

EMILY HUGGARD AND JON COPE

# COMMUNICATING FASHION BRANDS

Theoretical and  
Practical Perspectives



# Communicating Fashion Brands

This book demonstrates how fashion brands communicate, why the practice is significant within wider society and how it can be perceived as culturally meaningful.

Enabling readers to connect the tools and techniques of communication with their theoretical underpinnings and historical antecedents, the book shows how these methods can be applied in practice. The authors utilise social, consumer and cultural theory, and frameworks rooted in psychology, sociology and economics, as mechanisms to analyse and deconstruct current communication strategies used by fashion brands. The book presents insights and strategies for communicating authentic values, conveying a clearly defined aesthetic and visual language and generating shareable content that resonates with audiences. With insights into strategies used by brands including Burberry, Gucci, Dior, COS, Rapha, Warby Parker and Maryam Nassir Zadeh, each chapter outlines ways of maintaining relevant and consistent brand narratives in the 21st century. From how to sustain a dialogue with a brand's community, to the use of brand collaboration, co-creative storytelling and fashion spaces, the book aims to develop reflective communication practitioners who have a deep understanding of the cultural landscape, brand strategy and industry innovation.

Written for scholars and practitioners, this book is a valuable blend of theory and practice across the fields of fashion, communication and branding.

**Emily Huggard** is Assistant Professor of Fashion Communication at Parsons School of Design in New York. Her research explores how brands create a space of proximity for the consumer using physical, digital and social realms, and the use of installation art as a brand experience tool in the epoch of post-consumerism and post-digital.

**Jon Cope** leads the MA in Public Relations at Westminster University in London. His current research focuses on the use of visual materials in promotional communication. Jon co-authored and photographed the book *Fashion Promotion in Practice*, published in 2016. He holds an MA in Critical Global Politics from Exeter University.



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<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# Communicating Fashion Brands

Theoretical and Practical Perspectives

Emily Huggard and Jon Cope

First published 2020  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Huggard, Emily, editor. | Cope, Jon, editor.

Title: Communicating fashion brands : theoretical and practical perspectives / Emily Huggard and Jon Cope.

Description: London ; New York : Routledge, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019044138 (print) | LCCN 2019044139 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Advertising—Fashion. | Fashion merchandising. | Branding (Marketing)

Classification: LCC HF6161.C44 .C66 2020 (print) |

LCC HF6161.C44 (ebook) | DDC 659.19/74692—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019044138>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019044139>

ISBN: 978-1-138-61355-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-61356-0 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-46442-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon

by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Visit the companion website: [www.communicatingfashion.com](http://www.communicatingfashion.com)

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# Preface

The fashion industry is in a constant state of change. Innovation in technology (big data, artificial intelligence), digital and social media have led to an open, fluid dialogue between fashion brands and their audiences, leading to the co-creation of brand stories and value.

Once siloed into individually planned channels or “units” of conversation (retail, marketing, advertising, public relations) brand communication strategies must now be fully integrated—uniting various media, tools and platforms in order to avoid audience fragmentation, maintain cultural relevance, and create seamless and transparent brand narratives.

Fashion brands are no longer defined solely by their product. We have witnessed a move away from traditional sales-focused and brick-and-mortar retail to temporary and installation-based brand spaces that offer immense opportunities for personalised and meaningful communications and experiences. With the emergence of new business models and systems (e.g. direct-to-consumer, rental and consignment, open-source, and experiential) fashion brand communicators now work with a new breed of emergent designers and brands in telling their stories (e.g. sustainable or human rights focused) in ways that are inspiring and exciting to the market and capture the imagination of audiences.

This book offers the reader the opportunity to understand fashion brand communication from both a theoretical and practical perspective. It presents insights into, and strategies for, generating brand initiatives and strategies that communicate authentic values, convey a clearly defined aesthetic and visual language and generate shareable content that resonates with audiences.

Our approach relates cultural theory and historical studies to current industry practice, where theory is understood as a general principle or body of principles offered to explain phenomena. Each chapter utilises social, consumer and cultural theory and frameworks, rooted in psychology, sociology and economics, as mechanisms with which to analyse and deconstruct current communication strategies used by fashion brands.

Despite the availability of several fashion-specific marketing and branding textbooks, there remains a focus on brand communication at an operational

or tactical level, rather than at a strategic level. This book provides the opportunity for readers to understand the “why”—the deeper meaning, thought and logic behind the decisions made in developing fashion brand communication campaigns and strategies. This understanding is a crucial aspect of becoming a reflective practitioner who challenges current systems and thinking. Relating theory to practice helps the reader understand and analyse the social and cultural attributes of fashion brand communication, as well as what makes a brand’s approach successful and relevant.

While each chapter focuses on a different brand case study, the common thread between each is the role of the fashion brand communicator as a cultural intermediary who meaningfully responds to and shapes culture, and builds cultural credibility around the brands that they work with.

More broadly—with fashion now firmly established as a major topic of enquiry in social and cultural theory—this book offers a platform from which to reflect on practices of brand communication, consumption and identity politics (Rocamora and Smelik, 2016). In doing so, it provides an approachable overview of relevant theorists and concepts to provide readers with the ability to critically and deeply analyse the choices made by fashion brands.

We believe that this book offers a unique perspective on fashion brand communication, comprising a careful blend of theory and practical guidance. Readers will learn how to generate concepts and initiatives that will push the concept of fashion brand communication within the fashion industry.

### ***Objectives:***

To develop the reader’s competence in:

- Developing brand narratives and content for digital, print, spatial and social platforms;
- Developing innovative brand communication strategies (influencer and social media strategies, collaborations, fashion spaces and experiences) for fashion companies;
- Using appropriate cultural and theoretical frameworks to analyse and deconstruct brand communication strategies used in fashion.

### **Structure of the book**

Each chapter utilises a specific theory or framework, rooted in cultural and historical studies, to deconstruct current fashion brand communication strategies. The case studies employed include luxury, direct-to-consumer, niche, independent and mass-market brands in order to provide a holistic view of both the synergies and differences across industry sectors.

In Chapter 1, Emily Huggard introduces the discipline of brand communication and its unique value and position within the fashion industry.

She presents key definitions and branding theories for readers who have not studied brand communication in the context of fashion, and explains the strategic nature of communicating contemporary fashion brands.

Chapter 2 includes an overview of the global fashion industry, providing the reader with an understanding of the fashion system, core processes, stakeholders and players. This allows the reader to set the scene, and place the discipline within the dynamic industry in which they will practice—a crucial first step for strategic analysis in this context.

It also provides an overview of the current state of the industry including emerging directions and shifts in the global economy, culture, technology and digitisation, consumer needs and sustainability that are impacting brand communication strategies.

In Chapter 3, Emily Huggard demonstrates the role of the fashion communicator as a cultural intermediary. Using Bourdieu's sociology of cultural production and consumption, she argues that fashion brand Gucci exemplifies the cultural intermediary role by drawing upon both 'high' and 'pop' culture to imbue goods and services with meanings and values. In this role, they create new genres of cultural content and experiences that employ the power of digital and social communities as innovators of culture.

In Chapter 4, Jon Cope applies Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to the luxury fashion industry to explain how fashion brand communicators understand what motivates consumers and how they respond to consumers' physiological, social and psychological needs. He uses a case study on luxury fashion house Dior to illustrate how the brand uses art to build authenticity.

In Chapter 5, Rachel Lifter uses the case study of New York fashion label Maryam Nassir Zadeh to show how a brand creates a compelling and aspirational ideal. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, the chapter identifies the MNZ woman as a discursive construction, invented within the brand's visual communication strategy and intersected by broader, historically specific discourses on fashion.

In Chapter 6, Anja Overdiek looks at the definition of fashion space and brand experience. Using a case study on fashion brand COS, she delves into strategies for creating experiences that align with a brand's ethos and identity, and help build brand communities.

In Chapter 7, through the use of the DART(T) framework of co-creation and a case study of eyewear brand Warby Parker, Patrick Lonergan argues that the consumer is the most important and influential cultural intermediary in creating brand value. He discusses the pivotal role of co-creative brand storytelling in the creation of an authentic, socially conscious and culturally meaningful brand.

In Chapter 8 Jon Cope introduces the meaning and relevance of community to fashion brand communicators. He presents a case study on international cycling-fashion brand Rapha that illustrates how a brand community plays a strategic role in brand direction while drawing audiences closer into the brand's sphere of influence.

Chapter 9 explores fashion brand collaborations using a conceptual semiotic model called the brand association base. Jason Kass deconstructs, through a case study on luxury fashion brand Burberry, how brands transfer meaning and build brand image through engagement and collaboration with external partners.

Furthermore, to maintain currency of brand examples, case studies and industry trends, this text is accompanied by a companion website: [www.communicatingfashion.com](http://www.communicatingfashion.com). This will be used as a repository of ongoing comment, analysis and current examples from the fashion industry.

## Reference

Rocamora, A. and Smelik, A. (2016) *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*. London: I.B.Tauris.

# Acknowledgements

The fashion industry is no longer driven solely by products, status, product and motiveless consumption. As a group of educators across the disciplines of fashion communication, marketing, media, business and fashion studies, we understand the importance of nurturing students who will harness the power of design, strategy and compelling narratives to create change within the fashion industry, challenge and create new systems in society, and impact thinking on topics such as consumption, gender, race, social justice and well-being.

We would like to thank our team of contributors who brought their unique perspectives, research and experience to the individual chapters. We are grateful to our students who continually inspire and challenge us, to Gabriel Chavez for his web design expertise and to those who provided invaluable feedback on content development, especially Jason Kass, Stuart Mayell and Anna McGlynn.

We would also like to thank the Taylor & Francis team—Jennifer Vennall, Margaret Farrelly, Peter Hall and Liz Dawn—the designers and others involved in production for their support and guidance.

We also want to thank the teams at COS, Rapha and Gucci for providing insights, brand materials, assets and imagery for the case studies used within the text, as well as the following organisations who granted permission to reproduce or adapt imagery, figures, photographs, frameworks and text that appear in the book:

Anya Hindmarch  
Global Fashion Agenda  
Eileen Fisher  
Comme des Garçons  
H&M  
Warpin Media  
Studio One Eighty Nine  
Getty Images  
Emerald Publishing Limited  
Springer Nature  
Palgrave Macmillan Limited

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### Emily Huggard

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### Jon Cope

Jon is Course Leader of the MA in Public Relations at Westminster University, whose Fashion Promotion and PR module attracts an international cohort. Jon's research interests span a wide range of PR and communications practices including fashion and the use of visual materials in promotional communication. He is co-author and photographer of the book *Fashion Promotion in Practice* (Bloomsbury, 2016). He holds an MA in Critical Global Politics from Exeter University. Jon's professional experience in PR and journalism spans more than 20 years, with experience in the consumer, health and fashion sectors, both in senior agency and in-house roles and as a freelance journalist.

## Contributors

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Dr Jason Kass is Assistant Professor of Fashion Communication at Parsons School of Design, The New School in New York, where he teaches visual communication theory and practice. Prior to joining Parsons, he taught at London College of Fashion and directed their undergraduate degree in creative direction. Jason's scholarship spans visual art, fashion, design, media and communication. His doctoral work combined visual art theory with cognitive psychology to understand how pictorial artworks create conditions for viewing. Prior to a career in higher education, Jason worked across editorial and commercial fashion contexts including positions at *GQ* magazine and *Visionaire*, and on projects for brands such as Marc Jacobs, Polo Ralph Lauren and L'Oréal.

### Rachel Lifter

Dr Rachel Lifter is Assistant Professor of Fashion Studies at Parsons School of Design, The New School in New York. She is the author of *Fashioning Indie: Popular Fashion, Music and Gender* (Bloomsbury, 2019). Her writing also appears in *Fashion Cultures Revisited* (Routledge, 2013), *Fashioning Professionals* (Bloomsbury, 2018) and *Fashion Stylists* (Bloomsbury, forthcoming 2020).

### Patrick Lonergan

Dr Patrick Lonergan is a consumer researcher at the School of Fashion, Manchester Metropolitan University. His research and teaching interests are firmly located within consumer culture theory. A core argument that pervades his contribution to fashion theory is that rather than appreciate the consumption experience as one replete with conscious 'meaning', we must also acknowledge the intense affective energies, physical forces, mythical narratives and magic that guide emotional, non-rational consumption patterns of fashion through shaping our perception of reality. Thus, much of his work is positioned at the intersection of affect, hedonic consumption and marketplace cultures, and is geared toward enhancing the debate on aesthetic consumption experiences.

### Anja Overdiek

Dr Anja Overdiek is an Associate Professor at the faculty of Business, Finance and Marketing at The Hague University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. She leads the Future-Proof Retail program, part of the Innovation Networks research group. Anja's fields of specialisation are consumer engagement, retail entrepreneurship, temporary spaces and co-design. Currently, she explores the opportunity of temporary retail spaces in engaging consumers in more circular consumption behaviour. Anja holds a PhD in political sciences from Freie Universität Berlin and focuses her research from a sociomaterial perspective. Often working together with design researchers and students, she integrates social, material and digital perspectives.

# 1 An introduction to fashion brand communication

*Emily Huggard*

## Introduction

Central to defining the concept of brand communication within the fashion industry are definitions of ‘fashion’ and of ‘brand.’ Fashion itself, as Cheryl Buckley and Hazel Clark note, is a somewhat ‘troubled term’ (2017: 1), spanning “high fashion on the one hand, street style and youth culture . . . at the other” (Church Gibson, 2012: 18), but also recognisable as a practice of everyday life and a “cultural phenomenon that facilitates embodied identity . . . how individuals and groups of people present themselves in and for the world” (Buckley and Clark, 2017: 1). Many see fashion as an art form, a luxury based on exclusivity, couture and craftsmanship. For others, it is seen as an industry based on trends with accelerated cycles of production and consumption (Business of Fashion and McKinsey&Company, 2019). In contrast to clothing, which is defined as a more functional form of dress, fashion thrives on novelty, change and contradiction (Arnold, 2009). In order for change—which is intrinsic to fashion—to take place, the industry must continually innovate and introduce new products and collections and drive desire for the latest styles—a key part of the fashion communicator’s role (Easey, 2009).

Fashion is also a “vibrant form of visual and material culture” (Arnold, 2009: 7) that dictates and challenges what is deemed beautiful or acceptable, confronts societal constructs and beliefs and raises important ethical and moral questions. It is global, but can also be local and micro, specific to a niche group (Arnold, 2009).

Fashion is of course also recognisable as a highly competitive industry. The global apparel market is projected to grow in value to about 1.5 trillion dollars in 2020 (Business of Fashion and McKinsey&Company, 2019).

But despite its tangible value, most assets in the fashion industry are non-tangible and these non-tangible (symbolic and evocative) brand-related elements of fashion products are more important than their functionality (Jin and Cedrola, 2017). Brands, and their non-tangible elements, provide consumers with a feeling of shared well-being and common interest (Varley et al., 2018).

## What is a brand?

Originally defined as an object or a mark of identification, a brand is defined as “A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies the seller’s good or services as distinct from those of other sellers” (American Marketing Association, 2007). Brands are generally considered to be the sum of the tangible, physical features that create a brand (the logo, physical retail space, product, packaging) and the non-tangible elements—the feelings, meanings, values and associations that consumers ascribe to the brand that allow brand audiences to understand the intrinsic characteristics of a product (Jin and Cedrola, 2017). The combination of physical and emotional cues is triggered when the audience is exposed to the name, logo, the visual identity, brand imagery and brand messaging.

In *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*, Ries and Trout (2001) defined a brand as a concept idea or space that is owned inside the mind of the prospect or consumer. The most recent wave focuses on brand as experience. “A brand is essentially a container for a customer’s complete experience with the product or company” (Zyman, 2002: 41). It is not something you manage over time, but something you deliver in the moment (Bonchek and France, 2016; Zyman, 2002). Crucial to understanding the nuances of a brand are the differences between *brand identity*, *brand image*, *brand personality* and *brand positioning*.

**Brand identity** is the unique set of associations that the brand creates or maintains to influence consumer perception (Aaker, 1996). These associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers (Aaker, 1996). It includes the brand’s voice, values, imagery and visual communication. Brand identity is tangible, appeals to the senses, and is a clear projection of how the company desires to be viewed by their audience in every interaction with the brand, both online and offline. It stimulates brand recognition and helps differentiate and position a brand (Kapferer, 2008).

**Brand image** is the set of perceptions that the consumer has in their mind about a particular brand (Aaker 1996, 1997). Unlike brand identity, it cannot be controlled by the brand. Brands aim to ensure that the image held by consumers of that brand remains in alignment with the intended brand identity.

Through effective and strategic dialogue, brands are able to project their desired image and develop a **brand personality** with human characteristics that coordinate with their target consumer’s self-image (Aaker, 1997). Just as with humans, a brand’s personality describes the way a brand speaks, behaves, thinks, acts and reacts. Brand personalities are as abundant as their human equivalents, and some theorists have made attempts to categorise them (see Aaker’s 1997 Dimensions of brand personality, illustrated in Figure 1.1).