

Differentiation in the Luxury Industry: A Comparative Analysis of Accessible and Ultra-Exclusive Brand Strategies

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Abstract

The luxury industry has become increasingly competitive, prompting brands to adopt distinct positioning and differentiation strategies to maintain relevance and consumer loyalty. This paper examines how luxury brands differentiate themselves, with a particular focus on the contrasting strategies of accessible luxury brands such as Longchamp and ultra-exclusive houses like Hermès. Drawing on branding theory, including brand positioning, differentiation frameworks, and Keller's brand equity model, the study explores how value is constructed through product design, pricing, symbolism, experience, and heritage. The analysis situates these strategies within the broader transformation of the luxury market, shaped by shifting consumer values, generational change, and the growing emphasis on experiential consumption. Through a comparative case study, the paper demonstrates that while accessible luxury brands prioritise functionality, cultural relevance, and emotional connection, ultra-exclusive brands rely on controlled scarcity, artisanal craftsmanship, and symbolic prestige. The findings highlight the multidimensional nature of luxury differentiation and its dependence on strategic levels of exclusivity.

Keywords: Luxury branding, brand differentiation, brand positioning, accessible luxury, ultra-exclusive luxury

Introduction

The luxury sector has evolved significantly over time, highlighting key attributes that define its class and legacy. During the medieval and Renaissance periods, luxuries were not just items of beauty but also symbols of power, wealth, and spiritual significance. Nobles expressed their wealth through their clothing, fragrance, and grand feasts. They blended affluence with artistic brilliance in the name of craftsmanship (Marmin, 2024). As the 18th and 19th centuries progressed, luxury took on a new meaning, infused with modernity. The transformation took place in the 1980s and 1990s with the idea of consolidating heritage brands under centralised ownership, introducing professionalised management, and creating long-term value by expanding into new product categories and global markets (Donzé, 2017). This is when luxury conglomerates came into being. A luxury conglomerate is a large corporation that owns various portfolios of luxury brands. Under these, every brand has the power to express its own uniqueness and identity, which is further filtered through strategies designed for growth. According to Polaris Market Research, the luxury goods market was valued at USD 387.68 billion in 2024. Furthermore, the market is projected to grow from USD 412.02 billion in 2025 to USD 724.99 billion by 2034, exhibiting a CAGR of 6.5% during 2025–2034 (Trivedi, 2025).

That said, the luxury industry is facing a problem – overcrowding. Brands are entering the industry, and competition is increasing and intensifying across all kinds of luxury tiers. As per McKinsey and Company (2025), for the first time since 2016 (excluding 2020), luxury value creation is expected to be lower than the previous year. Several of the industry’s growth-driving engines have stalled. Price increases have reached a ceiling, and higher prices are negatively affecting demand from aspirational luxury consumers. It’s not just the upcoming brands that are having a direct impact on the industry; shifting customer values are also affecting it. Millennials and Gen Z are choosing experience and self-expression over material acquisition (Ward, 2024). As a result, effective brand positioning and differentiation have become essential for cultivating brand loyalty, shaping perceived value, and driving purchase intent. Differentiation and positioning can vary from brand to brand. That raises one of the most critical questions that this paper aims to answer: **How do luxury brands differentiate themselves, and how do the strategies of accessible luxury brands such as Longchamp differ from those of ultra-exclusive houses like Hermès?**

This research paper argues that brand differentiation within the luxury industry is multidimensional and shaped by the level of exclusivity a brand adopts; while accessible luxury brands like Longchamp differentiate themselves through democratic pricing, functional yet stylish design, and broad cultural relevance, ultra-luxury houses like Hermès rely heavily on artisanal craftsmanship, controlled scarcity, and deep-rooted heritage narratives. These contrasting strategies illustrate the diversity of approaches within the luxury sector and underscore why effective positioning and differentiation are essential for maintaining relevance and loyalty in an increasingly crowded, experience-driven market.

Brand Positioning and Differentiation

Before delving into the analysis, it is essential to ground this discussion in two core branding concepts: brand positioning and differentiation. Understanding these concepts is critical to examining how brands create meaning and sustain competitive advantage. Beyond how firms deploy these strategies, these frameworks also account for how consumers perceive, interpret, and respond to brand signals. Together, brand positioning and differentiation provide insight into how brands communicate value, shape consumer perceptions, and distinguish themselves within competitive markets. Establishing a clear understanding of these foundational ideas is therefore necessary before moving on to real-world theories and case studies. Brand positioning is the way a brand is unique and different from its competitors. According to Philip Kotler, “the act of designing the company’s offering and image to occupy a distinctive place in the mind of the target market” is the key concept that helps brands establish a perspective of themselves in the eyes of consumers or target markets (Marion, 2016). To stand out from competitors, a brand often needs to look at its capabilities, what makes the consumer think of that brand, and what makes it different from others, while remaining relevant. Brand positioning strategies are linked to consumer loyalty, consumer-based brand equity, and willingness to purchase the brand. While brand positioning plays a central role in shaping a brand’s reputation, it is inherently sensitive, as even a single misstep can create significant challenges. In an evolving marketplace, brands must remain responsive to change. Ongoing research and adaptive positioning enable brands to respond to emerging consumer demands while maintaining coherence with their core values, history, and identity. Effective brand positioning is achieved when consumers can clearly recognise and associate a brand with its intended identity through these strategic cues.

Brand differentiation is the strategic process by which firms distinguish their products or services from competitors by emphasising unique attributes that enhance consumer recognition, preference, and loyalty (Jerab and Mabrouk, 2023). In increasingly competitive markets, companies adopt differentiation strategies to respond to evolving consumer expectations, maintain a competitive advantage, and secure long-term customer loyalty. Differentiation can take many forms. Product differentiation, for instance, involves modifying features, design, performance, or style to make a product meaningfully distinct (Kopp, 2024). Beyond this, brands may also differentiate based on quality; symbolic differentiation, i.e., the form that makes the product stand out from competitors based on its brand's legacy and the history that shapes it, as well as the brand's personality; and experiential differentiation, which refers to the connection built between the brand and the consumer at touchpoints such as the consumer experience at physical stores and through online presence. Overall, while differentiation often begins with tangible product enhancements, its broader objective extends beyond surface-level modification to shaping consumer perceptions and strengthening brand attachment.

Therefore, while brand positioning defines where a brand resides in consumers' minds, differentiation explains how it stands apart from competitors (Haslett, 2020). Together, these strategies enable brands to establish a clear and favourable place within both consumer perceptions and competitive markets. Differentiation is essential for creating distinctiveness, as it allows a brand to remain memorable and recognisable in crowded marketplaces. However, sustained differentiation is only possible when a brand fosters repeat patronage while continuing to attract new consumers.

To understand how such loyalty is formed and reinforced, it is useful to examine frameworks that explain how strong brands are built. Keller's brand equity model presents brand building as a hierarchical pyramid in which each level builds upon the previous one. The central premise of this model is that strong brands are created by developing the "right brand image" (Hawker, 2019). Each consumer interaction contributes to this image, shaping perceptions and emotional responses. The pyramid progresses through four stages: identity, ensuring brand awareness and recognition; meaning, defining what the brand represents; response, where consumers form judgments and feelings; and relationship, in which consumers develop deep connections and become loyal, repeat customers. This framework highlights how a brand's performance and image work together to strengthen differentiation and sustain competitive advantage.

Understanding the Luxury Industry

The luxury industry is highly dynamic, continually adapting to shifts in consumer tastes, values, and economic conditions. According to a KPMG (2024) survey, the global personal luxury goods market fully recovered by 2021 following the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Supported by expansion strategies adopted by major industry players, global revenues reached €234.4 billion in 2022, marking a five-year high and exceeding 2018 levels by 9.4%, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 2.3% between 2018 and 2022. This period can be broadly divided into two phases: relatively steady growth before and after the pandemic, and a sharp contraction in 2020. Overall, these trends underscore the luxury sector's resilience and its sustained significance in the global economy.

The luxury industry is divided into five segments: accessible, contemporary, heritage, high, and niche luxury (FZ, 2025). Premium or accessible luxury is the broadest category: aspirational yet attainable and more affordable than high-end labels. For example, Ralph Lauren, Coach, and Longchamp. Contemporary luxury is fashion-forward and pricier than premium but still attainable for many aspirational buyers. For example, The Row, Maje, and Diptyque. Heritage luxury comprises long-established brands known for

their timeless craftsmanship and global iconic status. For example, Louis Vuitton, Gucci, and Cartier. High luxury caters to the elite, often associated with royalty, and features exceptional craftsmanship and symbolic pricing. For example, Hermès and Loro Piana. Niche luxury is sitting beyond traditional categories, serving collectors and ultra-wealthy clients with invitation-only, made-to-order, one-of-a-kind creations. For instance, Schiaparelli and Bugatti. Although these segments are diverse, they constitute one market. Notably, understanding these segments' contribution is key to knowing the global reach of luxury. Today, the luxury market faces a new challenge. The youth are willing to spend money on luxury and are looking for uniqueness that sets them apart, and to find it, they are willing to pay any price. While luxury brands offer high-quality products from names they have known their entire lives, younger consumers no longer just value 'expensive things'; they want the luxurious experience that comes with them (Anjum, 2022). The feeling of going to a luxury boutique, buying an item, and the treatment they receive is what attracts them. Even more importantly, many younger consumers are increasingly willing to invest in luxury experiences rather than purely material purchases. These preferences can be contextualised through the hedonic treadmill theory, which suggests that while individuals initially derive pleasure and satisfaction from acquiring goods, this happiness is often short-lived as people quickly adapt to new possessions and return to a baseline level of satisfaction (Sustainability Directory, 2025). As a result, repeated consumption of material goods delivers diminishing emotional returns over time. In contrast, experiential consumption, such as personalised services, immersive retail environments, and exclusive brand interactions, tends to generate more enduring emotional value, as these experiences are remembered, shared, and integrated into personal identity. Gen Z, particularly, appears increasingly aware of this dynamic. Rather than seeking happiness through repeated acquisition of high-priced goods, they prioritise experiences that provide longer-lasting emotional fulfilment, social meaning, and personal distinction. This shift is also reinforced by heightened sustainability awareness, as experiential luxury is often perceived as less wasteful than continuous material consumption. By prioritising experience over ownership, younger consumers remain influenced by luxury branding, but in ways where emotional resonance and symbolic meaning matter more than the physical product itself (Epperson, 2025). In line with the aforementioned, to create a strong perception in consumers' minds, luxury brands need to understand that product quality is not the only factor they consider. It is the symbolic meaning, cultural relevance, and trust that result in loyalty and repeat customers. For any brand, whether accessible or ultra-luxury, redefining or reshaping themselves in line with current trends is not enough; positioning and differentiation are what truly make a difference.

Comparative Study - Longchamp vs. Hermes

A comparative study between two extremely contrasting brands is not only an appropriate method for answering the research question of this paper, but it also provides a clear understanding of how, by comparing two extremes within the same industry, one can identify the different strategies brands use to attract customers and build relationships. This leads to an important question: why choose only Longchamp and Hermès? Why not any other brand? Both Longchamp and Hermès have been selected because they operate within the French luxury tradition while occupying distinctly different positions within the luxury hierarchy – Longchamp as an accessible luxury brand and Hermès as an ultra-luxury house. These brands will not be compared solely on superiority, but also on their positioning and differentiation strategies using the concepts discussed earlier. Alongside this, they will be evaluated on symbolic values, culture, customer relationships, and experiential differentiation.

Before delving into a deep evaluation of their strategic choices, it is important to understand the origins and evolution of the brands. Longchamp began as a leather goods company in 1948, founded by Jean Cassegrain, who initially sold leather pipes and later moved on to ladies' handbags (Lim, 2025). After its launch in the 1990s, Le Pliage became the hallmark of contemporary design and the face of Longchamp. The Cassegrain family continues to manage the company, preserving its heritage while innovating. The brand balances French savoir-faire with everyday utility, helping it appeal globally without losing its historical roots (Longchamp, 2026). Hermès, on the other hand, was founded in 1837 by Thierry Hermès as a high-end equestrian gear brand (TFL, 2025). Its first leather handbag was introduced in 1922 by his wife. The Kelly was launched in 1935, and soon after, in 1981, Hermès' most coveted luxury handbag, the Birkin, was introduced. From equestrian gear to fashion icons like the Birkin and Kelly, Hermès has always had a reputation for exceptional quality and craftsmanship (Luxity, 2020). Today, Hermès products rank among the most revered symbols of luxury worldwide due to their heritage value and exclusivity (The Birkin & Kelly's House, 2024).

With regard to positioning, Longchamp espouses a modernity that is both functional and accessible (Hoang, 2023). It caters to a wide range of generations and target audiences. Longchamp's products embody French craftsmanship, which appeals to consumers through their sense of timelessness. The brand strongly emphasises innovation while remaining connected to its heritage, with accessible pricing forming a key part of its value proposition. Longchamp employs a vertically integrated business model to maintain consistent quality and functionality across its products. Le Pliage, the brand's most iconic and enduring product, features a unique foldable design and is available in five sizes, from XS to XL, making it widely appreciated for its practicality and durability. Through its online platforms and broader digital presence, Longchamp also works to strengthen customer relationships by fostering emotional connections that extend beyond product ownership (Vizologi, 2023). This blend of French elegance and practicality positions the brand as everyday luxury rather than elite luxury. In contrast, Hermès operates on principles fundamentally at odds with Longchamp's emphasis on accessibility and practicality. Its core strength lies in exceptional craftsmanship and uncompromising quality. Each Hermès product is handcrafted, individually approved before leaving the workshop, and produced by artisans who undergo extensive training to ensure the highest standards (Roll, 2020). Hermès positions itself as timeless luxury rather than trend-driven fashion. The brand explicitly rejects mass production, as reflected in a former CEO's statement: "We don't have a policy of image; we have a policy of product" (Thorpe, 2025). In this case, exclusivity itself becomes a symbol of prestige, highly valued by the brand's affluent clientele. Hermès' desirability is reinforced by restricted access and lengthy waiting lists – often spanning several years – for iconic products such as the Birkin (Badola, 2025). This symbolic positioning generates anticipation and functions as a powerful form of status signalling. Accessibility, as exemplified by Longchamp, is deliberately absent from Hermès' strategy, as it would undermine the brand's carefully cultivated exclusivity.

Longchamp and Hermès also differentiate themselves on different levels in the luxury market. Longchamp has always offered accessible yet premium pricing, making it perfect for those buying their first luxury bag. Apart from calfskin, Longchamp also offers a Le Pliage Green collection, which uses sustainable materials like recycled polyester to create the iconic bag. They believe in being different and unique, and this is clearly seen in their collaborations, such as Longchamp x TOILETPAPER (pictured in Image 1), a range of quirkily designed Le Pliage bags bursting with positive energy and unique motifs, or Longchamp x Filt (pictured in Image 2), honouring French fashion in a grocery-run style (Lifestyle Asia, 2023).



Image 1: Longchamp x TOILETPAPER



Image 2: Longchamp x Filt

On the other hand, Hermès thinks differently. For them, it is their story and craftsmanship that speak for the brand. Their love for storytelling is reflected in their collaborations, such as Maria Jesus Contreras x Hermès (pictured in Image 3), a world of hidden details and playful illusions where familiar motifs are reimagined with a sense of wit and wonder, or Lee Kyutae x Hermès (pictured in Image 4), capturing the essence of movement, transformation, and the fine artistry behind every Hermès creation (The Fashionography, 2025). Hermès' pricing strategies differ greatly from Longchamp's, but it is their rarity

that determines pricing: the rarer the product, the higher the price. These are certain key aspects that influence both brands' perceived value and consumer desirability.



Image 3: Maria Jesus Contreras x Hermès

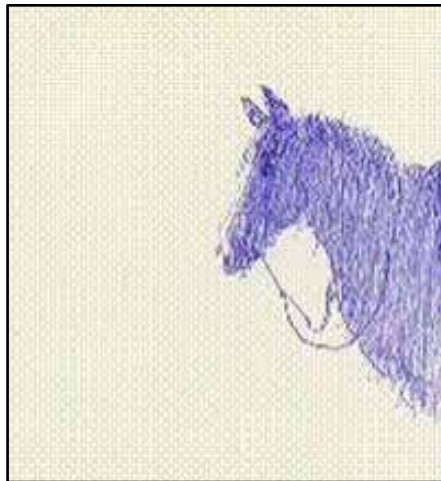


Image 4: Lee Kyutae x Hermès

Apart from the product level, these brands build their brand through consumer experiences, brand culture, communication, and storytelling. For Longchamp, accessibility is its agenda. That is what the brand is all about. Their key goal is lifestyle integration. Becoming so accessible makes it a home, daily-wear luxury brand. Through their quirky collaborations and various designs within the same bag, they emphasise personal expression and the importance of showcasing one's personality through accessories. Because of this very idea, Gen Z today is attracted towards the brand for the practicality they crave, and this is where consumer loyalty comes into play. This is how not just Gen Z, but consumers around the world, perceive the brand, and thus the brand gains consumer loyalty. On the contrary, Hermès values its customers above all else. Personal invitations for Birkin and Kelly purchases make ownership feel like an achievement (Patov, 2024). One-on-one consultations and the presence of personal sales assistants make each customer feel special and help create a strong relationship with the audience, thereby encouraging repeat customers. Hermès does not focus on being a homegrown or everyday brand; instead, its legacy and class lie in exclusivity, and the privilege accorded only to a select few.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to examine how luxury brands differentiate themselves and how the strategies of accessible luxury brands like Longchamp differ from those of ultra-exclusive houses like Hermès. The analysis shows that differentiation in the luxury sector is not singular or uniform but operates across multiple dimensions, including product design, pricing, symbolism, experience, and brand culture. Crucially, these strategies are shaped by the level of exclusivity a brand seeks to maintain and the type of consumer relationship it aims to build.

As seen in the case studies conducted, accessible luxury brands such as Longchamp differentiate themselves through functional design, democratic pricing, and lifestyle integration. By combining French craftsmanship with practicality and broad cultural relevance, Longchamp positions itself as an everyday luxury brand that prioritises usability, self-expression, and emotional connection. Its emphasis on experiential and symbolic differentiation through collaborations, digital engagement, and sustainable initiatives makes it aspirational yet attainable. This approach aligns closely with the preferences of younger consumers, who increasingly value experience, authenticity, and emotional resonance over material excess.

In contrast, ultra-exclusive houses such as Hermès employ differentiation strategies rooted in controlled scarcity, artisanal craftsmanship, and deep heritage narratives. Hermès deliberately rejects accessibility in favour of rarity, manual production, and restricted access, allowing exclusivity itself to function as a primary source of brand value. Long waiting lists, personalised client relationships, and storytelling centred on craftsmanship reinforce the brand's symbolic power and status-signalling capacity. Rather than responding rapidly to trends, Hermès sustains relevance through timelessness and continuity.

Overall, this research highlights that luxury differentiation is highly contingent on strategic positioning within the luxury hierarchy. While Longchamp and Hermès operate within the same industry and cultural tradition, their contrasting approaches illustrate how luxury brands can successfully differentiate by appealing to distinct consumer motivations - accessibility and lifestyle integration at one end, and prestige and symbolic exclusivity at the other. In an increasingly crowded and experience-driven market, effective positioning and differentiation remain essential for sustaining brand equity, consumer loyalty, and long-term relevance across luxury segments.

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