to define this aesthetically oriented strategy, in which a brand incorporates art within its very identity, eliding the discrete worlds of art and commerce, with each reinforcing the other's intrinsic value.

Participants in our study routinely experience LV flagship stores as an aesthetic experience equivalent to visiting an art institution. They were literally dazzled by the stores' interior and exterior design, with layered moiré patterns within translucent walls, and light manipulated to create shimmering facades that transform store spaces into ethereal evocations of luxury. As one participant reported, LV's lights are like "large sparkling

bracelets through the stores," while another commented that the stores "look like special glass boxes—each a jewel in itself." In a city as densely populated as Hong Kong, space itself is an emblem of luxury, one that LV exploits to great effect. The interplay of spaciousness, light, minimalist design, specific colours denoting luxury such as glittering gold, digitized images in constant motion, and sales personnel trained to allow customers to browse without disturbance, offers our participants an environment in which they can not only gaze at, but also fully engage with, a particular vision of artistry—exactly as they would within an art institution.

Within the stores, the aura of the museum, of precious objects to be viewed with awe, prevails, as our participants noted. Artisanal objects, designed by well-known artists affiliated with LV and available for sale, are displayed in sleekly elegant and spare surroundings, theatrically lit and presented alongside similarly displayed art objects unavailable at any price, the latter *bona fide* art objects. The question inevitably arises: what is a *bona fide* piece of art? For LV customers, the answer is opaque: a limited edition handbag by the renowned Japanese artist Takashi Murakami, an ongoing collaborator with LV since 2002, carries the inherent cachet of art, even as it runs the risk of being a less than secure investment. Our participants do not mind this element of risk; handbags are for use, after all, and that use provides a sense of ongoing pleasure: in possessing beauty itself, expressing one's identity as a collector (much as one might collect art), and as an indicator of one's *au courant* pop culture taste. Murakami himself has been bluntly unapologetic about the use of his art in brand merchandizing, and of the blending of art within commerce. Such pragmatism benefits both the artist and the corporation.

For LV, collaborations with artists including Murakami, Stephen Sprouse, Yayoi Kusama, and Sylvie Fleury, among others, have imbued the brand with an of-the-moment modernity. The LV iconic monogram has been shredded, discoloured, and re-imagined as patchwork—all with the corporation's backing. LV has retained its status as a venerable luxury icon in part thanks to its continual re-invention through artistic collaborations, which increased in number under the now former LV creative director Marc Jacobs, and will doubtless continue under future directors.

With LV as our focal brand, we discuss seven features that delineate a M(Art)World: (1) Luxecture: Public Sculpture, Ornamentation, and Technology; (2) Luxemosphere: Contemporary Interior Design, Extravagance, and Playfulness; (3) (De)Luxe: Luminosity and Art; (4) Luxedesigners: Creating aEsthetic Experiences via Contemporary Art Objects; (5) The Experience of Authenticity; (6) Luxescape: Curatorial Attention and Service; and (7) LuxeArt Foundation: the Luxury Brand as a Patron of the Arts.

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## Appendix A. Store images

LVST



LV Central 3



LV Central 1



LV Central 4



LV Central 2



LV Central 5



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