

Research on the Brand Positioning and Differentiation Strategy of Richard Mille in the Luxury Watch Market

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Abstract: The current luxury watch market, dominated by heritage brands with centuries-old craftsmanship narratives such as Cartier and Rolex, poses huge entry barriers for emerging brands lacking historical legacy. This article mainly discuss how Richard Mille, a 21st-century luxury watch brand, has successfully established its brand positioning and adopt differentiation strategies without relying on conventional narratives of craftsmanship history. The central research question explores how innovative strategies—such as material innovation, experiential retail and athlete endorsements—enable emerging luxury brands to bypass historical constraints and create unique value propositions, attract clients, and sustain growth. Practically, it provides practical insights for emerging luxury firms seeking to improve their reputation as well as market prominence in hyper-competitive markets. Unlike F.P.Journe's reliance on horological purism and craftsmanship narratives, Richard Mille mainly emphasizes on Material Science Advancements, Immersive Retail Experiences and Strategic Celebrity Partnerships, enabling this brand to cultivate distinctive identities and capture reputation in saturated markets, thus contribute to its success in the market. In a hyper-competitive market, unique brand positioning and adopting differentiation strategies is crucial to bypass historical constraints and rapidly capture market share.

1 INTRODUCTION

For heritage luxury brands with centuries-old history, storytelling centered on their craftsmanship narratives, brand history and value is one of the most indispensable market strategies to maintain their positioning. As was assumed by the “dream formula” proposed by Dubois and Paternault (1995), historical legacy is an indispensable part for luxury branding, yet the success of Richard Mille has provided a striking counterexample. Kapferer & Bastien (2012) assert that exclusivity is central to luxury, yet emerging brands must redefine strategies to compensate for historical absence.

Previous Studies have revealed the essential elements for luxury branding. Kapferer and Bastien's (2012) emphasize the necessity of rarity and storytelling, yet insufficiently explores how emerging luxury brands can bypass historical narratives through value creation. Fionda and Moore (2009) dissect the core elements of luxury fashion but overlook technical innovation, a gap highlighted by Zhang and Müller (2022), who emphasize that the

new Swiss watchmakers' shift toward "engineering theatrics" can help bypass their historical constraints. Limited research explores emerging brands like Richard Mille, who fully leverages celebrity partnerships as well as forward-looking design to redefine brand exclusivity (Gaskins, 2024). The existing research gaps indicate that more insights are needed to address problem concerning how could emerging luxury brand bypass their historical constraints and create their own brand value in today's market.

By analyzing literature research and adopting a comparative case analysis, this study firstly dissects Richard Mille's positioning and then practically compares its three primary marketing strategies composed of material innovation, experiential retail and athlete endorsements with F.P.Journe's conventional strategies centering around craftsmanship, followed by analysis on the disparity in the effectiveness of the two brand strategies and what contributes to Richard Mille's success.

2 BRAND INFORMATION OF RICHARD MILLE

Founded in 2001 by French entrepreneur Richard Mille, Richard Mille has redefined exclusivity through its avant-garde engineering, radical designs and cutting-edge materials adoption such as carbon composite and titanium. Known as "the Formula 1 of watches," Richard Mille positions itself at the intersection of hyper-luxury and high performance, targeting wealthy customers valuing innovation over tradition. Over the past few years, Richard Mille has become one of the Swiss watch brands that have grown much faster than their competitors and have been capturing the lion's share of the watch industry's profit pool (Zhang & Müller, 2022)

Richard Mille exemplifies how modern brands can dominate through differentiation strategies, challenging conventional aesthetics and prioritizing technological artistry (Joy, 2022). Considering emerging luxury firms seeking to improve their reputation as well as market prominence in hyper-competitive markets, Richard Mille's bold, innovation-centric approach is a highly significant research subject for reference.

3 RICHARD MILLE'S POSITIONING AND VALUE PROPOSITION

3.1 Brand Positioning of Richard Mille

Richard Mille positions itself as the "Formula 1 of Haute Horlogerie". Targeting upmarket customers, Richard Mille blends cutting-edge technology with avant-garde design to produce timepieces that are both engineering marvels and status symbols, blurring the lines between sporty, industrial, futuristic and playful (Campuzano, 2023).

Richard Mille's meteoric rise can be attributed to its strategic celebrity partnerships, among them, the most widely known one is its partnership with tennis star Rafael Nadal, who wore the RM 27-05 during the French Open, as mentioned by Gaskins (2024). Another consideration is its nontraditional storytelling emphasizing on material innovation. Unlike heritage brands, Richard Mille bypasses historical narratives and promotes its futuristic craftsmanship, reinforcing the brand's scarcity and status (Bwambale, 2023). Besides, its emphasis on futuristic design can also be seen from its immersive

retail experiences, Richard Mille's retail stores are designed to reflect high-tech and modern ethos. Unique materials and innovative layouts are often adopted in its boutiques to create an environment immersing customers into the brand's universe.

3.2 Brand Value Proposition of Richard Mille

Richard Mille's core values center around Horological technical Innovation, Futuristic design and Emotional Resonance

RM's adoption of aerospace-grade materials positions it as a leader in horological innovation. Richard Mille invests heavily in pioneering materials such as gold-carbon TPT and develops in-house movements with shock resistance up to 5,000g. This kind of innovations in technology and materials associate Richard Mille with engineering mastery, aligning with Joy's (2022) concept of "artification", where technology turns into wearable art.

Rejecting traditional aesthetics, RM embraces avant-garde and skeletonized designs demonstrating subtle turning of watch hands, one typical example is RM 40-01 McLaren Speedtail. Besides, collaborations with motorsport giants like Ferrari infuse automotive dynamism into horological design, appealing to consumers seeking futuristic aesthetics.

Beyond horological innovation, the brand's celebrity partnerships create emotional resonance, fostering aspirational loyalty (Zha et al., 2023). These collaborations turn its timepieces into symbols of elite achievement, sportsmanship and extraordinary insight, resonating with consumers seeking self-expression as well as status.

By balancing Horological technical Innovation, Futuristic design and Emotional Resonance, the brand value proposition of Richard Mille transcends timekeeping, enabling the brand to establish certain customers base while maintaining its exclusivity. As Veloutsou et al. (2022) argue, such differentiation can help brands dominate global markets while commanding unparalleled loyalty and price premiums.

4 RICHARD MILLE'S POSITIONING AND VALUE PROPOSITION

Founded in 1999 by François-Paul Journe, F.P. Journe is a Swiss luxury watch brand positioning itself as a bridge connecting traditional horology and

contemporary artistry. Known for its commitment to horological heritage, the brand targets connoisseurs valuing timeless elegance as well as craftsmanship. Unlike Richard Mille's cutting-edge brand positioning, F.P.Journe prioritizes historical continuity and craftsmanship narratives, aligning with Vigneron and Johnson's (2004) luxury perception dimensions of history and craftsmanship. Similar to most well-known luxury watch brand with rich historical legacy, F.P.Journe, as an emerging brand, also titles itself as a guardian of horological tradition and mechanical artistry, maintains its exclusivity through limited production and controlled supply chains.

4.1 Current Development Status

Rejecting mass production, the brand sticks to its technical exclusivity. Its unique design "FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA FFC Blue" sold for CHF 4.5 million at Only Watch 2021, while a platinum tourbillon fetched CHF 3.53 million at Phillips 2023, setting new records. The brand keeps maintaining its scarcity through limited editions, with certain series appreciating by seven times in value within three years. Although Chanel acquired a 20% stake to support the brand's expansion in 2018, its production remains manual with merely 120 craftsmen at its Geneva workshop.

4.2 Reasons for Choosing F.P.Journe as the Comparative Group

As a successful representative of the modern luxury watch industry, F.P.Journe shared a similar founding time with Richard Mille, with the former one founded in 1999 and the latter founded in 2001. By selecting this comparative group, the influence of uncontrollable factors caused by the founding time on the research results of this study can be reduced, thereby making the research outcomes more accurate and reliable.

More importantly, the two respectively represent completely different brand positioning and marketing strategies:

Tradition vs. Futurism: Richard Mille embodies avant-garde "hyper-tech" aesthetics, in contrast, F.P.Journe represents historical continuity through classical design and craftsmanship. Such brand positioning difference results in two distinct marketing strategies.

F.P.Journe serves as an ideal comparative group not merely through similar founding time as well as its opposition to Richard Mille, but by representing

the "traditional mastery" alternative in modern luxury watch market, providing a typical example to analyze the strategies of the emerging luxury brand.

5 COMPARISON OF THE TWO BRANDS' MARKETING STRATEGIES:

5.1 Richard Mille's Strategy

5.1.1 Material Science Advancements

The pioneering adoption of advanced materials of Richard Mille has positioned itself as a leader in horological innovation. Aerospace-grade materials such as Carbon TPT® and titanium alloys reflect the brand's commitment to high performance as well as avant-garde aesthetics, thus attracting a certain customer who is obsessed with mechanical and futuristic design.

One typical example is the RM UP-01, recognized as the thinnest mechanical watch in the world with merely 1.75mm thickness, it exemplifies that material science could also drive differentiation, rather than conventionally stressing on craftsmanship.

The adoption of Carbon TPT® was developed through a partnership with Thin Ply Technology Group. This material enhances products' durability while reducing weight, which is extremely critical for sports-oriented designs. Such material innovations have both functionality and a futuristic design sense, elevating functional objects to art (Joy, 2022).

Through redefining material breakthroughs as technical achievements and artistic expressions, Richard Mille appeals to customers seeking both exclusivity and performance.

5.1.2 Immersive Retail Experiences

Richard Mille prioritizes immersive and unique retailing environments, turning its retail experiences into a narrative medium expressing the brands' attitudes.

Different from F.P.Journe's focus on inviting, intimate and salon-style settings that highlight artisan workshops, Richard Mille's stores integrate a lot of digital elements to illustrate material innovations and provide customization options.

Richard Mille's flagship stores such as the "speakeasy"-styled boutique located in Singapore, employ hidden entrances and interactive displays to evoke a sense of exploration as well as privilege. One

of the most recognizable designs of Richard Mille's retailing space can be its central installation, a Immersive 36-degree projection mapping, which allows clients to visualize the molecular structures of its materials such as Carbon TPT® and Quartz TPT® composites. This unique retailing design bridges tactile with digital native engagement patterns, as conceptualized by Veloutsou et al. (2022). What's more, clients can customize watch components in real-time, observing how different material combinations can determine technical specifications through dynamic simulation overlays, appealing to a large group of young fans.

The immersive retail experiences provided by Richard Mille confirms the importance of strategic experiential marketing stated by Bwambale (2023), where physical spaces act as brand narratives that deepen emotional connections.

5.1.3 Strategic Celebrity Partnership

Richard Mille's collaborations with well-known athletes and celebrities not only validates the performance of its products, but also create a sense of human achievement, turning its timepieces into symbols of elite achievement, sportsmanship and extraordinary insight, resonating with clients seeking self-expression as well as status.

The most famous collaboration of Richard Mille is its sponsorship with Rafael Nadal. During the 2024 French Open, Nadal's RM 27-04 withstood repeated 130km/h movements and 2,500g groundstroke impacts, verifying that the brand's suspension system reinforced by graphene is highly suitable for sports. Such collaborations transformed product testing into public witness of mechanical endurance.

What is more, the collaborations strengthen Richard Mille's ethos of extreme performance, fostering "empowered loyalty" through aligning brand values with the aspirational lifestyles of influencers (Zha et al., 2023).

5.2 F.P.Journe's Strategies

FP.Journe's strategies is a condensed representation of many conventional luxury brand marketing strategies.

FP.Journe cultivates its brand identity mainly through three interconnected strategies: heritage preservation, cultural partnerships and retailing design emphasizing on artisan workshops. In sharp contrast to Richard Mille's marketing strategies, these approaches reflecting F.P.Journe persistence in pursuing traditional craftsmanship and historical

storytelling, aligning with two of the five dimensions defined by Vigneron & Johnson's (2004): History and Craftsmanship.

5.2.1 Heritage Preservation

From the very essence of F.P.Journe's value is its perpetuation of 18th-century horological traditions and high-quality craftsmanship, which can be reflected from the motto of its founder François-Paul Journe "Invenit et Fecit" which means "Invented and Made".

Some classic design series illustrate F.P.Journe's commitment to historical handcrafted excellence. For instance, the Breguet's tourbillon principles can be seen from the design of Tourbillon Souverain series.

Norifumi Seki, the 2020 winner of the Young Talent Competition, showcased a hand-carved spherical moon complication, demonstrating F.P.Journe's dedication to preserving mechanical artistry in an automated era.

5.2.2 Cultural Partnerships

Corresponding to Dubois & Paternault's (1995) "dream formula", F.P.Journe's partnerships with cultural institutions elevate the brand's artistry.

Collaborations with well-known cultural entities like the Musée des Arts et Métiers in Paris enable F.P.Journe to reinforce its connection to artistic excellence, in the meanwhile, subtly appeal to customers who value and appreciate fine craftsmanship and art. Besides, these events allow the brand to directly engage with art enthusiasts, collectors, and connoisseurs, showcasing its horological artistry beyond the commercial aspect. These cultural partnerships create a F.P.Journe's world for its clients where timepieces are viewed as expressions of creativity, fine craftsmanship, and cultural significance.

5.2.3 Retailing Design Emphasizing on Artisan Workshops

One of its core brand DNA -- perpetuation of craftsmanship can always be sensed in F.P.Journe's retailing stores. The brand transforms boutiques into live theaters illustrating craftsmanship, making its artisanal processes more visible to clients. One typical example is the F.P.Journe's Maison de Genève, the brand turns the retailing space into an open-plan atelier where master watchmakers assemble movements in full view.

In addition, the brand's "Workshop Series" events can exemplify that F.P.Journe's attaches great

importance to its exclusivity. At its Tokyo flagship, clients attendance is restricted to 12 guests monthly, creating an experiential exclusivity rather than merely production limits (Bwambale, 2023).

5.3 Comparison

Richard Mille and F.P.Journe represent two distinct marketing approaches to luxury watchmaking, both leveraging their own strategies to maintain exclusivity, customers' desirability and emotional resonance. While both founded around 2000, their tactics diverge sharply in execution, reflecting contrasting brand positioning and targeted customers. As argued by Anreola (2024), a historical artisan enterprise can contribute to its value creation. More importantly, in an increasingly globalized market dominated by large brands, maintaining artisan autonomy can still represent a competitive advantage. Aligning with Anreola's (2024) opinion, F.P.Journe's core strategies are implemented based on its pursuit of heritage and craftsmanship, and these are also the essence of many conventional luxury brand's strategies. Collections like the Tourbillon Souverain can symbolically reflect its classical design principles; Collaborations with cultural institutions like the Musée des Arts et Métiers position its watches as cultural masterpieces; Its retail space resemble open-plan workshops, where clients witness live craftsmanship. All of these marketing strategies target older, traditional luxury consumers, including horology purists, art collectors, and heritage-focused elites, and that is also the consumer group targeted by most conventional luxury brands, indicating a highly competitive market.

Whereas, Richard Mille ingeniously turns its attention to affluent, relatively younger, tech-oriented individuals in dynamic industries including tech entrepreneurs, athletes, collectors of contemporary art, avoiding such a competitive situation to some extent.

Compared with F.P.Journe, Richard Mille Initiated a brand-new marketing strategy targeting the contemporary younger consumer group with great potential and strong purchasing power. The brand prioritizes material science over craftsmanship, deploys interactive technologies to strengthen immersive experience and collaborates with athletes to transform watches into symbols of elite performance, these three primary strategies all illustrate Richard Mille's bold move to launch an innovative strategies for emerging luxury brand.

According to the "Dream Formula" proposed by Dubois and Paternault (1995):

F.P.Journe sustains its elite aura mainly through heritage and craftsmanship, limiting visibility to audiences and emphasizing artisanal rarity. Its "dream" centers around timelessness, appealing to clients valuing historical legacy.

While Richard Mille amplifies customers' aspiration through material innovation and digital engagement, making its "dream" accessible through high-profile celebrities while maintaining exclusivity via premium pricing and avant-garde materials. Its strategy targets a customers' values distinction through modernity.

The two brands exemplify polarized interpretations of luxury. The former cultivates tradition, resonating with connoisseurs who value artisanal storytelling as well as cultural permanence. The latter thrives on disruption, attracting a younger, performance-driven audience through material innovation and digital engagement. Both succeed but tailor their balance of exclusivity and aspiration to their own brand positioning and understanding of luxury.

6 ANALYSIS ON WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO RICHARD MILLE'S SUCCESS

To fully understand the value of Richard Mille's marketing strategies, it's of great importance to analyze the overall market environment in which the emerging luxury brands are situated. For emerging luxury watch brands, F.P.Journe can be assumed as one the most successful modern brands in leveraging historical narratives and craftsmanship, but even so its reputation and market share still pale in comparison to Richard Mille and many traditional well-known brand. It is really demanding for emerging brand to imitate the practices of F.P.Journe due to the challenges they face.

The first obstacles they may encounter is how to attract outstanding craftspeople, which is acknowledged by Tarquini et al. (2022). In the hyper-competitive luxury market, it is really demanding for emerging brands to find suitable craftspeople who inherit the craftsmanship passed down from generation to generation by their ancestors. Another greater difficulty is the targeted customers. Emerging luxury brands often struggle to establish credibility among discerning consumers prioritizing heritage and craftsmanship. For Millennials, emerging brands have to take one thing into consideration: convincing their customers to choose their own heritage and

craftsmanship rather than those classic brands owning a history of several hundred years of heritage. Besides, for younger generation, luxury is more about expressing social status and identity (Ludborza, 2024), indicating that they might not appreciate history and craftsmanship as much as the older generation.

Richard Mille's rise in the luxury watch market since its foundation in 2001 is of great reference value for emerging luxury brand. Its success can be attributed to mainly three critical factors behind its success: targeted clients, adaptation to modern aesthetic trends and building brand awareness.

6.1 Targeted Clients

Richard Mille's target customers comprises younger, affluent individuals in dynamic areas such as tech, finance, and sports. This customer group tend to focus less on the historical background behind the brand than conventional luxury consumers. Richard Mille cater to these consumers prioritizing cutting-edge engineering because its high-tech materials adoption and futuristic designs align with their recognition of the noble status. The brand's immersive retail experiences further solidify its appeal. Interactive projections of material molecular structures and real-time customization tools resonate with younger generations who value experiential luxury and individualized service.

6.2 Adaptation to Modern Aesthetic Trends

Richard Mille seizes the modern aesthetic shift toward "functional art" in luxury. For instance, the integration of sports-inspired styles such as the RM 65-01's F1-derived carbon fiber case reflect a broader trend of luxury goods embodying dynamic, performance-oriented narratives.

6.3 Building Brand Awareness

Richard Mille keep elevating the brand visibility through celebrity and sports Partnerships. As the sports fields Richard Mille collaborates with are all of high-end nature, such cooperation not only enhances the brand's reputation but also enables the brand to reach out to a group of elites who have greater potential to become brand clients, thus improving its brand awareness among its targeted customers.

6.4 Lessons for Emerging Luxury Brands

Richard Mille's success stems from its ability to harmonize technological innovation with storytelling, targeting emerging affluent customers while staying ahead of aesthetic trends. From the very essence of Richard Mille's case is not being trapped by the conventional thinking of marketing strategies, targeting customers with large potential and raising the recognition of brand identity. To bypass historical constraints, emerging luxury brand need to clarify their own brand positioning, keep up with the mainstream trends of the luxury market such as technological innovation and high-tech material adoption, and adopt differentiation strategies to attract customer base, thus enhancing its popularity and market share more rapidly in hyper-competitive markets.

7 CONCLUSION

F.P.Journe follows the conventional luxury brand strategies, leveraging heritage preservation and artisanal storytelling to attract traditional connoisseurs, but it can be demanding for emerging brand to follow its path. In contrast, Richard Mille boldly redefines luxury through material innovation, immersive retail experiences, and strategic celebrity partnerships. The analysis reveals that Richard Mille's differentiation strategies enable it to bypass historical constraints faced by most emerging brands. Through targeting customers with large potential, aligning with contemporary aesthetic trends and building brand awareness, Richard Mille gradually improved its reputation and market share.

For emerging luxury brands without historical legacy, Richard Mille's success offers actionable insights: the key lies in breaking away from the conventional luxury-marketing framework, clarifying their own brand positioning, keeping up with the mainstream trends of the luxury market and adopting differentiation strategies to attract customer base.

Whereas, Limitations of the article also exist. Focusing on merely two Swiss brands, this comparative study can not fully represent luxury market dynamics. Additionally, reliance on previous academic materials indicates that some inferences are merely theoretical and lack data support. Third, the analysis overlooks regional market variations (e.g., Asia's growing preference for hybrid luxury-tech products).

In brief, Richard Mille's strategies demonstrate that emerging brands have potential to thrive by redefining luxury through technological artistry and aspirational storytelling. Yet, the enduring appeal of craftsmanship, as seen in F.P.Journe, underscores that tradition remains a feasible but demanding path for brands targeting legacy-oriented clients.

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