

The Symbolic Politics of Luxury Brands in Film and Television: The Strategic Logic of Cultural Capital Competition

Rui Tao

*Film Academy, Shanghai University, Shanghai, China
ruirachel0827@shu.edu.cn*

Abstract. Against the backdrop of accelerated aesthetic consumption in the short-video era, film and television—often regarded as “slow media”—have re-emerged as strategic arenas where luxury brands contest cultural discourse power. This paper takes Dior and the Apple TV+ series *The New Look* as a case study, drawing on Bourdieu’s theories of cultural and symbolic capital, Edelman’s concept of symbolic politics, and recent scholarship on cultural branding to explore how luxury brands leverage audiovisual narratives to construct identity myths and consolidate cultural authority. Employing qualitative case analysis of series content, character portrayals, and audience reception on both Chinese and international platforms, the study demonstrates that luxury brands are moving beyond surface-level visual exposure toward active participation in narrative production. Specifically, the findings show three key mechanisms: Dior’s construction of a morally charged brand identity; its symbolic positioning in contrast to Chanel; and the overlap between premium streaming audiences and luxury consumers, which reinforces brand identification. These strategies enhance Dior’s cultural legitimacy and symbolic capital, but they also generate debates around historical authenticity and the instrumentalization of culture. The analysis highlights both the potential and the constraints of film and television as cultural battlegrounds for luxury brands seeking symbolic power.

Keywords: symbolic politics, cultural capital, luxury brands, audiovisual narrative, Dior

1. Introduction

In the contemporary cultural communication field, luxury brands are becoming increasingly involved in the film and television industry. This phenomenon goes far beyond mere product placement or brand exposure; it constitutes a systemic intervention in the production of cultural meaning. In addition to LVMH’s series *The New Look*, Gucci has explored branded storytelling in art cinema through its short film series *GucciFest*, while Prada has collaborated with renowned directors to create artistic commercials and fashion films. Collectively, these practices demonstrate the growing trend of luxury brands using film and television as cultural vehicles to reshape brand mythology and compete for cultural discourse power. LVMH’s decision to set up 22 Montaigne Entertainment and its cooperation with Apple TV+ on *The New Look* shows that film and television

have become important tools for luxury brands to enter cultural production and strengthen their symbolic influence.

Bourdieu's theory of capital reminds us that cultural capital, such as education and artistic taste, and symbolic capital, such as social recognition, both play a central role in maintaining power in society. The film industry can be conceptualized as an intersecting "field" where luxury brands and film institutions converge. Within this context, brands leverage mechanisms such as product placement and red-carpet ceremonies to amass symbolic capital, which is subsequently converted into economic capital. The process of brand "sacralization" is jointly facilitated by film festivals, cinematic texts, and media reviews, collectively endowing the brand with authority and solidifying its dominant position within the field [1]. Edelman and Hall's idea of "symbolic politics" explains how cultural works can shape political influence and public debate through the stories they tell [2,3]. In a similar way, Cayla and Arnould's concept of "cultural branding" shows Cayla and Arnould have formulated a theoretical framework termed "cultural branding," which underscores that the triumph of global brands hinges on the creation of cultural myths rather than mere product feature promotion. Films, as narrative mediums, serve as an optimal platform for the cross-cultural dissemination of these myths. In this manner, brand messages are transmuted into culturally authentic and meaningful narratives that resonate with the audience's perceptions [4].

Granot's study further shows that a concept of "Populence" was proposed, emphasizing the sinking and democratization of luxury goods in mediums such as pop culture and reality TV, thereby expanding its audience base. On the one hand, luxury brands maintain the myth of scarcity and exclusivity in film and television narratives, and on the other hand, they expand their influence through the popular cultural context, reflecting the tension of "accessibility-exclusivity", which shows that brands not only accumulate symbolic capital through the field of elegant cultural films, but also influence the consumption preferences of audiences with the help of pop culture scenes, thereby expanding the boundaries of cultural capital. Film and television media in popular culture play a significant role in shaping brand attitudes among young consumers [5].

Diaz Soloaga and Garcia found that luxury brands, through short films and cinema, convey not merely aesthetic ideals but also foster brand identity and cultural belonging [6]. Serdari regards "cultural intelligence" as the core resource of luxury brand strategy, arguing that high-end brands must actively shape cultural discourse to sustain the accumulation of symbolic capital [7]. Industry reports similarly reveal how brands harness international film festivals to strengthen cultural influence. Vogue Business notes that International luxury brands have not only achieved exposure through the red carpet show of the Cannes Film Festival and cooperated with the film, but also shaped their identity as "cultural producers", which shows that luxury groups have transcended the logic of advertising and entered the deep game of film and television narratives [8].

This paper employs case study and theoretical analysis to systematically examine how luxury brands manipulate cultural capital through film and television narratives to construct identity myths and establish cultural dominance.

2. Research methods

This study adopts a qualitative case analysis approach, with Dior's collaboration on The New Look as the primary case. Through textual analysis of series content, character narratives, and visual representations, the study investigates how Dior leverages audiovisual storytelling to engage in cultural capital production and symbolic capital acquisition. Research materials include the series itself, critical reviews, academic literature, and user commentary data from both Chinese and international social platforms (e.g., Xiaohongshu, Douban, Rotten Tomatoes).

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Dior's construction of cultural justice narratives

In *The New Look*, Christian Dior is portrayed as a restorer of postwar order, with his fashion symbolizing gentleness, hope, and humanistic values.

In the first episode of *The New Look*, the plot focuses on Dior's moral choices and mental struggles during World War II, such as in the first episode, when his sister Catherine is arrested by the Nazis, Dior is forced to face the moral question of whether to design a dress for the family of a senior German officer. Although the move would provide resources and asylum, he insisted on refusing. This passage is a powerful representation of Dior's inner contradictions. He tried to maintain his daily life against the backdrop of Paris, still in the shadow of war, but his anxiety for the safety of his loved ones and the pressure from the German "privileged clients" made it difficult. This insistence on refusing to cooperate has allowed Dior's image to leap from a fashion designer to a "cultural justice" who adheres to his beliefs in the face of suffering. This series setting strengthens the brand's sense of morality and historical depth, laying the foundation for it to establish a brand identity with more cultural capital value in the hearts of the audience.

In terms of clothing style, the play strengthens Dior's design language and spiritual expression through a large number of details. The sheer waistline, plump skirt, and precise tailoring in the first "New Look" collection not only restore the curvaceous beauty of the female body, but also symbolize the desire for order, elegance and hope in post-war society. These visual languages are not simply displayed in the play, but are given strong symbolic meaning in the historical context. In the clip of Dior trying on a model, for example, the viewer can clearly feel the attempt to "reconstruct the beauty of women", not only for the commercial market, but also for the reinvention of the identity of post-war women. Through this narrative, Dior is no longer just the founder of the brand, but also a symbol of "historical and cultural heroes", shouldering the spiritual mission of French cultural revival.

This approach deepens audience engagement while linking Dior's brand image with national memory, moral order, and humanistic values. It exemplifies Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital and aligns with Serdari's notion of "cultural governance," whereby narrative production participates in the distribution of cultural power [7].

3.2. Chanel's relativization and disenchantment

By contrast, Coco Chanel is depicted with greater moral ambiguity, referencing her controversial wartime associations. Episode Two portrays Chanel's privileges: residence at the Ritz, close relations with Nazi intelligence, and attempts to leverage these ties for business gain. While not outright vilified, her portrayal stands in stark contrast to Dior's integrity. By foregrounding Chanel's wartime ambiguities, the narrative relativizes her claim to cultural authority, sharpening an inter-brand field struggle in which Dior accrues legitimacy through contrast. This "negative relativization" undermines Chanel's legitimacy as an emblem of female independence, while accentuating Dior's cultural capital as a national moral symbol. The symbolic contest between Dior and Chanel thus exemplifies Bourdieu's notion of symbolic struggle [1,9].

3.3. Audience overlap with luxury consumers

As a premium Apple TV+ production, The New Look targets urban, educated middle-to-upper-class viewers with refined cultural taste—a demographic overlapping substantially with Dior’s core consumers. Apple TV+’s upscale audience profile aligns with core luxury consumers, tightening identification loops between on-screen myth and off-screen purchase intent [4,5]. The series thus functions both as a cultural product and as a transmitter of brand identification [10].

3.4. Social media reception and cultural discourse tendencies

This study analyzed user commentary on Douban, Rotten Tomatoes, and Xiaohongshu, filtering for Dior- and Chanel-related keywords and classifying sentiment (positive/negative). Representative comments were used to support findings.

3.4.1. Positive vs. negative evaluations

Table 1. Keyword sentiment classification

Brand attitude	Emotion classification keywords
Dior positive keywords	noble, elegant, steadfast, artistic, historical sense
Dior negative keywords	whitewashing, capital manipulation, over-marketing, instrumentalization
Chanel positive keywords	avant-garde, independent, fashion icon
Chanel negative keywords	pro-Nazi, dark history, villain stereotype, opportunism

Table 2. Sentiment proportions by platform

Platform	Dior positive keywords	Dior negative keywords	Chanel positive keywords	Chanel negative keywords	capital will	historical authenticity
Douban	7.20%	2.90%	2.50%	3.80%	5.40%	0.70%
Rotten Tomatoes	56.00%	4.00%	0.00%	13.30%	0.00%	0.00%
Red notes	10.30%	7.70%	0.00%	2.70%	0.90%	1.80%

See Table 1, classify comments form websites into different keywords, representing the audience’s emotional attitude towowards the brand through the episodes.

As Table 2 shown, Dior received higher proportions of positive commentary across platforms, especially on Rotten Tomatoes (56%). Viewers emphasized Dior’s integrity and historical resonance: e.g., “Dior’s legacy of integrity during wartime is beautifully captured here.” Conversely, Chanel attracted higher negative sentiment, focusing on her wartime controversies, e.g., “Chanel’s choices during the war make it difficult to see her as a symbol of female independence.”

3.4.2. Limits of brand cultural capital tools

On Chinese platforms, discussions more frequently revolved around “capital will” (e.g., brand manipulation, over-marketing, instrumentalization) and “historical authenticity” (e.g., distortion,

exaggeration, fictionalization). This reflects Chinese audiences' heightened sensitivity toward the commercial logic and historical fidelity of brand-driven narratives.

Thus, while *The New Look* enhances Dior's symbolic status as cultural justice, it simultaneously raises suspicion that luxury brands may be using film narratives as tools of capital discourse manipulation. Over-branding strategies, therefore, risk undermining narrative authenticity and cultural credibility.

3.5. The interactive mechanism of cultural capital and brand image

In Bourdieu's terms, individuals and institutions accrue symbolic capital through displays of cultural consumption and taste. *The New Look* not only reinforces Dior's cultural narrative but also, via Apple TV+'s high-value platform, associates the brand with "high culture."

The series integrates Dior's symbolic codes into the narrative fabric. For example, Catherine Dior's return home in a tailored Dior-style coat (Episode 5), the postwar body-image contrast highlighting Dior's "restorative beauty" concept (Episode 6), and the haute couture show stage faithfully reconstructing Dior's archival designs (Episode 8). Such organic embedding transforms Dior from an external advertiser into part of the narrative itself.

In the analysis, a tripartite mechanism is identified: (i) moralized identity myths; (ii) competitive symbolic contrast with rival houses; and (iii) audience–consumer overlap on premium platforms—together converting cultural capital into brand equity while exposing authenticity risk [7,9]. This strategy allows luxury brands to move beyond traditional advertising into cultural storytelling within festivals and premium audiovisual spaces. As Edelman notes, such symbolic politics grant cultural narrative primacy, enabling Dior to command discursive authority [2].

Moreover, Dior's on-screen presence resonates across social platforms and KOL communities, extending cultural capital into digital discourse.

4. Conclusion

The integration of luxury brands with film and television is not merely a media strategy but a significant practice in the reconstruction of cultural capital and the contestation of symbolic power. In "The New Look," Dior's brand image establishes a profound connection between historical narratives and modern audiences, illustrating the strategic pathway through which the brand achieves commercial transformation and cultural dominance via cultural engagement. In contrast, Chanel's complex image serves as a contrasting backdrop in Dior's brand construction. This indicates that film and television content not only disseminates aesthetics but also becomes a crucial platform for brands to construct discourse power and identity symbolism within the global cultural context. Film and television operate as apparatuses where luxury houses negotiate cultural sovereignty; yet over-instrumentalization invites authenticity backlash that can erode the very symbolic capital they seek to amass.

However, this study has certain limitations: the analyzed social platforms are primarily focused on mainstream Chinese and English social media, omitting cultural contexts in regions where French, Spanish, and other languages are predominant; the emotion recognition method still relies on rule-based matching, presenting semantic understanding boundaries. Future research could expand the scope of platforms, integrate multilingual corpora, sentiment analysis models, and brand behavior data to more accurately reveal the operational logic of cultural capital and media deployment strategies of luxury groups on a global scale.

References

- [1] Bourdieu, P. (1980). *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford University Press. <https://books.google.com/books?id=YHN8uW49I7AC>
- [2] Edelman, M. (1964). *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*. University of Illinois Press. <https://archive.org/details/symbolicusesofpo0000edel>
- [3] Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. SAGE. https://archive.org/details/representationcu0000unse_g7g0
- [4] Cayla, J., & Arnould, E. J. (2008). A cultural approach to branding in the global marketplace. *Journal of International Marketing*, 16(4), 86–112.
- [5] Granot, E., Russell, L. T. M., & Brashear-Alejandro, T. G. (2013). Populence: Exploring Luxury for the Masses. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 21(1), 31–44.
- [6] Diaz Soloaga, P., & Garcia, E. A. (2016). Fashion films and storytelling. *Communication & Society*, 29(4), 45–57.
- [7] Serdari, T. (2022). *Rethinking Luxury Fashion: The Role of Cultural Intelligence in Brand Strategy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [8] Vogue Business. (2023, May 23). Inside fashion megabrands' whirlwind at Cannes. <https://www.voguebusiness.com/fashion/inside-fashion-megabrands-whirlwind-at-cannes>
- [9] Rocamora, A. (2009). *Fashioning the City: Paris, Fashion and the Media*. I.B. Tauris. <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/fashioning-the-city-9781845118976/>
- [10] Zwick, D., & Cayla, J. (Eds.). (2011). *Inside Marketing: Practices, Ideologies, Devices*. Oxford University Press. <https://academic.oup.com/book/8032>