



FSW Insights: Supra-Referentiality and the Art of Luxury Brand Storytelling

Why narrative brand archetypes matter
and how to build them

APRIL 2024

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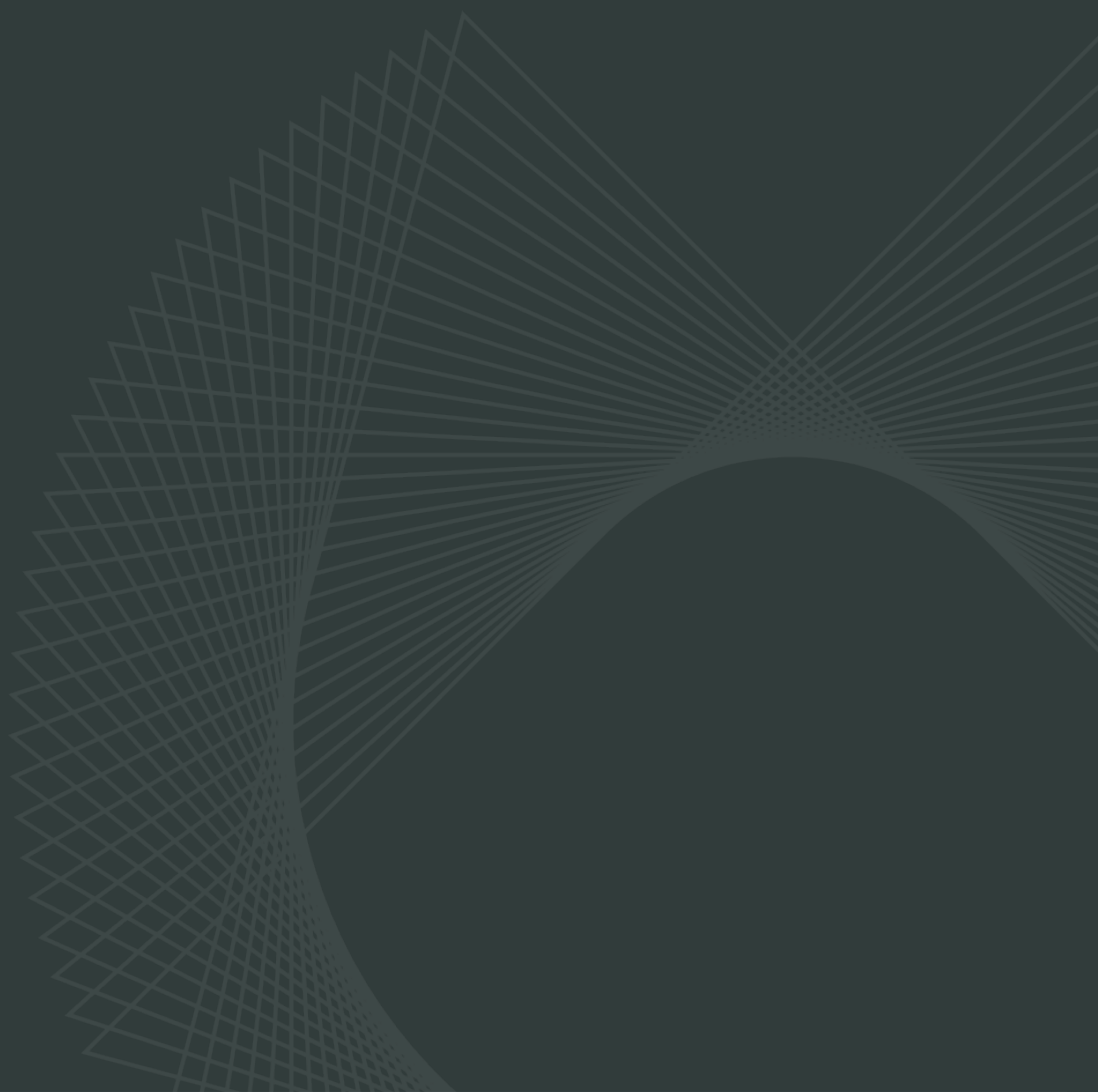
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Introduction



Introduction

The idea of narrative archetypes is hardly new for luxury brand storytelling. Designers have been inspired by archetypical stories throughout fashion history, such as the influences of neo-classicism on 19th-century Romantic period column dresses.

What is different is the landscape of the 2024 consumers, how they shop, and what they expect from brands. As we have extensively argued, the brand-consumer paradigm is rapidly changing with consumers in the driver's seat, expecting more personalized, dynamic, and immersive experiences from both in-person and online shopping.

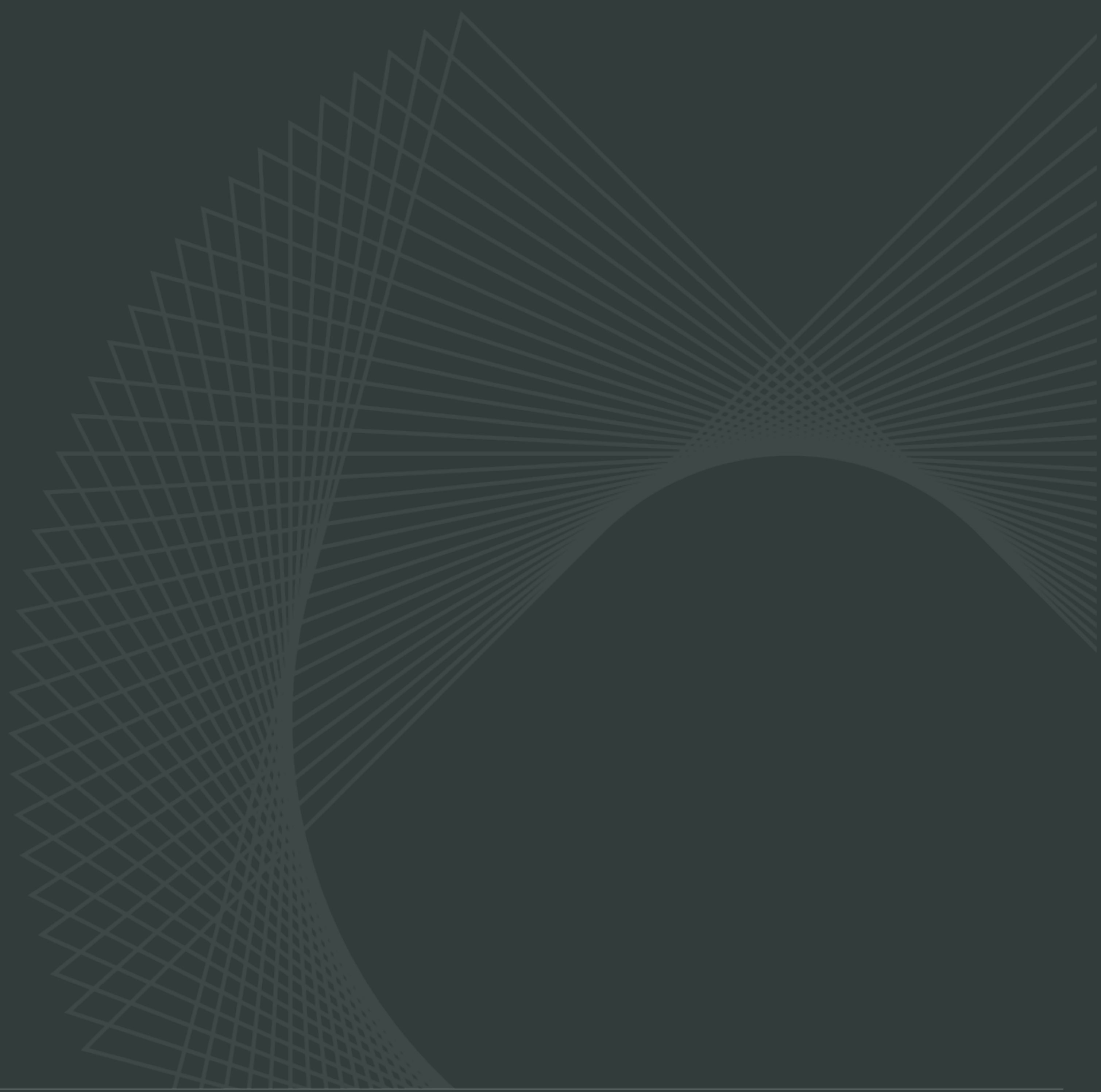
Yet, when it comes to telling stories, luxury brands continue to rely heavily on top-down, brand-centric modes of storytelling and content marketing that are directly at odds with a retail and media landscape that is increasingly consumer-driven or bottom-up. This is especially true for heritage luxury brands with a strong creative director or senior leadership with strong views and entrenched ways of telling brand stories and marketing products.

Luxury brand storytelling is a unique form of narrative designed to sell a sense of exclusivity and high-end value and, in turn, to build desire and brand loyalty. More than any other sector, luxury brands need to take a step back and initially approach brand storytelling through a wider lens.

A luxury brand story should be an archetypal story (or what in the literary field of narratology is called supra-referentiality or an overarching, transcendent concept), building their brand into a timeless construct that is recognizable no matter how it is transformed and transmogrified across channels.

Once this archetype is established, brands should then build a content strategy framework and roadmap that align this archetypal vision to consumer needs, both globally and channel by channel, over time in a way that can be tracked and measured. This formalized approach to luxury brand content strategy ensures that consumers will encounter the right stories and the right products at the right time on the right channel.

Narrative marketing or why luxury brand universes need structure





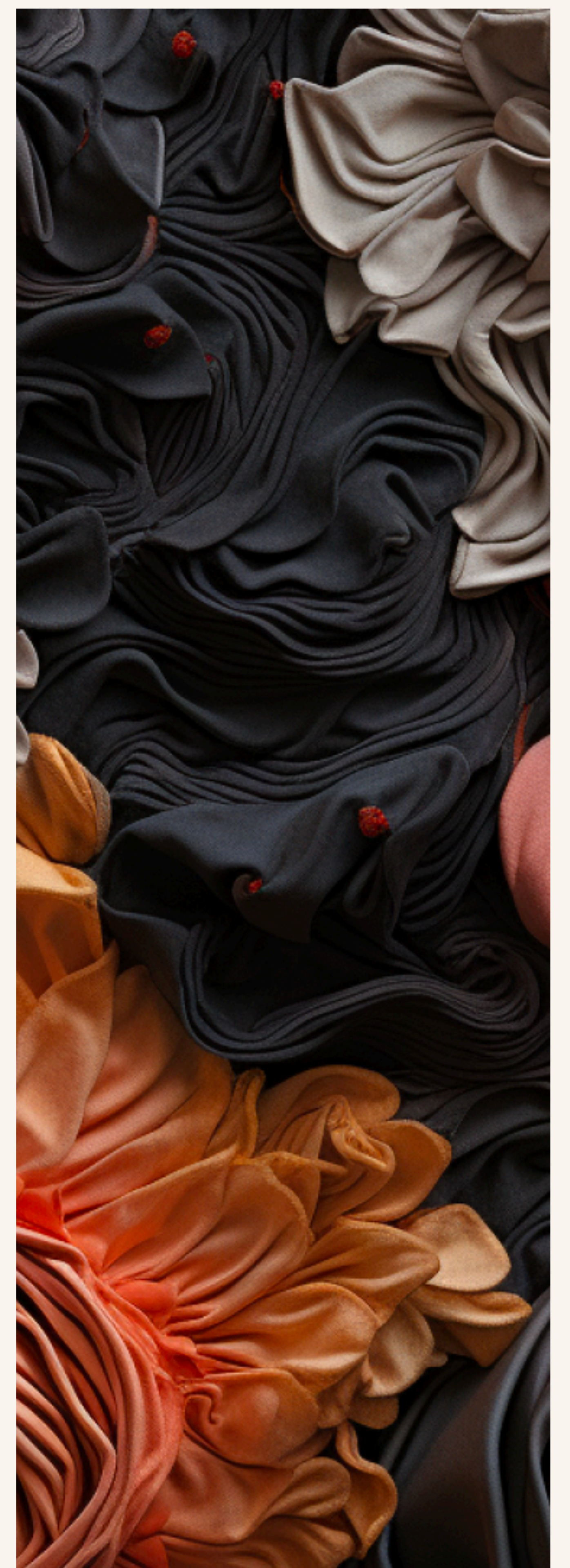
Narrative marketing or why luxury brand universes need structure

Sociologist and brand strategist Ana Andjelic has written about the import of brand universe creation to consumer experience and brand loyalty in marketing. The “how” of building brand universes is not necessarily straightforward but comes from the basic narrative toolkit of writing itself.

The problem with most luxury brand storytelling is that the stories either lack a sense of instant brand or product recognition and fall into the camp of too esoteric or they are devoid of structure and do not draw the audience into a familiar or unfamiliar narrative framework in which they want to participate. Both of these scenarios produce stories that land flat with today’s consumers as they either do not see themselves within the narrative or do not aspire to the lifestyles reflected in the content. In effect, luxury brand stories suffer from sameness, with many brands relying upon celebrity marketing in the guise of storytelling and a lack of centralized content strategy and operations to drive the right stories to the right people on the right channels at the right time.

Like criticizing a version of a story that we may not like, it is very easy to poke holes in specific brand marketing campaigns or brand strategies. However, analyzing a standard luxury brand advertisement provides many insights into the “why” and “how” of content and omnichannel brand storytelling. This type of small-scale close reading or analysis also demonstrates the elements brands need to tell stories that truly connect and how they build brand universes, even if it does not address how specific stories connect to other stories within a brand’s ecosystem or how well individual campaigns resonate with consumers or convert to actual sales over time.

For instance, many perfume ads, like Dior’s Miss Dior floral campaign with Natalie Portman, rely upon celebrity-driven, character-centric mini-films to sell an assumed luxury lifestyle with minimal actual narrative or structure to drive the story. Yet, many of these ads fail to communicate the product or product values being marketed, leaving consumers to decipher what the ad is actually about and what they are supposed to do with it.





Many of these luxury brand ads do not feel like a true story and lack the structure, plot, and logical flow of ideas one expects from a narrative. More importantly, these stories lack a sense of authenticity—in this case, a relatability that is attuned to the target audience, channel, and time. A luxury brand putting the same paid video ad on TikTok that they do on Instagram misunderstands the platform and misses the opportunity to connect with a different audience.

In truth, narrative marketing needs to have the central characteristics of literary narrative:

- A strong, consistent unifying concept or main idea;
- A “plot” or “storyline”—i.e. a course of action or series of events—that can be developed across different media outlets;
- Intriguing “characters” or actors (whether a person, product, or idea) to act; and
- A simple, pervasive means of implementation or strategy to express or tell different parts of the narrative in various forms across the product line and through media/advertising/communications.

Trying to storyboard the Miss Dior perfume ad, for instance, is an exercise in absurdity (see Exhibit 1):



Story Diagram for Miss Dior Ad

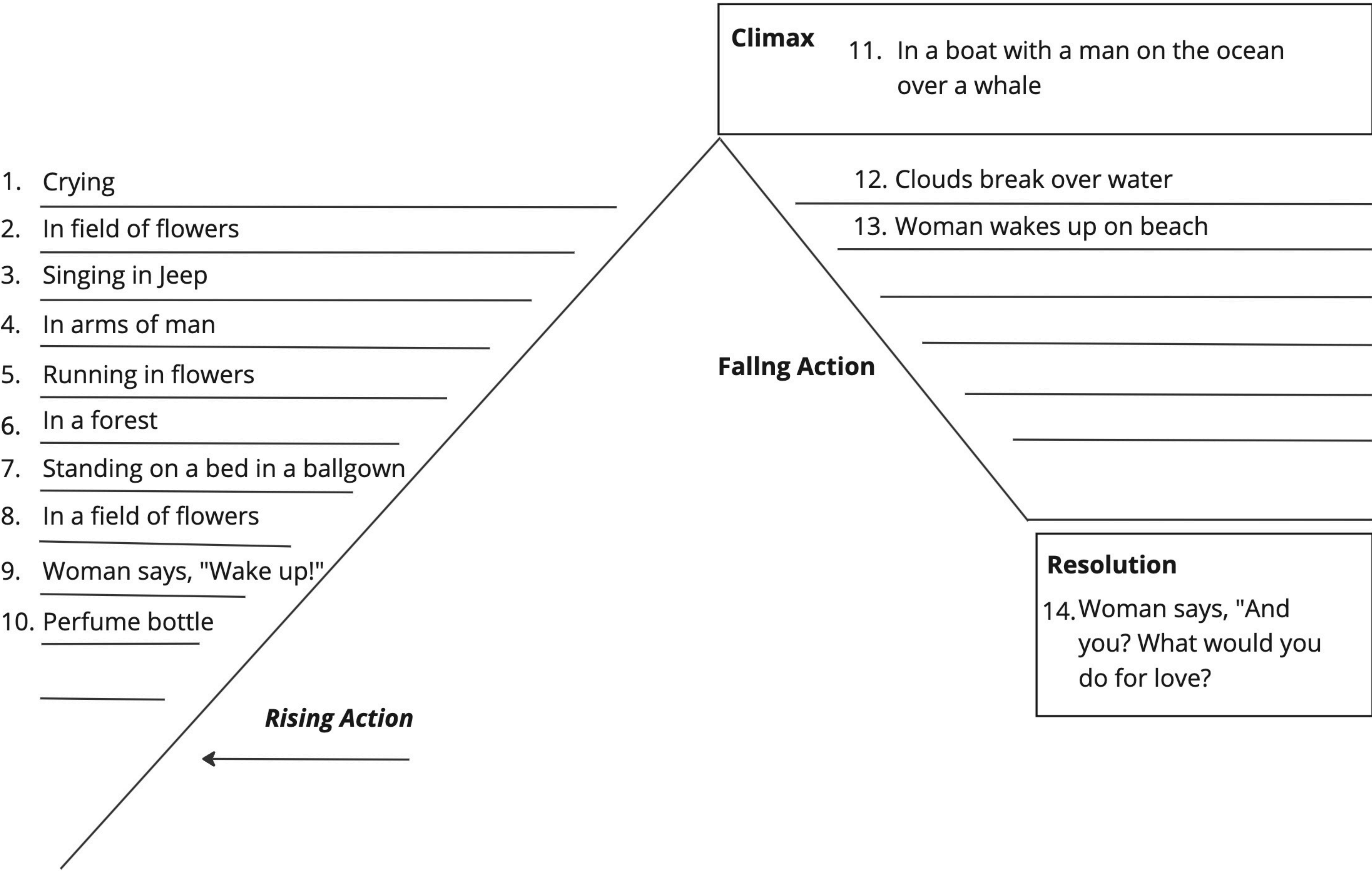


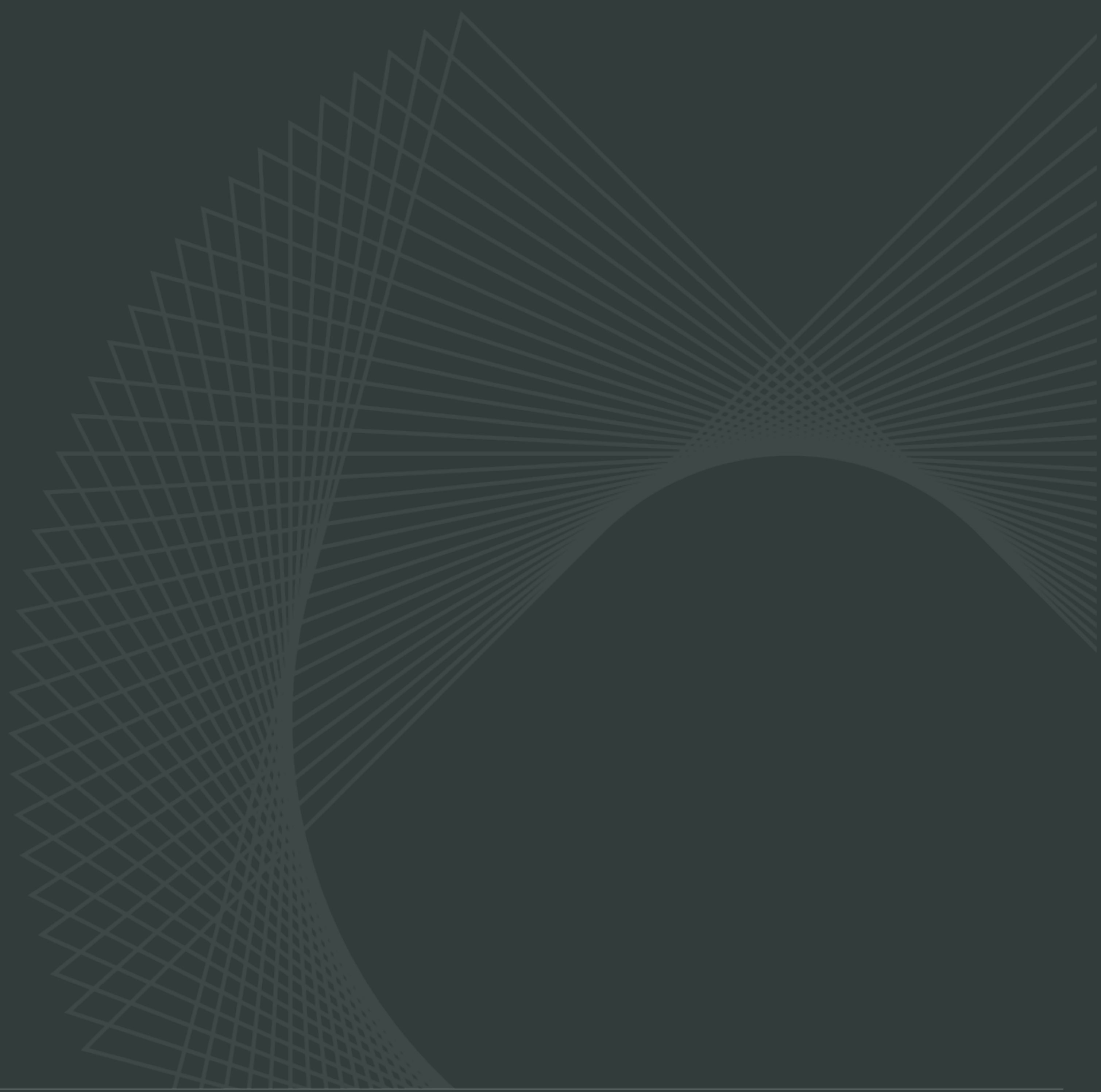
Exhibit 1: Story diagram for Dior’s Miss Dior ad with Natalie Portman.



One major problem with this ad is the lack of a narrative center. For one, the climax of the ad's story is debatable. Is it when she wakes up on the beach? Or is it when she is in the boat with her lover over a whale? We chose the latter but one could go either way. Also, we get a sense of the protagonist's feelings but no sense of her character, outside of the fact that she likes to run through fields of flowers and sing while driving.

The purpose of luxury and fashion marketing is to evoke a mood, an elevated lifestyle, and a beautiful aesthetic that makes people want to be a part of that elevated reality to encourage them to purchase the product. Perfume ads are all about synaesthesia, a mixing of the senses and emotions. If storytelling is stripped down to its fundamental elements, there should always be a literary theme and a logical flow of ideas. Even in a théâtre-d'absurde approach where up is down and narrative structure is fully nonlinear, there is meaning, even if it is that there is no meaning.

Supra-referentiality or the luxury brand story as archetype





Supra-referentiality or the luxury brand story as archetype

The other challenge of the Miss Dior Natalie Portman perfume ad is that its embodiment of the Dior brand is arguably literal, rather than timeless and evocative as one would expect of such an iconic brand. Digital marketing for an ephemeral product like fragrance is hard and requires a synaesthetic approach to work well. Yet, creators on TikTok do it every day through authentic takes on how a specific scent inspires them or makes them feel.

Luxury brands, however, cannot afford to be so casual and need to take an attenuated approach to content and marketing if they want to communicate their brand identity, story, and products in the right way. To create effective content and sell products in a way that is true to a brand's DNA, luxury brands should think about their "why" as a brand and delineate the construct of their unique narrative brand archetype.

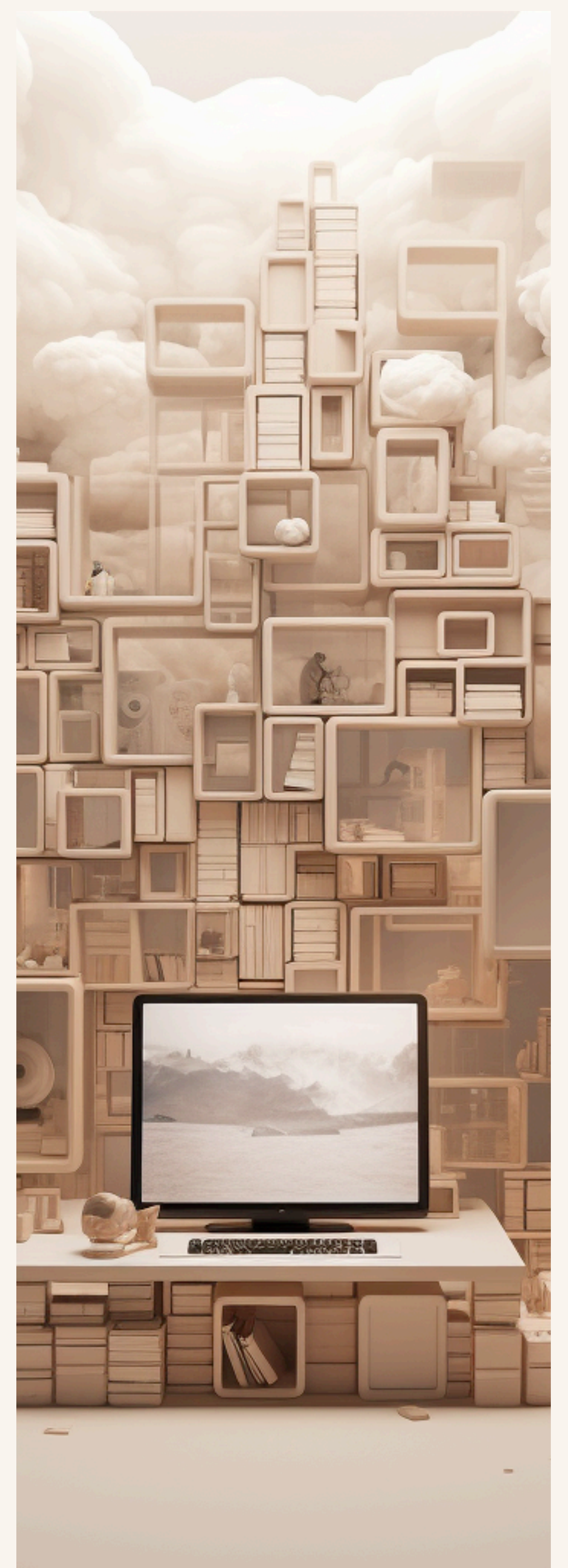
In storytelling, authors tap into archetypes as one type of referentiality to build systems of meaning and reference within and outside texts to draw in readers

through weaving webs together between the familiar and unfamiliar. There is an entire field of literary criticism called narratology that deals with how words make sense or how they come to refer to anything.

Within narratology, reference or sense-making comes in four different ways:

- Extra-referentiality refers outside of the text to a material reality, even if only imaginary.
- Self-referentiality refers internally to the structures and meanings of the work itself.
- Inter-referentiality refers to the dialogic context of speaking individuals and their intentions.
- Supra-referentiality refers to a transcendent principle that grounds our faith in producing meaning.

Among these classes of reference-making, the world of luxury storytelling is dominated by supra-referentiality or the idea of a system of holistic or overarching principles to which we all implicitly agree, even unconsciously that what is being referenced or shown is “luxury,” usually



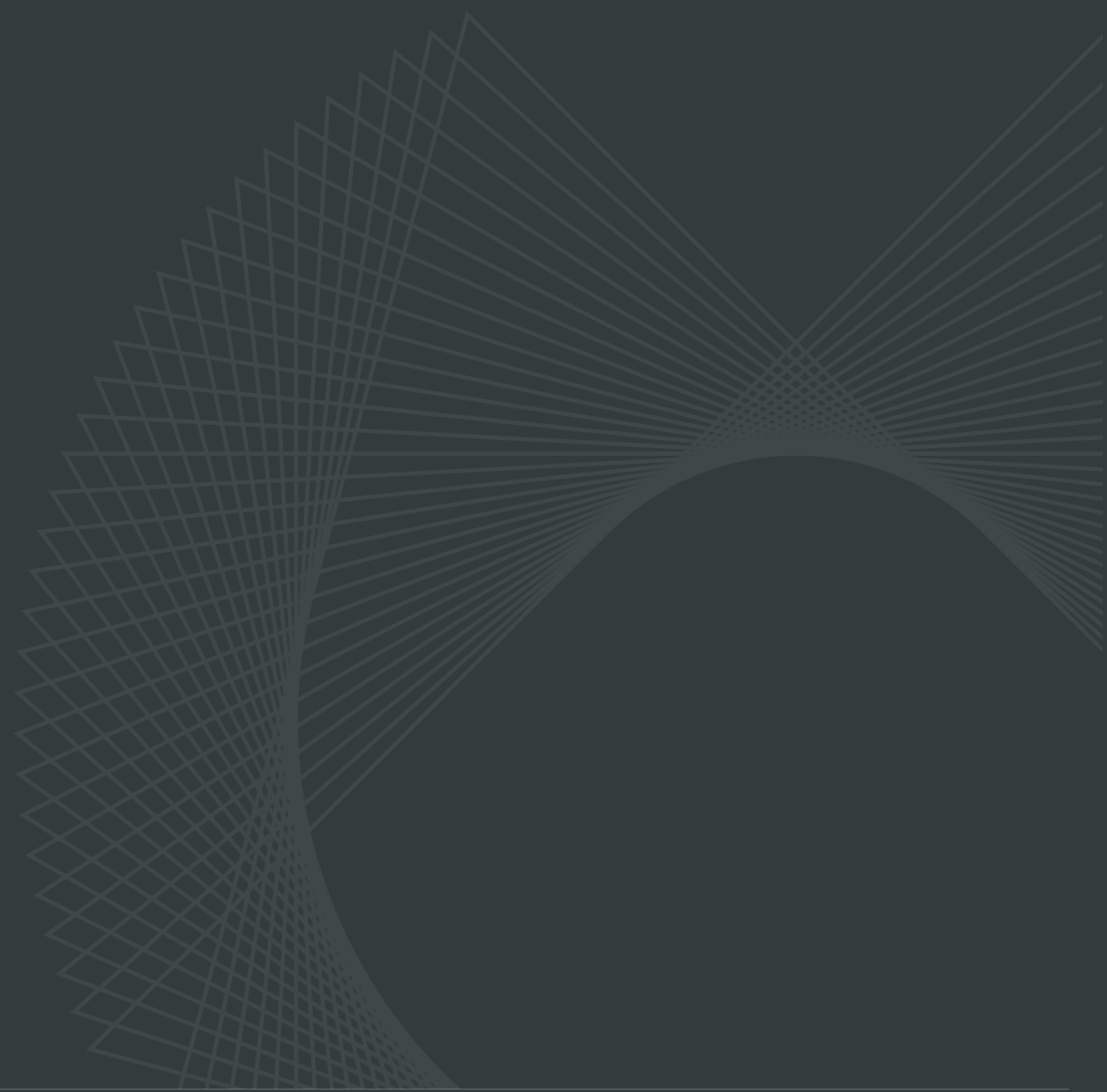


because a luxury brand tells us that it is. Luxury storytelling by its nature must feel “high-end,” “exclusive,” and “elite” or it no longer retains its primary code as luxury.

Tapping into the concept of supra-referentiality, luxury brands need to think about their own set of universal identifiers that make their brand unique. Formulating a brand archetype starts with the brand strategy standards: purpose, audience, value, positioning, personality, voice, and market. Only the goal is to define the brand fingerprint or universal uniqueness—the what-stands-apart identifiers—that differentiate and define its DNA from all other brands.

To hone in on brand archetypes, consider running an internal workshop for brand and marketing teams focused on brand archetype definition as part of a wider content strategy exercise. When workshopping brand archetypes, internal teams generally discover that they think about and define the brand differently. The goal is not to get everyone on the same page per se but rather to collect all brand references into a unique construct with a defined architecture. This becomes the brand archetype.

Luxury brand archetypes in practice





Luxury brand archetypes in practice

The results of a brand archetype workshop result in a brand matrix (see Exhibit 2) with defined brand concepts mapped out in a kind of narrative map. A brand matrix can help you think holistically and operationally about storytelling and form the kernel of future content strategy work. Creating a brand archetype matrix requires diving deep into how the brand defines itself, where it started, where it wants to go, and what and why drives the brand to create products and for whom it is creating them.

Once a luxury brand defines and understands its unique brand archetype, then the real work begins in evaluating the what, how, where, when, and to whom this story in its various forms gets communicated. This is where content strategy comes into play as a centralized framework or strategy for omnichannel thinking on how brand content is planned, created, managed, and distributed, as well as the team and operational structure that manages it and the architecture, rules, and workflows through which storytelling flows across and within channels.



Brand Archetype Matrix

Internal/External Internal	External	VALUE PROPOSITION What are our key offerings, and how do we want them to appeal to customers and other stakeholders	RELATIONSHIPS What should be the nature of our relationships with key customers and other stakeholders?	POSITION What is our intended position in the market and in the hearts and minds of key customers and other stakeholders?
	Internal/External	EXPRESSION What is distinctive about how we communicate and express ourselves and makes it possible to recognize us at a distance	BRAND PROMISE What do we promise, and what are the core values that sum up what our brand stands for?	PERSONALITY What combination of human characteristics or qualities forms our corporate character?
	Internal	MISSION & VISION What engages us (mission)? What is our direction and inspiration (vision)?	CULTURE What are our attitudes, and how do we work and behave?	COMPETENCIES What are we particularly good at, and what makes us better than the competition?

Exhibit 2: A brand archetype matrix template.

For luxury brands that do not want to shift current state content investments, small-scale exercises like archetype diagramming nonetheless can be useful to pinpoint gaps and opportunities to refine current approaches or expand into new platforms and markets. Often, it becomes a matter of upscaling content efforts that already work within specific teams into a more integrated strategy to improve collaboration, data and analytics, and customer experience, particularly between, say, digital, marketing, and social media teams.

Ultimately, the notion of “content is the product” is not far off in the context of a brand archetype approach to storytelling. A brand’s DNA becomes an established or supra-referential construct that is recognizable no matter how creative the storytelling gets, as long as the stories told reflect the same set of core elements and principles. While the product may be the main character of the story being told, it is not the “why” or moral of the narrative. The brand’s values are.





Luxury brands need to flip their mindset towards brand storytelling. They can no longer compete on broadcast storytelling, any more than they can on products or pricing anymore. It is all about creating value through content while communicating the supra-referential narrative of the brand's archetype. This is equally true for luxury brands as it is mid-market fashion companies. Consumers want to be heard, valued, and entertained. Luxury brands need to look at storytelling through a supra-referential lens to eke out their unique point of view, take the time to understand their target audiences, and then build a holistic, consumer-focused content strategy to create more personalized, targeted products and content.



JESSICA QUILLIN, PHD

CO-FOUNDER AND PRINCIPAL

1.202.250.0758

JESSICA@ITSWORKINGTITLE.COM

BRYCE QUILLIN, PHD

CO-FOUNDER AND PRINCIPAL

1.202.250.0762

BRYCE@ITSWORKINGTITLE.COM