

Cultural Branding and Feminist Identity in Chanel

Zihan Yin

Faculty of Arts, Law and Social Sciences, University of Bristol, Bristol, BS8 1JU, UK

ABSTRACT

This article examines how feminism is strategically mobilised as a branding resource in the luxury market, using Chanel as a case study. Grounded in post-feminist theory and consumer culture research, the study analyses how feminist discourse is translated into brand aesthetics, self-gift consumption narratives, and symbolic capital. Through a qualitative cultural analysis of visual codes, brand ambassadors, consumer-generated content, and corporate responsibility communication, the article identifies three mechanisms: the construction of wearable feminist style, the alignment of empowerment with self-reward and authenticity myths, and the management of ethical legitimacy amid luxury exclusivity. The findings demonstrate that while feminist branding enhances perceived authenticity and achievement status, it simultaneously reinforces class-based segmentation. The article contributes to branding and consumer culture literature by revealing the tensions between empowerment discourse and exclusionary luxury strategies.

KEYWORDS

Luxury brands; Feminist branding; Consumer culture; Symbolic value; Self-gift; Brand authenticity; Co-creation

1. INTRODUCTION

With the rise of her economy and social media, more and more luxury brands take the initiative to borrow feminist words: empowerment and self-realisation as high-frequency words in advertising and brand stories [11]. When these seemingly progressive slogans are tied to high prices, feminism may also be treated as a consumable emotion and style, rather than a social activity that truly points to structural inequality. As a French luxury brand, Chanel has always been famous for its brand narrative of "liberating women's bodies", simple and neutral tailoring, and visual symbols such as black and white tones, pearls and camellies. Nowadays, brands have packaged brands into life templates for elite women through global brand ambassadors, social media and public welfare projects, and continue to produce "Chanel-style femininity" globally.

This article takes Chanel as a case and focusses on how luxury brands talk about the problem of feminism. Focus on the detailed analysis from three levels. (1) How does Chanel make feminism a style through visual code, brand ambassador and consumer practice? Build a set of feminist aesthetics that can be worn and imitated. (2) Analyse the combination of self-gift and feminism into symbolic capital, and complete the customer group screening and class separation in the narrative of self-reward. (3) Explain the ethical and strategic tension of brand feminism in terms of empowering discourse and class exclusion, authenticity, limited characterisation, etc. This article discusses feminism and cultural strategies, and provides inspiration for luxury brands to realise more responsible and reflective communication practises when applying feminist issues.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Post-feminism and Brandised Feminism

It pointed out that the concept of post-feminist culture is that the image of women in the media is often presented in the manner of empowerment, self-confidence and self-being [11]. But this kind of empowerment is highly individualised. Structural issues are weakened, and more focus is on encouraging women to prove themselves good enough through consumption, appearance management and career success. Shift political issues to lifestyle issues. On this basis, put forward the concept of branded empowerment [2]. She believes that words such as truth, self-love and empowerment are frequently used in social media and advertising. Feminism has become a saleable emotion and image. Brands also use this to shape the image of friendly women while avoiding discussions on deep structural issues.

further pointed out the criticism of "femwashing", pointing out that when brands use feminist discourse to win moral legitimacy for themselves, but continue the unequal structure in the supply chain or target customer group, such empowerment is just a marketing strategy [20].

2.2. The Symbolic Capital and Authenticity of Luxury Brands

emphasises the role of consumption behaviour in social class distinction from the perspective of capital and taste [4]. Cultural capital and economic capital are the key in the consumption of luxury goods. Only with the corresponding aesthetic ability and cultural knowledge can individuals correctly and moderately enjoy the goods with complex symbolic meaning. As a result, luxury brands have become an important resource for a few people to classify. pointed out that what luxury brands really sell is not functionality, but the symbolic meaning of identity, status and lifestyle [12]. High prices are only reasonable when the symbolic value far exceeds the use value. Therefore, luxury brands must continue to build a set of cultural narratives related to scarcity, craftsmanship, etc.

In terms of brand and moral legitimacy, discussed how luxury brands can acquire a positive image through moral posturing: when brands speak out on social responsibility, public welfare or positive rights issues, However, when creating exclusivity in practice, it is easy to be questioned as "value whitewashing" [13]. This provides an important reference for understanding the ethical risks that luxury brands may face when using feminist discourse.

analysed the obsession with authenticity in contemporary society from a broader cultural criticism perspective [16]. When "real" itself becomes a scarce resource that can be chased and shown off, "more real" brands and lifestyles become new status symbols. Luxury brands build a "myth of authenticity" by emphasising history, craft, tradition and values; when this myth is bound to high price and scarcity, the "real" itself is transformed into symbolic capital.

The sustainable development report and social responsibility report released by enterprises represents how luxury brands continue to emphasise their support for women and girls and their commitment to diversity and equality in official documents [5, 6]. These texts not only provide important materials for brand ethics narrative, but also reflect how luxury brands can integrate gender issues into corporate image management at the institutional level.

2.3. Brand Identity, Cultural Code and Working Consumer

Brands build meaning through visual and material symbols. The concept of cultural code indicates that the brand consists of a set of visual, material and narrative elements These codes are understood and displayed through diverse dissemination [19].

The brand personality model is a classic framework in brand research. He divides brand personality into sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, ruggedness and other dimensions. Many luxury

brands shape themselves as symbols of a specific personality and lifestyle by emphasising "exquisite", "mature" and "elegance" and other characteristics. further discussed how specific visual elements can carry these personality traits, and form a set of easy-to-recognise and cultural brand language through details such as colour, material and shape [3].

In terms of the formation of brand identity, Emphasise that brands are no longer defined unilaterally by enterprises, but are the result of collaborative construction between brands, influencers and consumers [18]. Social media allows consumers to participate in the shaping of brand image through content production.

pointed out the concept of "working consumer" emphasises that consumers are not simply "audiences" who passively accept brand information, but contribute a lot of emotional and cultural labour in participation and interaction [7]. By analysing the content spontaneously created by users, they pointed out that this kind of labour is often unpaid, but it brings great added value to the brand.

The brand updates its brand temperament through cooperation with brand ambassadors such as stars and idols, and borrows their personal image and fan base. This study shows that brand ambassadors are not only communication channels, but also important carriers of brand personality and cultural significance [17].

2.4. Self-gift and Feminist Consumption Practises

Was the first to systematically discuss the concept of "self-gift". Individuals celebrate their achievements, regulate their emotions or confirm that "I deserve to be treated well" by buying gifts for themselves [15]. The experimental research of further found that under the motivation of "rewarding themselves", female consumers, especially those who are more likely to make impulsive purchases in highly involved in product categories. Research shows that when the product is positioned as a "reward for yourself", consumers will associate their purchasing behaviour with personal efforts and achievement needs, thus improving the legitimacy of purchasing [14].

explores the role of luxury goods in self-gift situations from the perspective of status symbols [9]. Some brands are not just "expensive gifts", but marks of achievement status - they are used to prove the success of individuals in career, income or self-management. Unlike the traditional status based on origin, this achievement-based status emphasises the qualification "gained" through personal efforts.

2.5. Cross-section and Characterisation of Feminism

proposed the concept of intersectionality, pointing out that if oppression is explained only from a single perspective of gender or race, it will often make many people at the intersection of oppression invisible [8]. Cross-section has therefore become a very important theoretical tool in gender research. In terms of culture and media research, discussed how mainstream culture builds the image of "ideal women", which is often biased towards middle-aged, white women who meet mainstream body and aesthetic standards [10].

Combining the cross-cutting perspective of with the characterisation analysis of , it can be seen that if feminism only praises the image of a few elite women at the symbolic level, it is easy to further deepen the differences in race, class and body [8, 10]. For any brand or institution that claims to "support women", who is seen, who is represented, and who is excluded is the key indicator of assessing whether their feminist practises are truly inclusive.

3. DISCUSSION AND APPLICATION

3.1. Feminism Makes the Style

Chanel's feminism is a "wearable and imitable feminist cultural coding system" that is jointly performed by multiple subjects. A brand consists of slogans and advertisements, and also requires cultural codes to construct visual and material meanings [19]. According to the brand personality model proposed, Chanel chose sophistication [1]. Use black and white tones, pearls and camelia, double c logo and these elements as cultural code [3]. These elements make up a calm and elegant femininity. It is different from the gorgeous and cumbersome female image presented by traditional female luxury brands. Chanel's cultural codes shape the brand's unique mature and elegant temperament.

Chanel's cultural code changes from abstract description to visual style through advertising, social media and other ways. Chanel cooperates with consumers and influencers to participate in the construction of brand identity [18]. Chanel has set up brand ambassadors represented by women in film and art to present and enrich Chanel's female portraits with their unique femininity. For example, through K-pop idols like Jennie Kim to attract consumers in the new era [17]. With the help of brand ambassadors, we constantly enrich and update the imagination of Chanel-style women.

put forward the concept of working consumer, emphasising the added value created for the brand by consumers through free emotional and cultural labour, such as wearing and sharing, unboxing videos, etc [7]. In Chanel's online community, many economically independent women will choose "the first Chanel bag" and "gifts for their promotion" to share their stories and brand products online. In this way, Chanel's feminism is constantly shaped in reality. The brand narrative of "Elegance is Power" has also been converted into stories in the daily life of consumers.

Chanel has repeatedly emphasised its long-term financial commitment to Fondation CHANEL in its annual financial results and social responsibility report, and wrote "support for women and girls" in the key sustainable development goals. These projects reflect Chanel's support and attention to empowering women, adding a moral and social latitude to the brand's feminist narrative [5, 6].

In general, Chanel's feminism is not written by a single subject, but is constantly co-created and produced through cultural strategies among visual code, working consumers, female influencers and social projects.

3.2. Feminism as a Luxury Brand Symbolises Capital

3.2.1. Feminist Consumption Practice Under The Logic of Self-Reward

Self-gift is not simply buying something for yourself, but self-communication with a sense of ritual. For example, after you achieve a certain goal, you can confirm the subjective feeling of "I did it" by buying gifts for yourself. User-generated stories on social media, buying Chanel products for yourself as a reward for yourself [15]. These narratives are the ritual moments when consumers are related to Chanel. On the surface, it is just a sharing of some experience, but there are implicit norms behind it. Only when women work hard and have strength enough will they be qualified to reward themselves with Chanel. The experimental research of further found that women are more likely to have impulsive self-gifting behaviours in highly involved product categories under the motivation of "rewarding themselves". The feminist speech shown by Chanel is packaged as the practice of women having the ability to be self-master [14]. From the perspective of brand strategy, the combination of "self-gift + feminism" not only meets the identity needs of high-income women, but Chanel not only symbolises wealth, but also the achievement status it contains. Moreover, only women with certain economic strength and cultural capital will reward themselves according to such narrative logic [9]. In an imperceptible way, Chanel completed the screening of the customer group.

3.2.2. Authenticity Myth and Symbolic Justification

The truly symbolic pricing of luxury brands lies in their cultural significance and social distinction. When the symbolic value is higher than the use value, the high price is only reasonable when the brand is given a strong enough identity and cultural connotation [12]. The obsession with authenticity in contemporary society has itself constituted a status game. Pursuing more authentic brands and lifestyles has become a symbolic strategy to distinguish the masses [16]. pointed out that brands often commercialise truth, empowerment and other discourses, and package feminism as emotional resources that can be consumed [2]. On the one hand, Chanel briefly describes the history of the brand and the tradition of high-end customisation, which is in line with the logic of authenticity construction. On the other hand, superimposed feminist narratives that are loyal to themselves link the true Chanel spirit with high-priced consumption. This myth of authenticity also has a strong exclusivity, and only a few women with sufficient economic and cultural capital have the power to participate in Chanel's "be yourself" game.

3.3. Ethical and Strategic Tension of Feminist Luxury Brands

3.3.1. Empowerment Discourse and Class Exclusion

The core of luxury is to become an exclusive symbolic resource for a few people through a sense of distance from mass consumption [12]. Being able to understand and consume specific luxury goods is itself the embodiment of the superposition of economic capital and cultural capital, and luxury consumption has thus become one of the mechanisms for class distinction [4] Under such a structure, the purchase of luxury goods has become a class problem closely related to social inequality.

Therefore, Chanel's words on women's empowerment obviously carry the premise of class. In fact, only women with high economic and cultural capital can transform such an empowering narrative into concrete consumption practises, which the brand promotes in communication. Independent stories that seem to be acceptable to all women have become privileges for high-end customers because of the restrictions of price and channels. When brands actively speak out on moral and political issues, but reinforce inequality or exclusion in practical strategies, it is easy to fall into the risk of moral posturing or value whitewashing [13]. While Chanel provides real psychological resources for high-end women, it invisibly bundles the question of who is qualified to be empowered with the class threshold of luxury goods themselves, forming an ethical tension that cannot be ignored.

3.3.2. Characterisation of Limitations and Intersectional Deficiencies

From an intersectional perspective, the mainstream feminist discourse often assumes an abstract female subject, thus ignoring the problems of differences in race, class, figure, etc [8]. In Chanel's feminism, this abstract subject is usually described as an elite woman and a figure that conforms to mainstream aesthetics. And other female groups are almost invisible in narrative and visual. Although Chanel has introduced more races and styles in terms of spokespersons and collaborators in recent years, the "Chanel woman" in the mainstream narrative still focusses on elite women with strong aesthetic and cultural capital [10]. Most racist women and working-class women, as well as women who do not meet the mainstream body standards, are mostly placed in public welfare projects or marginal narratives. They are not regular characters in the main vision of the brand.

In terms of feminism, Chanel talks about the independence of all women on the surface, but in practice, it constantly strengthens a specific class and figure to be represented and praised, thus deepening inequality in class, figure and other aspects at the symbolic level.

3.3.3. Commercialisation, authenticity risk and women's rights whitewashing

When feminism enters the brand context, it is often treated as a consumable feeling. Emotional slogans such as empowerment, freedom and being yourself are widely used, but rarely touch on structural inequality [2]. Post-feminist culture often individualises gender issues and encourages

women to become successful women through consumption and other self-optimisation methods [11]. In this situation, luxury brands behave like women's rights whitewashing [20]. While holding high the banner of empowerment, use women's empowerment to add moral aura to the exclusive business model.

Chanel is in such a double risk. On the one hand, through the history, craft and public welfare projects of the founder of Chanel, we will build a brand image that truly cares about women. On the other hand, its high price, scarcity and elite aesthetics make feminism a symbolic capital with exquisite packaging. As pointed out, when authenticity becomes a commodity of status, the more sincere the attitude of women's rights seems, the more likely it is to be a means of separation. [16] Once consumers find that it is not easy to say and do it. Then the female narrative that once added points may counterattack the credibility and legitimacy of the brand.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the above analysis, Chanel's "feminism" is more of a carefully designed style system. From black and white tones, pearls and camellias and other cultural codes, to the stories produced by brand ambassadors and working consumers, to the words in public welfare projects and corporate reports, they all weave a feminist imagination that seems to be "elegance is power". However, when the self-gift narrative is tied with the myth of achievement status and authenticity, feminism is also transformed into a scarce symbolic capital, which is only open to a few elite women with sufficient economic and cultural capital.

This extravagant feminist makes empowering discourse entangled with the risk of class exclusion, limited representation and the whitewashing of women's rights. The represented and praised "Chanel woman" is highly idealised, and many women in the position of cross-oppression are still excluded from the main narrative. In the future, if luxury brands want to move towards more responsible practises on feminist issues, they not only need to expand diversified and cross-cutting characteristics at the communication level, but also need to face structural inequality in pricing logic, and transform the support for women from a consumable emotional slogan to a testable institutional commitment.

REFERENCES

- [1] Aaker, J.L. (1997) Dimensions of brand personality. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34(3), pp.347–356.
- [2] Banet-Weiser, S. (2018) *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- [3] Bott, D. (2007) *Chanel: Collections and Creations*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- [4] Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [5] Chanel Limited (2023) Chanel Limited financial results for the year ended 31 December 2022. London: Chanel Limited. Available at: <https://www.chanel.com/puls-img/1730292703537-10202336657438pressrelease2022resultseingfinaleapdf.pdf>. Accessed: 2 December 2025.
- [6] Chanel Limited (2025) Chanel Limited financial results for the year ended 31 December 2024. London: Chanel Limited. Available at: <https://www.chanel.com/puls-img/1747810519727-20250520fy24resultspressreleasefinalwwpdf.pdf>. Accessed: 7 December 2025.
- [7] Cova, B. and Dalli, D. (2009) Working consumers: The next step in marketing theory? *Marketing Theory*, 9(3), pp.315–339.
- [8] Crenshaw, K. (1989) Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), pp.139–167.
- [9] Desmichel, P., et al (2020) What if diamonds did not last forever? Signaling status achievement through ephemeral versus iconic luxury goods. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Volume 158, May 2020, Pages 49-65.

- [10] Driscoll, C. (2010) 'Chanel: The order of things', *Fashion Theory*, 14(2), pp. 135–158.
- [11] Gill, R. (2007) Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898>. Accessed date: 21 November 2025.
- [12] Kapferer, J. N. and Bastien, V. (2012) *The Luxury Strategy: Break the Rules of Marketing to Build Luxury Brands*. 2nd ed. London: Kogan Page.
- [13] Kapferer, J. N. and Michaut-Denizeau, A. (2014) Is luxury compatible with sustainability? Luxury consumers' viewpoint. *Journal of Brand Management*, 21(1), pp. 1–22.
- [14] Kemp, E. (2016) Female Self-Gift Buying Behaviour: An Exploratory Study of Impulse Buying and Product Involvement, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 30, pp. 32–40.
- [15] Mick, D.G. & DeMoss, M. (1990) Self-Gifts: Phenomenological Insights from Four Contexts, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17(3), pp. 322–332.
- [16] Potter, A. (2010) *The Authenticity Hoax: How We Get Lost Finding Ourselves*. New York: HarperCollins.
- [17] Salsabilla, Z.B. and Salya, A. (2023) The influence of K-Pop idols as brand ambassadors on Chanel's purchase intention: Case study: Jennie Kim as the face of Chanel, *Jurnal Ekuisci*, 1(2), pp. 106–116.
- [18] Sarasvuo, S., Rindell, A. and Kovalchuk, M. (2022) Toward a conceptual understanding of co-creation in branding. *Journal of Business Research*, 139, pp. 543–563.
- [19] Schroeder, J.E. (2009) The cultural codes of branding. *Marketing Theory*, 9(1), pp. 123–126
- [20] Sobande, F. (2020) Woke-washing: "Intersectional" femvertising and branding "woke" bravery, *European Journal of Marketing*, 54(11), pp. 2723–2745. doi:10.1108/EJM-02-2019-0134.