

A Lack of Luxury? Contemporary luxury fashion in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Within recent history the impact of globalization has made a crucial impression upon the contemporary understanding of luxury, largely due to the mass-expansion of luxury fashion brands around the globe. The extreme growth and visibility of these brands, substantially dictated by conglomerates such as LVMH and the Kering Group, has monopolized and for many come to epitomize the term *luxury*. This is evident within a wealth of marketing literature, which both assumes and establishes the colonisation of the term by the world of global luxury fashion brands.

Sri Lanka does not, as yet, have a significant incidence of these brands. Despite this, the recent influx of communication technologies has led to a stronger knowledge of their significance around the world. During qualitative interviews undertaken within Sri Lanka as part of an exploratory research project, many respondents commented on the apparent lack of luxury fashion within the local market, understood as the absence of these same global luxury fashion brands.

This would suggest that without the physical presence of global luxury fashion brands luxury does not exist within the Sri Lankan market. This paper suggests that despite the innate subjectivity of luxury as a philosophical idea, the sheer scale of the contemporary global luxury fashion industry has created an objective understanding that has garnered dominance through its prevalence and transnationalism, as can be demonstrated in the case of Sri Lanka. Through the comparison of two luxury fashion brands, Louis Vuitton and Lovi Ceylon, this paper considers the context that has created this perceived lack of luxury within Sri Lanka.

Keywords

Luxury, Fashion, Globalisation, Sri Lanka, Brands

Classification

Research Paper

Introduction

'...to know what a society thinks necessary, and what it thinks a luxury, is to know something important about that society.' (Berry, 1994, p.233)

How can we encapsulate the essence of luxury within our globalized, capitalist world? This is the question continually revisited by academics within critical luxury studies and those working within the global luxury industries alike. Clearly, much has been written about the evolving nature of the perception, understanding and experience of luxury throughout history. Indeed, its unfaltering power has been documented and examined, all the way from the politicization of luxury within classical thought, to the contemporary consumption patterns of the global luxury industries. (Berry, 1994, Calefato and Adams, 2014, Berg, 1999, Sekora, 1977) The continual difficulty in encapsulating the essence of luxury lies in the apparent dichotomy between the subjective and objective. Subjectively, luxury exists within the ephemeral moment between human desire and acquisition. In this sense, luxury is democratic, experienced by all in some form, but entirely dependent upon personal, social, cultural and political contexts.¹ On the other hand, luxury exists objectively within the vast and powerful consumer industries that have staked a claim to its very meaning, and thus offer a tangible reality for contemporary luxury to inhabit. The academic debate around luxury often struggles to connect the philosophical meaning of a term such as luxury with its contemporary reality within a capitalist global marketplace. This dichotomy is apparent within the diversity of relevant contemporary literature. Whilst critical luxury studies tends to approach the concept from a subjective standpoint, there is a wealth of marketing and branding literature which assumes an objective understanding based largely on the patterns and characteristics of the luxury industries. (Tungate, 2009, Phillips, 2012, Hoffmann and Coste-Maniere, 2012, Kapferer and Bastian, 2012)

The personal luxury goods sector - including fashion, accessories, leather goods, cosmetics and perfume – amounted to a global spend of €253 billion in revenue in 2015, with further expansion expected in 2016. (D'Arpizio et al., 2015) Luxury fashion is a vast and influential industry increasingly informed and dictated by powerful conglomerate groups such as LVMH and Kering. The term luxury, as utilized by this industry, is grounded within the reality of contemporary markets and consumption patterns that are innately global in nature. As such, brands such as Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Dior and Burberry offer their increasingly global consumer a branded version of luxury that is able to cross geographical and cultural boundaries, and provide a pertinent form of universal conspicuous consumption. In this way the global luxury fashion industry – through the sheer breadth and exposure of its operation -

has staked a strong claim toward an understanding of luxury within contemporary neoliberal society. (Armitage and Roberts, 2016, p.43)

Yet, as it has been argued within critical luxury studies, the luxury industries and the wealth of consumer goods that they offer only ‘...characterize luxury, they are not sufficient in themselves to *define* it.’ (Berry, 1994, p.11) This is largely due to the fact that the global reality of the luxury industries tends to neglect the diversity of local context, offering a one-size-fits-all approach. In reality, and subjectively, luxury fashion is a spectrum that can comfortably encapsulate an infinite array of material forms, from the perfect find in a local charity shop to the most lavish haute couture. In contrast to the global industry of luxury fashion brands, this subjective sense of luxury fashion is intrinsically dependent upon the local context of each individual, community or culture. Although the industry of global luxury fashion brands may gain its objectivity through its global scale, luxury fashion also exists subjectively within the local, and the context of each consumer’s unique circumstance and relationship with luxury.

This is apparent within Sri Lanka: an island nation in the midst of great economic development. (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2015) Sri Lanka has a very limited incidence of global luxury fashion brands within its domestic market. As a result, qualitative research indicated a perceived lack of luxury within the domestic market. This perception testifies to the strength of the objective form of luxury as offered by the global luxury fashion industry, to the point that the physical manifestations of these brands are able to encapsulate the very idea of luxury. However, within the context of economic transformation and expansion, the absence of global luxury brands has created a vacuum for local luxury fashion brands to emerge, actively catering to the domestic consumer and inherently nationalistic in nature (at least, for now). As such, a sense of local luxury fashion necessarily exists in Sri Lanka, as a result of the absence of global luxury fashion brands.

Drawing upon qualitative interviews undertaken in Colombo (Sri Lanka) alongside the examination of two luxury fashion brands, the paper explores this perceived lack of luxury within the domestic market whilst considering the impact of globalization upon an understanding of luxury fashion within recent history. Furthermore, it seeks to highlight the interaction and collaboration of the global and local within the realms of luxury fashion in Sri Lanka, and suggest that it is through this interaction that we are able to look into the future of luxury, both as an industry and an actuality. Like its consumers, luxury fashion must also simultaneously exist within global and local spheres. Through an exploration of the similarities and differences between global megabrand Louis Vuitton and local start-up Lovi Ceylon, this paper seeks to understand the reasoning behind the perceived lack of luxury

within Sri Lanka. Subsequently, the paper argues that the recognition of this lack hinges upon the innate globality (meaning the global reality, relevance and impact) of brands such as Louis Vuitton within an increasingly global society, which enables the industry of global luxury fashion brands to encapsulate the essence of luxury for many twenty-first century consumers around the world.ⁱⁱ

Research Methods and Results

As part of an exploratory study, interviews were undertaken in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Employing a constructivist worldview, qualitative interviews were employed as a means of obtaining and examining the participant's personal understanding and experience of the topic at hand. (Creswell, 2014, p.8-9) Interviewees were selected in order to represent the diversity of the Colombo population, particularly from an economic point of view. Furthermore, participants were selected due to the extent of their first-hand experience of luxury fashion brands. Within the context of this study – due to the scarcity of global luxury fashion brands operating within the domestic Sri Lankan market - this is experienced primarily as a result of possessing the economic means to participate within a global consumer society, access to communication technologies and the ability to travel. Therefore the range of participants included Sri Lankan nationals who have never left the country, the economic elite who regularly travel abroad, and expats currently residing in Sri Lanka.

A striking and recurrent comment made during the interviews was upon the perceived absence of luxury fashion brands within the domestic Sri Lankan market. When asked to name a luxury fashion brand sold within this market many participants could not offer any suggestion, either domestic or international, consequently purporting a lack of luxury fashion within the Sri Lankan market overall. (Gunawardena, 2015, Fonseka and Pereira, 2015, Abyewardana and Chaaminda, 2015) When questioned on why they felt this lack, interviewees crucially commented upon the scarcity of global luxury fashion brands within the domestic market. Furthermore, many participants commented that they would not consider domestic brands, although operating at the high-end of the fashion industry and catering to the economic elite within Sri Lanka, to be 'luxury', particularly in relation to many well-known global luxury fashion brands. One interview participant summed up this perception, stating: 'We don't really have luxury fashion here. You can get clothes for a special occasion, from Odel or somewhere like that. Or you can buy an expensive sari for a function or have something special made by the tailor. But they aren't *luxury* brands. It's not like India or Thailand. Some people pay to have things imported. But we only really have Sri Lankan brands here. (Abyewardana and Chaaminda, 2015)

These responses are particularly interesting within the context of the economic development that has expanded within Sri Lanka since the end of the civil war in 2009. A huge amount of investment, much from mature Asian economies such as China and India, has transformed the experience of everyday life for many, particularly within Colombo. Crucially, the peacetime development and influx of globalization has led to steadily growing levels of wealth, and the subsequent expansion of consumer culture.ⁱⁱⁱ (Oxford Business Group, 2016)

Consequently, there has been a dramatic increase in the discourses of luxury. The term has been attached to an array of new developments and a plethora of consumer goods and experiences. The steady increase of economic wealth, alongside the phenomenal rise in tourism, has also been reflected in the growth of luxury goods and services within the domestic market.

With relevance to fashion, this has included the development of new spaces of consumption, as many historic buildings within Colombo, such as the Dutch Hospital and the Racecourse, have been transformed into high-end shopping arcades. These new spaces have enticed a variety of mid-range Western brands to enter the Sri Lankan market (including Tommy Hilfiger, French Connection, Levis and Nike) catering to the expanding Sri Lankan consumer class. Furthermore, many Western brands have also entered the market through national franchises. Notably, Lancôme recently opened its first outlet within the eponymous department store Odel.^{iv} Similarly, high-end domestic brands (such as Spa Ceylon, Cotton Collection, and the aforementioned Odel) have seen healthy growth within recent history, expanding their retail outlets both within and outside Colombo. The economic growth within Sri Lanka has also seen a revival of the domestic fashion industry, including the expansion of institutions such as Colombo Fashion Week and the AOD Design Campus. As such, a wealth of new designers and brands (such as Rum Punch, Handcrafted Batiks by Salt and Fashion Market) has recently emerged, largely catering to the economic elite.

Despite the rapid and dynamic development of the fashion industry as a whole within Sri Lanka, the presence of global luxury fashion brands within the domestic market remains minimal, perhaps largely as a result of the limited scale of high net worth consumers within said market. This leads us to question the relationship between the actual absence of global luxury fashion brands and the perceived lack of luxury fashion overall within the Sri Lankan market. Furthermore, in light of this perceived lack, how are we to understand or recognise luxury fashion within this apparent vacuum? With growing economic wealth and an expanding culture of consumption, Sri Lanka provides an opportunity to explore new ways of understanding luxury fashion outside of the context of global luxury fashion brands.

The Global appeal of Louis Vuitton

Despite the brand's absence within the Sri Lankan market, Louis Vuitton was often cited during interviews as a quintessential example of luxury fashion. Clearly, Louis Vuitton has a strong yet intangible presence within Sri Lankan consumer culture. The breadth and power of a luxury fashion brand such as Louis Vuitton - to be able to command such a level of desire without a tangible presence – is largely as a result of the pervasive forces of capitalist globalization within our contemporary neoliberal reality. Dana Thomas has suggested that Louis Vuitton, founded by an independent trunk maker in 1854, offers the first example of a luxury brand and a pertinent insight into the creation of the luxury industries. Louis Vuitton was transformed from a namesake into a brand in 1876 when the, now synonymous, monogrammed pattern was first applied to his trunks in order to prevent counterfeiting. Not only did this hallmark make the trunks inimitable, it also created a visual identity for the brand that would become crucial to its growing appeal and power. (Thomas, 2008, p.25) This pattern would become identifiable not only with the brand of Louis Vuitton, but also the class, culture and lifestyle that these products would henceforth allude to. The creation of luxury fashion brands provided a highly effective and easily recognisable form of Veblen's *Conspicuous Consumption*. (Veblen, 2007) This phenomenon crucially led the way for the mass expansion of luxury brands.

Fast-forward 160 years and Louis Vuitton has become a global corporation and a household name, selling a huge array of luxury commodities, from luggage to ready-to-wear, accessories and perfume, in over 50 countries worldwide. Louis Vuitton is valued at \$27.3 billion, and placed 19th in Forbes' ranking of the world's more valuable brands, making it the most valuable luxury brand. (Forbes, 2016) Furthermore, in 1987 Louis Vuitton was merged with Moët Hennessey to form the LVMH group, the world's largest and most powerful luxury conglomerate, controlling 70 subsidiary luxury brands, a sizeable portion of the luxury industries. Thus, Louis Vuitton, independent trunk-maker to the Parisian elite of 1850, has been transformed into an inexorable global conglomerate group of immense power and influence around the world. Though clearly enabled through the creation of a global marketplace, the power of the global media lies at the heart of this transformation and the extreme growth of the luxury industries as a whole within recent history.

The global media, created by a series of imperative technological advances, has been an intrinsic tool in furthering the transnationalism of brands such as Louis Vuitton. Drawing upon Marshall McLuhan's concept of the *global village*, everyone around the world with access to communication technology can now view the same messages and images of consumption simultaneously.^v (McLuhan, 2001) In this way, the semiology of Louis Vuitton

has been able to circumnavigate the world, regardless of geographical, political or cultural boundaries. Access to the global media via communication technologies such as smartphones is steadily growing within Sri Lanka, particularly within urban areas. All of the interview participants had access to the Internet, mostly through personal devices. Through access to the global media, Sri Lankan consumers are able to participate within Appadurai's process of *global imagining*. Consequently, the power of the imagination – enabled by the communication technologies of the global media - transcends local boundaries, creating increasingly global citizens and thus global consumers. (Appadurai, 1996, p.53)

The power of a brand such as Louis Vuitton lies in its innate sense of globality. As more of us participate within a global consumer society, through the many outlets of the global media, these brands and their products offer an understanding and form of luxury that operates within a global sphere. Now available around the world, the logos, design features and branding of Louis Vuitton have contributed toward a universal semiotic language of luxury fashion, and a means by which to establish a sense of place within an increasingly global social hierarchy. (Thomas, 2008, p.41) A Louis Vuitton monogrammed handbag offers an overt manifestation of luxury that is quintessentially global in nature. Through the sheer breadth and visibility of its operation, the global industry of luxury fashion offers an objective and tangible form of luxury that can cross geographical and cultural borders, marketed to a 'Borderless Consumer'. (D'Arpizio et al., 2015) Consequently, a Sri Lankan consumer is now able to indirectly experience, understand and covet the latest Louis Vuitton purchase by a popular instagrammer on the other side of the world, despite no personal experience of the brand and its purported luxuriousness. Both taste and desire are becoming increasingly globalised as a result of the millions of users viewing the same aesthetic aspirations through the same social platforms.

Furthermore, the ubiquitous presence of these brands within our contemporary society means that, for many, they have come to embody an understanding of luxury. (Armitage and Roberts, 2016) Through their innate transnationalism, and within the context of contemporary neoliberalism, global luxury fashion brands offer an indication of luxury as understood by the masses, rather than the individual. If we are to understand, as Berry has, that luxury (or the desire for a particular consumer good) must be agreed societally then this sense of luxury, as marketed by global luxury fashion brands, grows in scope and validity through its consumption within an increasingly global society. (Berry, 1994, p.5) This does not diminish the relevance of a personal (or subjective) interpretation of luxury, but suggests that the dominance of this industry is important not only to an understanding of the discourse around contemporary luxury, but to the experience of luxury in itself. This is true within Sri

Lanka, where the objective claim to luxury by this industry is both understood and proliferated.

Louis Vuitton was frequently cited during interviews as a pertinent example of a luxury fashion brand: “If you go to India they have Louis Vuitton, and Gucci, and... you know, you can buy luxury fashion there - if you can afford it, of course. But you can’t buy luxury here. There aren’t any luxury brands.” (Abyewardana and Chaaminda, 2015) Despite the limited presence of global luxury fashion brands within Sri Lanka, in these instances it was assumed that the meaning of luxury was derived from the codified knowledge of the luxury industries, rather than personal experience. Armitage and Roberts, within their exploration of how we know luxury, state that our contemporary appreciation of luxury is increasingly informed by ‘...the rise to dominance of markets in the neoliberal era.’ (Armitage and Roberts, 2016, p.42) As such, the perceived absence of luxury fashion within Sri Lanka highlights the lack of global luxury fashion brands within the domestic market, and the sheer might of brands such as Louis Vuitton to command and even determine the explicit meaning of the term. It also reveals the importance of an objective, tangible form of luxury within an increasingly transnational consumer culture. The recognition of a lack of luxury within Sri Lanka speaks of the increasingly global nature of its citizens, who through increased mobility or the many screens of contemporary communication technologies are able to partake within a global consumer community, and absorb its dominant understanding of luxury in one of its most visible, universal forms: global luxury fashion.

This perceived lack certainly speaks to an often-cited quality of luxury: inaccessibility. In contrast to critics of the luxury industries, who have claimed that the sheer ubiquity of brands such as Louis Vuitton necessarily negates their sense of luxury, the relative scarcity of global luxury fashion brands within the Sri Lankan market means that their sense of exclusivity is not only retained but also compounded. (Thomas, 2008) This inaccessibility revolves not only around the limited physical presence of global luxury fashion brands within the domestic market, but the economic barriers to access these products internationally. Drawing upon Bauman’s notion of the winners and losers of globalization - the globally mobile and the locally tied - the appeal and power of the industry of global luxury fashion brands within Sri Lanka is drawn from its inaccessibility to the masses, or those without the economic means to access these brands within other localities. (Bauman, 1998) As such, the desire for Louis Vuitton is compounded by its relative scarcity within the domestic Sri Lankan market.

The concept of desire provides a central reference point within Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalysis. He states that ‘Desire is “the desire for something else” since it is impossible

to desire what one already has...’ (Lacan, 1977, p.167) As such, within the instance of luxury fashion in Sri Lanka, the inaccessibility or absence of global luxury fashion brands creates greater desire, and therefore even more potent symbols of conspicuous consumption. Particular branded goods have become an indisputable sign of wealth due to the simple fact that they must have been bought abroad, or imported at great cost to the owner. Appadurai notes that ‘Like breathing, consumption is a self-effacing habit that becomes noticeable only when contextually ostentatious.’ (Appadurai, 1996, p.67) A Louis Vuitton handbag exists ostentatiously within Sri Lankan consumer culture as a result of its relative scarcity. The potency of these status symbols, such as the Louis Vuitton brand, is also apparent in the wealth of counterfeit or thinly veiled replicas available within the Sri Lankan market, which seek to draw upon the desire both for this brand and the lifestyle that they allude to.

In sum, despite the absence of Louis Vuitton within the domestic market, the brand is recognised, understood and coveted by Sri Lankan consumers, many of which have no personal experience of the luxury commodities they provide. The inaccessibility of Louis Vuitton, due to its scarcity, also contributes significantly towards its sense of luxuriousness to a Sri Lankan consumer. As such, Louis Vuitton exists within Sri Lanka as an intangible conception of luxury, feverishly desired as a result of its unobtainability. However, this does not signify an absolute lack of luxury fashion in Sri Lanka. In seeming contrast, Lovi Ceylon offers a tangible realisation/manifestation of luxury within Sri Lanka, and a luxury fashion brand that is essentially grounded within the reality of locality.



Figure 1: Counterfeit Louis Vuitton handbags sold in a store in Majestic City, a shopping mall in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Copyright: author's own.

The Local Appeal of Lovi Ceylon

Although the objective understanding of luxury, as created by the industry of global luxury fashion brands, has had a significant impact upon the philosophical understanding of luxury within Sri Lanka as a whole, alternatives are beginning to emerge. To recognise these alternatives we must look to the local. Within the context of post-war economic development, a variety of national Sri Lankan luxury fashion brands have emerged, attempting to incorporate local taste with global ambition. (Fernando, 2015, MacLeod, 2015) These brands are informed by global luxury fashion brands such as Louis Vuitton, yet exist within a local sphere dictated by the context of the Sri Lankan consumer. Lovi launched their range of high-end sarongs in 2016 during Colombo Fashion Week. Brand creator and CEO Asanka de Mel is seeking to reinvent the local, and very traditional, garment of the sarong in order to create something appropriate and exciting for the contemporary Sri Lankan consumer. De Mel states that ‘The post-war period is ushering in a new identity... working out the balance between local and global identity.’ (De Mel, 2016) Lovi seeks to cater to these new Sri Lankan consumers who exist within both a local and global sphere.

By the very nature of their offering, Lovi Sarong has a strong nationalistic appeal. The sarong is of inherent cultural importance within Sri Lanka, as a garment that has been hand-woven and worn for centuries. (Pararajasingham, 2006) Furthermore, the sarong draws upon a cultural narrative of crucial importance to luxury and indeed the luxury industries: handicraft. The ancient practise of handloom weaving is deeply engrained into Sri Lankan culture, with reference to the craft and its weavers within the Mahavamsa - a sacred Buddhist text charting the political and social history of Sri Lanka as an ancient civilisation. (Coomaraswamy, 2003, p.2) The contemporary handloom industry is in many ways a nationalistic cause, particularly within the context of post-colonialism. It is noted that in a speech given in 1966, the infamous Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake stated that “It is an act of patriotism to wear local textiles.” (Pararajasingham, 2006, p.102) In this way, the sarong has become ingrained into Sri Lankan cultural heritage not only as a historical garment but also for the long narrative of handloom weaving that it represents.

Lovi seeks to offer luxury through the refinement and reinvention of this traditional and nationalistic garment. Using Sri Lankan handlooms, the sarong is updated for modern lifestyles including a cotton lining, pockets (which are in fact patent pending) and a belt. (De Mel, 2016) Although historically largely functional, Lovi seeks to transform the sarong into a fashion statement, offering collections such as the tuxedo collection and the ‘little black sarong’. (Wijedasa, 2016) A self-stated luxury brand, sarongs are priced from 4,300 to 9,500 Sri Lankan rupees, placing the brand within the premium sector and above many well-known

local competitors. From this perspective, it would seem that Lovi is marketed toward Sri Lanka's economic elite (the Colombo 07 set, known for their exclusive postcode) and thus seeking to create an aspirational brand. With global ambitions, Lovi's core customer base is currently within Sri Lanka, but with international shipping and a strong social media presence, De Mel notes that '...almost all brands are global because the fans that sustain them are all over [the world], including Lovi. (De Mel, 2016)

Despite the local context of Lovi, through offering a premium product both Louis Vuitton and Lovi share a common ideology, mutual characteristics, and many of the intrinsic qualities that form the core of the luxury industries as a whole. Through identifying and employing the key characteristics of a luxury fashion brand such as Louis Vuitton, Lovi stakes its own claim to luxury. In its most prevalent form the term luxury is used economically, as a means of establishing a premium product with a consequent high price tag, relative to the particular category of consumer good. (Kapferer and Bastian, 2012) As such, the notion of economic-exclusivity forms the foundations of the luxury industries, regardless of the validity of the narrative used to justify a high price point, such as craftsmanship, brand integrity, scarcity and timelessness.^{vi} Consequently, Lovi strives for luxury status through a premium price-point within the Sri Lankan sarong market, therefore creating economic exclusivity. Furthermore, intrinsically linked to the notion of economic-exclusivity is the practice of conspicuous consumption: establishing social standing through the overt consumption of particular (and usually expensive) products or experiences. The conspicuous consumption of particular luxury fashion goods and brands has become a clear indicator of luxury status within contemporary society. (Chadha and Husband, 2006) As such, a Lovi sarong offers an object of conspicuous consumption for the Sri Lankan consumer as a result of its economic-exclusivity, branding, distinguishing characteristics (such as the pockets) and recognisable design qualities.

Furthermore, Lovi stakes a claim to luxury status through its production processes and narrative. As aforementioned, the notion of handicraft and cultural heritage – in this instance through the nationalistic connotations of both the sarong and handloom weaving – is a common facet of luxury brands. Indeed, Louis Vuitton has sought to market its products, particularly its leather goods, around such ideas of craftsmanship and heritage.^{vii} Crucially though, Lovi aims for luxury status through the *refinement* of an everyday garment. Sombart understood luxury, particularly within the context of capitalism, as being either quantitative (a surplus of goods) or qualitative (the refinement of goods or increased quality). Qualitative refinement describes '...any treatment of a product, over and above that which is needed to make it ordinarily useful.' (Sombart, 1967, p.59) In this sense, Lovi has created luxury through the refinement of the sarong, including distinctive design features and high quality

materials. (De Mel, 2016) Furthermore, Lovi has sought to improve the performance of the sarong, adding pockets, a belt and a lining, offering luxury through the promise of convenience for its consumers. Clearly, Lovi has all the markings of a luxury brand. Consequently, why is it that, despite the ambition of brands such as Lovi, there remains a perceived lack of luxury fashion within the Sri Lankan market?



Figure 2: Lovi Ceylon's Tuxedo Collection featuring brand ambassador Sri Lankan model Adrian de Silva. Copyright Lovi Ceylon.

Conclusion

Clearly, an understanding of luxury fashion in Sri Lanka is as multifaceted and nuanced as the notion of luxury in itself. This complexity reflects the changing lifestyles of consumers in Sri Lanka under the growing influence of capitalist globalization, particularly since the end of the civil war. Crucially, the perceived lack of luxury fashion within Sri Lanka is representative of a growing sense of globality, as more consumers participate within a global consumer sphere. The complexity of contemporary globalization has meant that, as consumers, we are now able to appreciate and covet luxury in an array of forms, regardless of the limitations of personal, cultural or geographical context. Louis Vuitton and Lovi offer a dynamic insight into the perception of luxury fashion within Sri Lanka. The global appeal of Louis Vuitton offers an objective sense of luxury that exists within Sri Lanka as an intangible presence, gaining its sense of luxuriousness through its scarcity. In contrast, Lovi offers a subjective sense of luxury founded upon locality, through the refinement and reinvention of a national garment.

As we have seen, there are a plethora of similarities between Louis Vuitton and Lovi, many of which are seemingly intrinsic to the claim made by the luxury industries over the explicit meaning of luxury as a philosophical concept. (Armitage and Roberts, 2016) Both case studies stake a claim to luxury status in the same way: through economic exclusivity, conspicuous consumption, refinement, handicraft and heritage. As such, both examples of luxury fashion within Sri Lanka do not exist within isolation but are essentially related through their common offering of a luxury product, within a world increasingly connected through the *culture-ideology of consumerism*. (Sklair, 2002) However, the crucial difference between Louis Vuitton and Lovi, and hence the lack of luxury fashion perceived by Sri Lankan consumers within the domestic market, lies within each brand's scale of globality, dependent on the breadth of their desirability around the world. Although Lovi is certainly able to offer a luxury product to the Sri Lankan consumer (if not the global consumer), it does not yet have the global exposure and appeal to symbolize the idea of luxury in the way that Louis Vuitton has. The power of the luxury industries, and particularly the pervasive world of global luxury fashion brands, lies within its transnationalism and its mass appeal to a continually expanding global culture; thus creating a sense of desire that is widely experienced and appreciated, as has been seen in Sri Lanka.

Accordingly, although it should not be presumed that the industry of global luxury fashion brands is able to encapsulate the very essence of luxury fashion, the importance of its mass appeal toward a shared understanding of luxury should not be underestimated within critical luxury studies either. Despite the fundamentally subjective nature of luxury - as

something that is defined and experienced on an individual level – it is critical to recognise the importance of a collective understanding, particularly within the context of growing global connectivity. The industry of global luxury fashion brands provides a tangible form of luxury that can be desired and experienced collectively. Despite the consumerist nature of this endeavour, and the objectivity of luxury within this context, it would be short sighted to disregard the importance of mass-appeal within the pursuit of an understanding of contemporary luxury.

The dominance of the global industry of luxury brands and its astute sense of conspicuous consumption draws upon one of luxury's most constant and prolific qualities: its political power. Within an increasingly global society brands such as Louis Vuitton are able to create a global social-hierarchy through the economic exclusivity of its products. Within the context of Sri Lanka, this sense of conspicuous consumption is made more pertinent as a result of the scarcity of global luxury fashion brands, and the economic barriers that consequently block many Sri Lankan consumers from participating within this hierarchy. In this way, despite the fact that the industry of global luxury fashion brands may only inform its consumers how to *know* luxury, rather than *know how*, due to its political power within a globalised society Louis Vuitton has become embedded into the socio-cultural context of the locality of Sri Lanka. (Armitage and Roberts, 2016, p.35) In contrast, though Lovi may provide an object of conspicuous consumption with a local context, it does not yet possess the level of globality to dictate social hierarchy within an increasingly global consumer society.

Yet, the transnationalism of the industry of global luxury fashion brands, and its subsequent dominance over the very idea of luxury, does not come without its difficulties. Through offering an objective form of luxury identifiable and appropriate for the increasingly global masses, the nuance and diversity of local context is necessarily neglected. In the aftermath of the mass-expansion of this industry into fast-developing Asian economies such as China and India, the difficulty (and perhaps impossibility) of adapting these global brands in order to be contextually appropriate within each diverse locality has led to slowing sales. Critics within the luxury industries have commented negatively upon the sheer speed and scale that brands such as Louis Vuitton have expanded around the world, without appropriate consideration for cultural context. (Shukla, 2015, Shukla et al., 2015) Furthermore, the recent expansion of domestic luxury brands within these localities has crowded the market, as the industry of global luxury brands seeks to compete with local competitors who are able to offer a more nuanced, site-specific sense of luxury, much like Lovi. (Som and Das, 2012) As the presence of global luxury fashion brands continues to expand around the world, and ownership becomes more achievable perhaps their luxury status is beginning to fade as they

slip into the realms of accessibility. In these instances we see the struggle of global luxury fashion brands to remain relevant despite their deep-seated sense of globality.

With time, it seems likely that the global luxury fashion brands such as Louis Vuitton will move into the Sri Lankan market. The Sri Lankan government has made strategic plans in order to remove or reduce the economic barriers currently deterring the global luxury industries from expanding into the domestic market. Clearly, they are confident that the healthy economic growth within Sri Lanka will continue to flourish, crucially to be able to financially support the entry of such brands. Indeed, Renaud Dutreil (chairman of the LVMH group) is a partner within the Krrish Square development in Colombo, a luxury residential and commercial complex. (Bastians, 2013) Clearly Dutreil himself is confident in Sri Lanka's continued, future economic prosperity. It goes without saying that luxury, and the industry of global luxury brands, will always follow economic growth. As the economic pendulum continues to swing from West to East, the aspirations of many Sri Lankan consumers, alongside the global growth of Lovi, may well be within reach.

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ⁱ Patrizia Calefato comments upon the infinite manifestations of contemporary luxury as a result of varying quality of life around the globe, noting that in its most extreme form, ‘...life itself is rare; life itself is a luxury.’ (Calefato & Adams, 2014, p.23)

ⁱⁱ Believed to have been coined by economist Daniel Yergin, the term *globality* is used to refer to the end state of globalization – a hyper-connected reality in which the processes of globalization have become an unavoidable condition. This is particularly pertinent within the context of contemporary capitalist globalization, and the huge expansion of the global marketplace. However, within this paper, the term *globality* is used not only to describe the end-state of the economic processes of globalization, but also the socio-cultural. As such, alongside the expansion of the global marketplace, globality is used to describe increased participation within a global society.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Oxford Business Group state that the GDP of Sri Lanka grew at a rate of over 6% per annum to reach \$82.2 billion in 2015. They attribute this growth to the expansion of consumption, with a continued decline in exports as a percentage of the GDP.

^{iv} Within his short story, *Agnes of God*, celebrated Sri Lankan author Ashok Ferrey makes a reference to how people of a certain social standing would make sure to be ‘seen’ in Colombo’s most luxurious department store Odel, usually accompanied by one of two nannies. A national brand and overt status symbol, Odel is now being challenged by a variety of Western brands that have entered the market, but still holds its prestige as the first department store within both Colombo and Sri Lanka as a whole.

^v The term ‘Global Village’ has become associated with Marshall McLuhan, and in particular his works *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964), in which McLuhan describes how the immediacy of electronic information has created an instantaneously connected globe.

^{vi} Dana Thomas laments the democratization of the luxury industries as a result of growing accessibility and falling quality within her book *Deluxe: How Luxury Lost its Luster*. Thomas claims that the expansion of global luxury brands has stripped them of the qualities with which they claimed their luxury status.

^{vii} Interestingly, in 2010 the British Advertising Standards Authority banned a Louis Vuitton advertising campaign that pictured craftsmen making their products, accompanied by copy reading “What secret little gestures do our craftsmen discreetly pass on?” The adverts were banned on the premise that they would lead consumers to interpret that Louis Vuitton products, and particularly their leather-goods, were entirely made by hand without sufficient evidence of this being the case.