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Rapha – weaving story strands of luxury

Abstract

British cycling company Rapha presents itself as a premium brand offering high quality apparel, concierge travel services, boutique 'clubhouses' and beautiful publications. Since 2004, it has enjoyed year-on-year growth and in 2016 sales increased almost 30% to £63 million (Wood 2017). This chapter critiques how we can know *that* and know *how* (Roberts and Armitage 2016) Rapha is a luxury brand – contrary to its labelling as 'premium' – and how this can be established through socio-cultural sense-making of the brand offerings, through critical textual analysis. This chapter interrogates how Rapha has developed a luxurious 'storyworld' (Abbott 2008) and charts how story strands of luxury are woven through its material artefacts, texts and environments, acting as a symbolic 'red thread' that cohesively binds the brand together.

Setting the scene.

The first place to find Rapha's voice or sense of 'self' is online where an organic search finds weblinks such as 'Rapha® Performance Roadwear' and 'Rapha: The World's Finest Clothing and Accessories' (Google 2017). Its aspirational sensibilities to connect with a global cultural elite can be seen communicated clearly through 'The World's', 'Finest' and 'Performance'. Moving on to the official Rapha website however, the Company webpage acknowledges Rapha's current business in expanded terms:

Rapha is now more than just a clothing company – in addition to an online emporium of performance roadwear, accessories and publications, the brand includes physical retail locations, luxury travel, and a cycling club with global membership.

(2017a)

This statement provides an overview of its business empire and reveals its span of lifestyle offerings, multi-media publishing and networked community. Particularly notable is a rare reference to 'luxury', however this is limited to travel. The descriptive noun 'emporium' does add associations of eclectic merchant wares and interestingly derives from the classic stem meaning 'journey' (Oxford University Press 2017a), a neat link to cycling as a mode of transport. If we employ Christopher Berry's (1994) four basic categories of luxury goods to check Rapha's fit, then the goods and services in their statement align to three: clothing ('performance roadwear'), leisure ('cycling club', 'luxury travel') and shelter ('physical retail locations'). Only Berry's fourth category of sustenance is satisfied indirectly, if one is aware that most Rapha retail locations are also clubhouses that contain cafés. Taking this broad view, Rapha can be considered as offering a full palate of universal goods and services to satisfy the luxury needs of a cycling community. Rapha's Company statement though neglects to reveal a meaningful aspect of any modern

brand – its culture. The cultural challenges of growing a luxury lifestyle brand are acknowledged by *The Business of Fashion* (2017):

Ultimately, luxury brands are selling culture – not mere products, but the cultural meaning that has condensed around these products. Yet culture takes time to grow. Building a [brand] with genuine social and cultural capital takes significant time, patience and associated long-term strategy and investment. This is something that aspirants often underestimate.

Simon Mottram, Rapha's CEO and founder, provides clues to his vision, which is imbued with socio-cultural resonance:

If you take everything out and away from Rapha, all the products, me, the trademark, all the technology, all the Clubhouses, all the staff, loving the sport is the most important thing. ... We want to help transform the sport... What that all adds up to is wanting to reach hundreds or thousands or millions of cyclists and take them by the hand, and take them on the most amazing journey through cycling. (2017)

The implicit backstory behind the '... transform the sport...' remark relates to the reputation of professional cycling, which has been negatively affected in recent years with allegations of doping among the highest echelons of the elite rider community. Mottram's motivation to contribute to positive reputation building may reflect his own concerns as a cyclist and his use of the brand to champion a personal goal is clearly in the hope it will resonate with impassioned cyclists globally. Indeed, it provides insight into Mottram's call-to-action communication style which shows purposeful storytelling zeal and his role in Rapha. 'As a storyteller you are a vital force in molding the culture of your organization, community and family' (Simmons 2006, p.221). Andy Bull labels this mission-focused brand activity 'cause marketing' stating: 'An organization that operates in a particular market, or a particular location, can support causes that concern the community they are seeking to engage with' (2013, p.69). Whether viewing Mottram's intentions cynically, one can at least trace passion and purpose in his statement, which belies his self-defined role as a 'superpromoter' (Vogelaar 2009) for the sport. He wants to offer the world a transformational experience through cycling (critically, he is not offering transformation through fashion). Pine and Gilmore (2007, p.47) define transformations as 'effectual outcomes that guide customers to change some dimension of self'.

Using luxury brands to attain a desirable lifestyle is a central component of the modern aspirational way of being and it chimes with the current zeitgeist of the socio-cultural trend of 'wellness' and the personal affordance of self-investment. It is a view reflected by global brand consultancy, Interbrand, which acknowledges the fast evolution of the concept of 'luxury' and proposes that we are now in a new age where brands are becoming a consumer's partner:

In the Age of You, enabled by intelligent infrastructure and powered by big data, the leading brands will develop integrated ecosystems of experiences and reshape the world around us. As people and devices become more connected and everything becomes 'smarter,' businesses are recognising the need to reorganize themselves around 'you'. As a result, each of us will become our own marketplace or 'mecosystem.' As 'intelligent everything' meets the mecosystems of the future, brands will

have unprecedented opportunity to create context, creative possibilities, and meaning for individuals — and value for all. And therein lies the challenge. (Robins 2015)

In the Age of You, brands are being required to connect deeply with 'me'. And if both luxury (and its purpose) are dependent on one's context, such as time, location and subjective positional viewpoint (one's selfhood), it seems highly appropriate to base this situated examination of Rapha on *my* own subjective interpretative praxis of the brand (in the mode of Gould 1991; Woodside 2004). As a long-term cyclist with years of commuting experience as well as being an academic with extensive past professional industry experience, I have come into contact with numerous products, retail environments and marketing messages aimed at persuading me to buy new cycling clothing. I have also been responsible as a public relations practitioner for promoting luxury fashion, along with as a design journalist critiquing brand storytelling that aims to sell products and create desire. This places an auto-ethnographic approach at the core of this examination, putting importance on the researcher's perspective (I, me), emphasizing personal storytelling and lending validity to the personal knowing. This auto-ethnographic approach is a valuable contemporary and critical response to alternative traditional, more empirically focused methods. Auto-ethnography can be defined as 'a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context' (Reed-Danahay 1997, p.9) and it insists on the use of personal stories, reflections, emotions and experiences, asserting the inevitably subjective nature of knowledge, using subjectivity deliberately as an epistemological resource (Butz and Besio 2009).

So what makes Rapha an instructive luxury case-study worth examining with this self-narrative approach? As a key example brand, Rapha stands out in the marketplace for its beautiful performance fabrics, well-cut and manufactured products and for additionally providing self-realization and 'meaning-making' far beyond the addition to a sartorial wardrobe of another cycling item. Instead, it offers a reflection of personal interests, common stories that reveal collective experiences of cycling, and that stimulate my own recollections of what it takes to power up a mountain when my legs are screaming with pain. One might ask – where is the luxury in that? To clarify a position on luxury, Kapferer and Bastien's (2012) description of luxury as distinct from premium is pertinent here:

Premium means pay more, get more in functional benefits. Luxury is elsewhere: it signals the capacity of the buyer to transcend needs, functions or objective benefits. This is how luxury brands are different from premium or super-premium brands: beyond the experience they bring creative power, heritage and social distinction.

Using this understanding as a basis, we can now consider how Rapha has transformed in such a short period into a rarified luxury lifestyle brand and how this has been communicated through stories.

Stories are commonplace in our culture as instructive vehicles of emotional, moral and causal tales. Contemporary consumer brands use stories frequently as conceptual slogans, such as luxury fashion brand Louis Vuitton, which uses the phrase 'the art of travel' to prompt marketing stories and images synonymous with rarified journeys to an elite global audience. In this instance, storytelling is being used to promote Louis Vuitton's wares by evoking emotional connections that move its audience – a commonplace promotional technique. 'Story was the *original* tool of influence,' states Annette Simmons (2006, p.230). Rapha certainly complies in this way, by using stories of cycling to create social and commercial influence yet crucially, it does much more, embedding

stories at the core of the brand and through the very fabric of its identity, constantly re-defining Rapha and its status as a luxury brand through storytelling. The distinctiveness of the brand's stories seems to be their consistency across all expressions of the brand and this is what we are to interrogate now, using Berry's four categories of luxury goods as a structural framework for the critical textual analysis of Rapha's material goods, services and environments, to ascertain the 'red thread' of luxury creates a coherent cultural storyworld (Abbott 2008).

Rapha and clothing

On the website, Rapha.cc, the range available spans menswear, womenswear and a nominal sample of kidswear. The subcategories vary from cycling kit for when on the bike (bib shorts, tights, jerseys, jackets and gilets) to off the bike (trousers, shirts, tops). The various collections available are distinctive in their purpose, level of performance-required, price points and promotional pitch. For example, the ethos of the Flyweight collection is communicated through the text 'Using the lightest fabrics for the hottest, most humid days' (2017b), which is placed over an image of four cyclists rounding a corner on a steep incline. The Brevet Collection (2017c) has the text line 'Designed with distance in mind' and an image of two cyclists riding by a river winding through tree-covered mountains. The Classic Collection (2017d) has the text title 'Rapha's Most Iconic Products' with a black-and-white grainy image of a cyclist riding on an empty road. Each collection is a distinctive fashion design story, defined by evocative text and visuals that take a different angle on romance, adventure and purpose on two wheels.

When selecting a clothing sample for analysis, the obvious place to begin is with a cycling jersey – an eponymous item that holds a central place in any cyclist's wardrobe. The Classic Jersey II is Rapha's core product and boasts the longest history. It is available in both men's and women's sizes and the white stripe on the sleeve has become a recognizable brand identifier on the roads of Britain. The product caption selling the men's jersey is a clear example of consumer-focused marketing stating:

A Classic Reborn. The Classic Jersey was Rapha's first ever product. A bold expression of the company's mission to create the world's best cycling apparel, it changed the industry. Predominantly black and cut from an unorthodox merino-wool-based fabric, *Bicycling Magazine's* Editor Bill Strickland declared it the 'best bike jersey the world has ever seen'. Twelve years in the making, Rapha introduces a new generation, the Classic Jersey II. Brought up to speed for 2016, this highly evolved design is cut from a new proprietary merino-wool-based fabric, milled to Rapha's exact specification. Called RPM150 (Rapha Performance Merino, the 150 indicates grams per square metre), it is lighter, softer and more breathable than generic merino-blends, adaptable to a huge range of conditions. Not stopping at the fabric, the construction of the jersey has also improved with a reworked fit and sections bonded rather than stitched. This reduces weight and bulk even further. (Rapha 2017e)

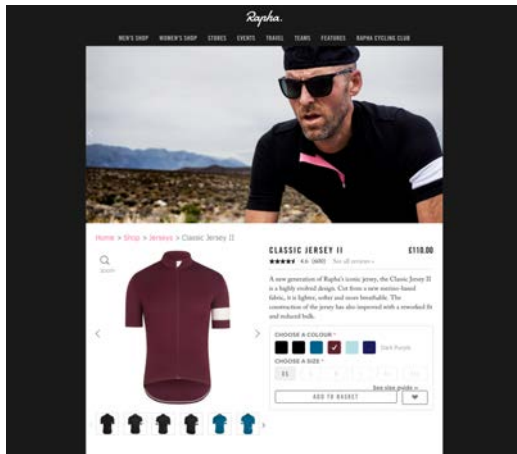


Figure 1 Image from Rapha.cc website, Men's Shop section showing a 'Classic Jersey II' cycling jersey top (2017) © Rapha

Structured as a short creative vignette, the storied lexicon within this passage belongs to the language of luxury, displaying modern luxe aspirations and qualifiers of luxury (see Kapferer 1998; Barnier, Falcy and Valette-Florence 2012). These include: global prestige representing social markers ('best bike jersey the world has ever seen'), heritage and culture attached to Rapha ('a classic reborn', 'changed the industry', 'introduces a new generation'), qualitative hedonistic experience and made to last ('highly evolved design', 'milled', 'bonded rather than stitched' properties of the merino), personalisation services ('adaptable to a huge range of conditions') and its price exceeding mere functional value (£110 in exchange for promise of craftsmanship 'twelve years in the making'). To add to this perception, we know *that* this jersey is a desirable product of universal need to any cyclist through the accreditation from an external media specialist, lending valuable international context and the value added promise of being 'the best'. Altogether, this reinforces the knowledge of luxury as temporal and relational. More information on the jersey is listed under the subtitle 'About the new RPM150 fabric', reinforcing the impression of the preoccupation with quality, not exclusivity, being the contemporary key definer of luxury for consumers globally (Albatross Global Solutions and Numberly 2015, cited by Tesseris 2015). Berry's (1994) says: '... luxury is a question of qualitative refinement rather than quantity' (p.24) and this caption communicates the message of luxury through adjectival qualities of refinement such as 'highly evolved [design]'. This impression is reinforced offline when physically touching the Classic II jersey, where tacit knowledge and the experience of quality is realized through sensory feedback: the merino fabric feels light, the bonded seams are smooth to the touch and the zip glides with faultless connection and a quiet buzz. It is evident *how* this jersey is luxury by its feel, look and sound, communicating refinement of aesthetic sensibilities and luxurious design.

A second sample of clothing to examine for evidence of luxury indicators is the men's Premium Denim - Slim jeans (see figure 2), provocatively chosen here for Rapha's labelling of 'premium'. The jeans are part of Rapha's City Collection and come with the tagline: 'For life on and off the bike' (Rapha 2017f). The collection brings Rapha as a sportswear brand into the more traditional realm of fashion clothing and reflects the two contemporary socio-cultural trends of 'wellness' and 'athleisure wear' (the latter defined by Merriam-Webster (2017) dictionary as 'casual clothing designed to be worn both for exercising and for general use' or conversely wearing activewear outside of the gym). The product caption reads:

The Premium Denim Jeans are designed to be extremely hard-wearing while maintaining optimum stretch for freedom of

movement. Made from a solid-colour cotton that is stain resistant and fast-drying, both the fabric and construction have been carefully considered to withstand the rigours of city riding. A reflective Rapha logo is printed inside the right leg, while hi-vis piping on the inside seam provides additional on-bike visibility when rolled up. A black cowhide leather patch on the outside waistband has a debossed Rapha logo. The jeans use a proprietary high-stretch 11.4oz denim, milled specifically for Rapha in Italy. (Rapha 2017g)

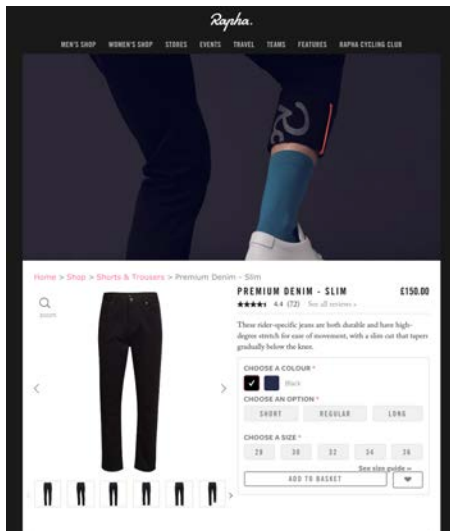


Figure 2 Image from Rapha.cc website, Men's Shop section, showing 'Premium Denim – Slim' jeans (2017) © Rapha

Although the caption seems remarkably utilitarian in its listing of functional characteristics, there is subtle evidence of storytelling, with the text implicitly communicating that the jeans are the perfect prop for the typical urban cyclist's transitional experience. It eschews an explicit story of a ride and instead uses provocations of oily, dusty, hazardous journeys evoked through details that rely on the customer's personal knowledge of city cycling, such as needing 'freedom of movement' and 'stain resistant and fast-drying'. Yet is it telling a story of luxury? Kapferer and Bastian's (2012) distinction between a luxury good and a premium one applies here:

...premiumness is based on objective superiority when comparing alternatives. The more you pay the more you get. Luxury instead is non-comparable. The pricing power of luxury instead rests on high intangibles, making the brand singular, unique: first and foremost its culture, heritage, then country of origin, exceptional know-how, fame of its clients, and so on. (pp.47-48)

At first reading, the jeans do seem to fit their premium label as quantitative and qualitative aspects could easily be measured against competitor jeans. Crucially, however, it is the assertions of the culture of cycling, the heritage of Italian production and their exemplary performance that supports that they are, in fact, a luxury item. Tacit understanding of this is likely clear to the consumer who has a propensity for international and urban reference points of excellence and quality, along with fashion, design and sporting know-how. Rapha preoccupations with stealth luxury is evident in the debossed brand logo on the exterior, a covert marque of sartorial distinction. Finally, awareness of exclusivity and provenance as luxury desirables is shown in 'milled specifically for Rapha in Italy'. To reinforce a more empirical argument *that* Rapha jeans are a luxury item can be found supported by external market data. The McKinsey Global Fashion Index (MGFI) is a quantitative benchmark system designed to categorize global fashion companies into six fashion market segments. In their 'State of Fashion 2017' report

(2016, p.40), it features a sales price index (with consideration of local geography) to view a standard basket of goods within each market segment. The example item is a pair of 'plain men's straight / slim cut jeans (no rips)'. Using this as a relevant comparison analysis tool, the price point of Rapha's Premium Denim – Slim men's jeans is £150 (converting to \$190 at time of analysis (Investing 2017)) and this places them in the 'Affordable Luxury' category (\$156–\$315), not in the lower 'Premium / Bridge' segment. To reflect briefly on Rapha's rationale for naming their product 'premium', it could denote that their sales lexicon is rooted in the commercial clothing market ('premium' meaning 'relating to or denoting a commodity of superior quality and therefore a higher price', Oxford University Press 2017b). It is also relevant to consider that Rapha consistently uses the words 'apparel' or 'clothing' rather than 'fashion', a deliberate choice of language that contributes to its identity as a brand that places performance-led design at its fulcrum, and pitches style (rather than fashion) as its cultural metronome. Rapha's own lexical preference for premium, however, does not preclude the evidence that we know *how* and *that* its stylish jeans are luxury.

Rapha and leisure

The next category for analysis of luxury indicators is that of leisure, explained by Berry (1984) as the effort spent undertaking activities that are a human necessity of living and concerned with bodily and physical satisfactions. Rapha engages with leisure on two social levels: cycling as recreation for amateur riders (Rapha's main customers) and cycling as a professional pursuit (their sponsorship of pro-teams such as Canyon/SRAM). To recap from earlier, the proposition here is that Rapha uses leisure as the driver to its entire business, casting luxurious goods and services as enabling props for the 'good life'.

The main vehicle for the activation of leisure activities is the Rapha Cycling Club (RCC), which launched in 2015. At the D&AD President's Lecture in London in January 2017, Simon Mottram stated that the RCC had over 9,000 members and was aiming for 50,000 within the next five to ten years. On Rapha.cc (2017h), the text claims distinctiveness in its field: 'The Rapha Cycling Club (RCC) is the first cycling club of its kind, an active riding and racing club designed to create a global community of like-minded, passionate road riders.' The RCC here is established as a boutique service, structured as a socio-cultural portal to elite leisure activity. If subscribed to the mailing list, the invitation to join the RCC comes through email, within which it sells the Club with a simple storied pitch: 'All together now, the Rapha Cycling Club' the script reads, accompanied by a photograph showing a band of smiling cyclists wearing Club striped jerseys. Clearly, this content indicates tribal inclusivity through two-wheeled leisure, an offer of how membership access equates to a unique passport to physical and social pleasure through cycling. Mottram himself acknowledges the tribal aspect, having been quoted as saying: 'Cycling is such a sport of tribes' (Lindsey 2017). As a mode of inclusion, the email invitation may not be the typical closed approach of traditional member clubs where an invitation often comes through having inside connections. Yet, in many ways, the RCC *is* an elitist, gated community. To join the RCC tribe, a 12-month membership costs £135 (Rapha 2017i) and the Member's webpage acts as a paywall behind which lies the community and leisure services, accessible to those who have the economic capital to afford it and the social and cultural capital to consider it desirable. As a commercial barrier it enforces the impression of Rapha as an 'affordable' luxury brand, with egalitarian roots in social trends such as the 'democratisation of luxury' (Evrard and Roux 2005). The success of the RCC is that it relies on an increasing number of global consumers with high disposable income and the penchant for high prestige luxury symbols and networked communities. Jones identifies these types of protected

areas accessed through consumption and economic capital as 'limited-access 'electronic communities" (1999, p.16). The barriers to join are insurmountable to those who cannot afford it and thus exclusive in their function. Agnès Rocamora discusses social and commercial parameters in the context of luxury fashion noting, 'gates and boundaries are re-embedded on digital platforms, allowing for the reproduction and maintenance of social hierarchies' (2016, p.210). On Rapha.cc it can be concluded, the digital paywall acts as a technological gatekeeper of aspirational prestige and literally signifies that you are either in or out of the Club. Mottram has taken his activation of socio-cultural tribalism further claiming:

I think Rapha is like a cult, but a good one as well, if you can conjure that idea, and I think that's no bad thing. And if people are in the Club, then they're part of the cult. (2017)

If membership is paid then access into the Club's Member's area or 'cult' host environment, is granted. Tribal connotations can be found infusing all areas and texts, such as the RCC's Terms and Conditions (2017j), of which these are excerpts:

The RCC motto is *ex duris gloria* ('glory through suffering'). [author's italics]

The RCC is international in perspective, character and membership.

The RCC is an inclusive club of like-minded individuals, and members are encouraged to get to know each other both on and off the bike.

The RCC identity includes RCC typography, RCC stripes & colours and the RCC shield.

Rapha is under fifteen years of age, yet here it is building a myth of a significantly longer heritage and communicating a territorial ambition. The Latin motto and the RCC identity, indicated through colours, type choice and shield, gives the sense of a legacy plumbed for authentic values and ancestral leanings.

The lexicon of social privilege continues (Rapha 2017j) under the Membership sub-header, where the text reads as a code of conduct and meticulous description is given outlining the expected standards of socio-cultural behaviour:

- RCC members will uphold good riding etiquette and camaraderie and abide by the Rapha / RCC ride etiquette rules. Members will greet other riders on the road, wait for dropped riders, and help those in need. ...
- The RCC champions the road less travelled and members are encouraged to use the road bike to explore new routes and discover adventures.
- The RCC honours the 'lanterne rouge' in every race; the RCC recognises the suffering needed just to survive.

These are organizing principles that reveal a culturally attuned level of civility, respect and deference – the formal tenets of a philosophy of cycling that Rapha has built into its foundations. It also reveals Rapha's interpretation of authenticity encompassing both the *context* of leisure ('social spins', 'new routes', 'discover adventures') and the *content* of leisure ('road bike', 'lanterne rouge', 'training rides'). The personal, temporal and spatial requirements listed inform and support the new member in conforming to their new consumer brand tribe. In terms of story, 'Championing the road less travelled' is the clue to the RCC's larger meta-narrative as a club of purpose, integrity and Western middle-class values, all activated in the pursuit of an adventurous ideal. This underwrites the sense

of luxury, situating Rapha as a label for the bourgeoisie, or in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, their tastes are 'tastes of luxury (or freedom)' (1996, p.177) rather than necessity, enabled by cultural and economic capital.

The Kit Rules list on the same RCC webpage also reveals cultural and liberal aesthetic persuasions stating, 'The RCC believes in creativity in cycling style, as long as it is done with panache and individuality.' (Rapha 2017j) In just a few short words, it communicates to the RCC members the conditionality of how and where style meets performance, revealing the essence and cultish control of this lifestyle brand as it challenges members to indulge in cycling at their leisure while consciously acting as brand ambassadors who exemplify both functional capabilities and aesthetic taste. Pierre Bourdieu comments on taste as a marker of class stating: 'Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier' (1996, p.6). Rapha's distinctive air of luxury comes through its penchant for both elite sporting and sartorial flair as displayed on its classifying riders.

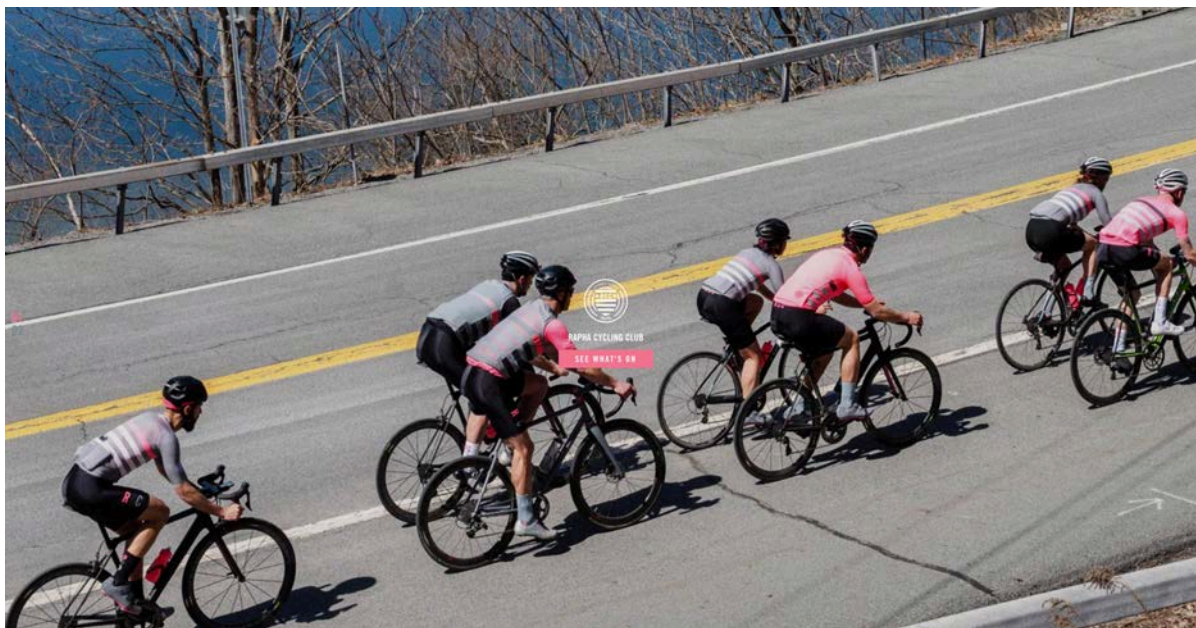


Figure 3 Image from Rapha.cc website, 'Membership' page (2017) © Rapha

On the RCC Membership landing page in the Members section (Rapha 2017i), a looping varied sequence of photographs alternately shows members riding together in Club colours (see figure 3), a close-ups of individual cyclists or an image of Rapha's own magazine, *Mondial*. Each image is accompanied by a short caption, such as 'Ride With Us', which provides a sense of the dynamic leisure activity of cycling and the social network of the RCC. Underneath, membership benefits are listed under three headers 'Ride', 'Race' and 'Rest', reflecting the benefits of luxury leisure as interpreted by this cycling brand. Examples include '21 RCC chapters in major cities, providing an international riding community', 'Free bike hire on Rapha Travel', 'RCC Race Jersey lifetime crash replacement', 'Monthly socials hosted at Rapha Clubhouses' and 'Priority access to annual sales and select new products'. Words such as 'exclusive', 'limited edition', 'personalised', 'preferential', 'priority access' and 'free' are used, all qualities that underpin the theme of luxurious experience, whether through VIP treatment or complementary services. These are signs of the 'staging of rarity' (Marion 2000, p.306) and also scarcity, which underpins the perceived elevated value of modern luxury goods and provides the logic of privileged inclusion, thereby engineering the desire to belong.

The link between experience and leisure is a common leitmotif for modern lifestyle brands and Rapha is no exception. End-of-season parties, pop-up events and hard luxury items such as RCC podcasts, RCC smartphone rides app and a 'fleet of high end Canyon bikes and Canyon Commuter bike hire from Clubhouses' exemplify this. With this potent mixture of leisure offerings, Rapha is reflecting clearly the market's current preference for luxury to be inclusive (note, to the 'right' extent, given luxury's relational importance), modern and experiential. In WGSN's *Condé Nast Future Luxury 2016 – Key Takeaways* report, it claims these aspects as core contemporary values reflecting:

The traditional perception of luxury as an indicator of status and wealth is questioned, as younger generations are aspiring more to personal expression and seeking brands that share their values. Leading a more refined life centred around culture, travel and wellness gives consumers more cultural cachet than possessing a luxury item, experts at the conference agreed, which is forcing the luxury industry to rethink their positioning, offering and marketing. (Ng 2016)

The relational geographical context of leisurely refinement can be found in its philosophy of 'Local Club, Global Community' (Rapha 2017i). This tagline reflects Rapha's 'glocal' approach, as defined as 'the interpretation of the global and the local, resulting in unique outcomes in different geographic areas' (Ritzer 2006, pp.337-338). When first joining, new members select their geographical 'Chapter', whether in Europe, North America, Asia Pacific, or the generic option, 'international'. The Rapha's web copy explains:

The RCC is split into chapters located around the world. Each chapter has a unique identity and when you join the RCC you choose the chapter geographically applicable to you. Most chapters are affiliated to a Clubhouse, which will become your base for events and rides. (Rapha 2017k)

The decision to use the word 'chapter' for the local RCC branches is intriguing. One definition of this word is 'the governing body of a religious community or knightly order' (Oxford University Press 2017c). The alignment to a specific chapter is reminiscent of other social clubs, such as American sororities and fraternities. It signifies the active role of the RCC chapter as a social structuring unit for a local community. Each chapter has a text describing its character, riders and ethos, for example:

London is the oldest of the chapters and also one of the largest. It is also a fluid group, with regular faces joining occasional riders for Wednesday hill sessions and Friday social laps of Regent's Park. ... These rides are very much about the journey and the chat and will usually involve lunch or a cake stop before heading back to town. ... (Rapha 2017l)

The description sells an accessible experience and is weighted semantically to drive inclusive engagement from both novice and experienced riders interested in leisure. It also contains overtones of tribal loyalty, hierarchy and expectations of members' behaviour, as much as what an RCC member can expect if coming along for a ride.

The unique identity of each local chapter is also helped by a distinctive and idiosyncratic graphic logo, or 'emblem' as Rapha calls it. The London chapter emblem, for example, comprises a black crown motif called 'Royal Greenery' and the story behind the design is explained on the website thus:

For one bloody Tudor ruler an area of isolated farmland on the wrong side of town had instant appeal. In 1538 King Henry

VIII seized what is now Regent's Park and added it to his vast collection of hunting chases, which today form London's Royal Parks. 'Old Coppernose' was known to follow a philosophy of working to live, not living to work and most mornings rose late, choosing to spend his day indulging in his favourite pastime rather than get on with the business of governing. It seemed fitting then, to base the emblem for the London chapter of the Rapha Cycling Club (RCC) and its Clubhouses in Soho and Spitalfields, on the emblem of London Royal Parks as a reminder to find time to do what you like best. (Rapha 2017m)

In this paragraph, the key character of King Henry VIII promotes a narrative of refined leisure equating to noble aspirations and the distinctive environs of royal parks evokes socio-cultural privilege. The story and its message resonates for me weeks later, when on a cycle ride of my own in North London, I ride around closed road barriers and into Regent's Park, past the royal crown, sitting atop the gate post. Its gold paint glints in the early morning sunlight and it reminds me of the Royal Greenery motif and the philosophy of mindful leisure, giving me validation that riding urban hills before breakfast is finding personal time to do what I like best. It is also evidence of my subliminal persuasion by the brand and exemplifies that Rapha's influence is not simply the stories it tells, rather that the stories have narrative congruence with my own experience. To sum up, it is 'the cumulative power of [my]... exposure to the meta-message' (Lakhani 2008, p.56) that is powerful and mobilizes.



Figure 4 Photograph of pillar displaying royal insignia and crown, at entrance to Regent's Park, London (2017) © Glover

Returning to the Rapha website and app, there can be found numerous storied pitches offering paid for leisure opportunities, most obviously in the travel section where it promotes future rides, events, trips, global training camps, races and tailored holidays. An example of an international trip is the RCC Summit Boulder, a 3-day supported trip in Colorado, USA, with the cost for a single occupant being £1,300 (Rapha 2017n). The web page (see figure 5) shows a photograph of a dusty road with a backdrop of tree-covered hills and a hazy recession of planes. This promotional copy sets the scene:

Local guides will lead rides through the old mining camps of Gold Hill, and along the famed Peak to Peak Highway, all supported by follow cars to provide mechanical assistance and ride fuel. Finish your day with some cold Colorado brews while enjoying the company of Summit VIPs and fellow RCC members as you watch the sun tuck behind the Rockies. (Rapha 2017n)

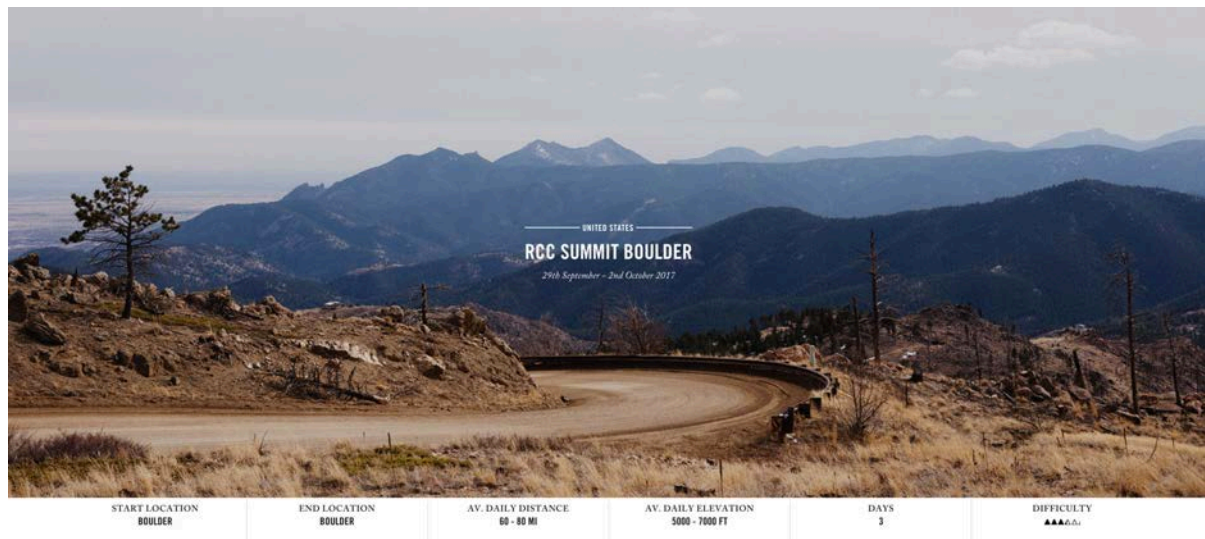


Figure 5 Image of Rapha.cc website, 'RCC Summit Boulder' webpage (2017) ©Rapha

This brief synopsis promises local context combined with the global content of a luxury leisure experience. Descriptive adjectives (such as 'cold Colorado' to qualify 'beer') have been used decisively along with entitled prefixes and abbreviations understood by an international clientele ('Summit VIP') denoting the importance of the conquering endeavour. These move the trip from the realms of the universal need for luxury into the elevated intentional realms of desire. It also communicates the collaborative effort by the brand and the members alike to achieve fulfilment, or physical and bodily satisfaction, through collective immersion in the cultural process of luxury glocalisation, that is 'the interpretation of the global and the local, resulting in unique outcomes in different geographic areas' (Ritzer 2006, 337–8). As part of a paid for riding experience, the Summit Boulder trip offers much opportunity for consumer engagement at all levels, for example, it offers collaboration through engendering purposeful activity between clients and support staff / brand (Rapha). Evans and McKee (2010, p.15) illustrate that structured engagement for consumers increases systematically as the social environment changes from consumption, curation, creation to collaboration, so for the price of £1,300, this trip is offering the highest levels of experiential engagement. In 1998, Pine and Gilmore (p.98) termed contemporary society the 'Experience Economy' explaining: 'An experience occurs when a company intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event.' Pine comments, 'Brands must remember that consumers are looking to become better people. ... If they are buying physical goods, it's to achieve aspirations, whatever they might be.' (Sherman 2016). Simon Mottram commented at the D&AD President's Lecture in London in 2017 that:

It [cycling] is a social thing, it is a thing you do with friends. You create better relationships on a bike than you do in any other walk of life. I guarantee it almost. It offers adventure, discovery, you often see the world, it is something that you can do

when you are seventy or you can do when you are seven. And it keeps you fit, and it is generally a good ecological and financial thing to do. It's got everything. (Mottram 2017)

It can be concluded that Rapha package their leisure travel services as the ultimate landscaped stage, with the bicycle and accessories acting as props. Achieving sporting and personal aspirations alongside results in a fulfilling luxury experience and networked community that thousands of international members subscribe to, proving Rapha is achieving a glocality of leisure that is scalable and seemingly authentic.

Rapha's shelter and sustenance

The last two categories of Rapha's portfolio to be considered are shelter and sustenance. A Rapha Clubhouse fits these two categories as both a standalone physical retail space and café. London's Soho is the original, hence its selection for analysis, and it is publicized on Rapha's website in the following terms:

Rapha's first-ever Clubhouse was launched in 2012 and instantly became a destination for the London cycling community. The location proved so popular that it was expanded in 2014, adding more retail space and a larger café area. The Clubhouse is located a stone's throw from Piccadilly on Brewer Street and is continually vibrant. ... Events are a regular feature of the Clubhouse, and visitors could find themselves rubbing shoulders with some of the biggest names in the sport, who will often make a point of visiting when they are in town. (Rapha 2017m)



Figure 6 Citroën H-Van in Rapha's Soho Clubhouse in Brewer Street, London (2017)

This is a persuasive blurb and it uses an inviting tone-of-voice and storied approach. On the summer's day that I visit, the door is open with the streets outside humming with taxis, pedestrians and cycle couriers. Immediately

inside, there is a horizontal metal rail with hooks for clientele to hang their bikes during their visit; none of the bikes are locked. The atmosphere inside is buoyant, with Rapha staff in branded T-shirts chatting to each other and clients, who are wearing a wide range of business clothing, athleisurewear, performance cycling wear, office shoes, distinctive trainers and cleated cycle shoes. The shop space is visually stimulating with framed photographs of historic riders, newspaper tears and cycling memorabilia hanging from walls and parked at the rear (see figure 6), a light grey Citroën H-Van. The iconic traditional *voiture balai* or 'broom wagon' holds an iconic and nostalgic place in the history of elite cycling, first introduced to the Tour de France in 1910 for the purposes of collecting overly slow competitors in the mountain stages. Behind the van is a large-scale black-and-white photograph of a snowy mountain pass giving appropriate environmental context. The H-Van is a significant leitmotif of Rapha's alignment to the mythology of cycling (see Barthes 1957) and again signifies cultural acuity. In the main body of the shop, there are orderly racks of clothing, a mannequin display of coloured jerseys (including a signed *maillot jeune*, a King of the Mountains jersey and jerseys from the Rapha current collection), and a traditional glass display case containing perforated leather shoes and wallets, with a classic Peugeot bike balanced on the top. Also on display are Rapha's own label skincare products such as Body Wash, which has the long title: 'Rapha, Summer Embrocation, Baume Chauffant, Warming Body Balm. Performance skincare' (see figure 7). The copy on the packaging gives further details:

Rapha Performance Skincare products are designed to protect your skin against the elements and the wear and tear of riding. A highly effective summer embrocation for warmer conditions. Contains warming agents Wintergreen and Capiscum as well as Menthol and Arnica to help revive and comfort the skin. The unique fragrance is inspired by aromatic plants and herbs found on the slopes of Mount Ventoux. (Rapha 2017o)



Figure 7 [left] Rapha Body Wash (2017) © Rapha

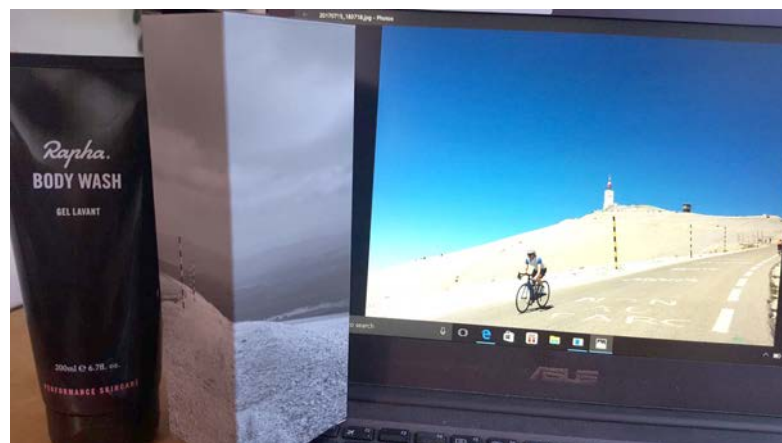


Figure 8 [right] Photograph of cyclist on Mont Ventoux, beside packaging of Rapha Body Wash showing same landscape (2017) © Glover

The combination of this evocative description (using the language of sensorial marketing) plus the monochromatic design of the packaging gives the impression that the product is aimed at both sexes. This acknowledges that *all* cyclists need functional products that soothe and sensorial products that recall positive memories. Mont Ventoux is a mythical mountain, viewed by most riders as one of the hardest climbs in Europe and often included as an iconic challenge in the Tour de France. For the price of £20, Rapha have attempted to imbue their body wash with

that magnetic feeling of elite summit success (figure 8) by utilizing a photograph of the landscape, a textual description and aromatic scent that taps into the experience.

The Soho Clubhouse retail space is connected to a similarly sized café which again displays goods imbued with cultural significance. A strip of pennant flags (the decoration at Pro races) hangs suspended from metal utility pipes above and a shiny metal bar, panini maker and Italian coffee machine add to the industrial chic ambiance that attracts 'hipster' clientele. A daily latte with heart-shaped froth art served in Rapha coffee cups is complementary to RCC members and many who come in do flash membership cards in exchange for their caffeine. The low café tables are glass display cases and these contain cycling related ephemera such as Ordnance Survey maps showing the terrain of classic climbs. A large screen situated behind the bar streams digital footage of international racing. These multi-layered elements all enforce the impression of Rapha as an adventurous European lifestyle brand, fueled by passion, adrenaline and a sense of adventure for the sport of cycling (see figure 9).



Figure 9 A coffee on glass display table containing paper map in Rapha's Soho Clubhouse, London (2017) © Glover

For the customer who likes immersion in luxury shelter and complementary sustenance, this highly designed, culturally loaded environment must provide a reassuringly elitist atmosphere. The Rapha bricks-and-mortar store offers an immersive experience, clearly fulfilling all five key experience–design principles that Pine and Gilmore (1998) define: theme the experience; harmonize impressions with positive cues; eliminate negative cues; mix in memorabilia; and engage all five senses (pp.102-104). For the casual or hungry visitor, this shelter provides gastronomic, multi-sensory sustenance; a space to sit and consume, to walk around and enjoy. We know *that* and *how* this is a luxury shelter that provides sustenance as it is consumer indulgence at its zenith, supplying accessible, affordable glocal culture and high quality, promotional, storied experiences as part of packaged 'shoppertailing' or 'entertailing'.

Conclusion

In this study, critical textual analysis of Rapha's goods, services and environments using Berry's (1994) basic categories of luxury goods has determined that we know *that* and *how* Rapha is a luxury lifestyle brand. It has shown that Rapha qualifies as a luxury brand through charting the socio-cultural indicators, refined qualities and culturally-loaded and materialised story strands that flow through the textual fabrics of its branded clothing, leisure offerings, Clubhouses (shelter) and cafés (sustenance). It has been discussed that luxury is manifest when pre-existing simple necessities and basic fundamental needs are fully met, and indulgence in the higher realms of esteem building and self-actualisation through material goods or experiences are attained. Therefore, if we believe its founder and CEO Simon Mottram's intentions, to '...take them [millions of cyclists] by the hand, and take them on the most amazing journey through cycling', then putting cycling itself at the heart of motivational self-actualization places Rapha's brand offerings in the role of agents, as satellite accoutrements through which the luxurious experience is achieved. Add to this the knowledge of Rapha's internal tagline 'glory through suffering' (Mottram 2017), then Rapha's luxurious goods are glorified packaging showcasing physical suffering, ultimately showing how Rapha's success is to dress the sport of cycling in the finest fabrics while telling tales of a luxurious experience.

This examination of Rapha altogether reveals how it has woven a 'red thread' of storied luxury throughout its brand world – its 'storyworld' (Abbott 2008) – and that these stories are activated with coherence through its material goods, texts and environments. Rapha utilises the history and myths of cycling as much as its contemporary scene to energise its audience and uses nuanced, value-based stories that rely on socio-cultural taste that speaks to a certain clientele. Rapha's textual and visual stories showcase themes of luxurious adventure, rarefied travel and a philosophy of leisure and this rich story content is personally validated by Mottram, who claims Rapha's uniqueness in its field:

So there are so many ways that we have been first, which I think is so important to the success of the company. Critically, urban wear, what we now call city clothing – we did that in 2005, when only a couple of other brands were even thinking about it. We were the first to do ... story-based product. Nobody was doing story-based product, which is crazy as it is a sport full of stories. (Mottram 2017)

It is in this manner that Rapha is remarkable and distinctive in the marketplace, namely by critically introducing style to cycling, supported by an experiential luxury lifestyle portfolio that is built around stories. It is possible therefore to conclude that Rapha's storytelling is wholly integrated within its offerings where the stories act as a promotional call-to-action, successfully influencing and mobilising an increasing global audience in search of authentic, opti-channel brand connection and luxurious experiences that resonate in this new Age of You.

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