

Why do Certain Urban Brands Like Ralph Lauren Stay Relevant? | The Atlanta Post

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By Barbara Thau

Polo Ralph Lauren, anchored by its tony, classic-Americana aesthetic, and Louis Vuitton, marked by an unapologetically status-driven image with a touch of bling, are two disparate brands that have held consistent sway with the African American audience.

By contrast, Mark Ecko, the street wear and apparel line, as well as fashion brand Baby Phat, have lost their footing with the Black audience. So why have these two sets of fashion brands garnered different marketing results with African Americans, who, according to Diversity Affluence—a firm that helps brands market to the affluent ethnic audience—hold more than \$100 billion in purchasing power?

While there are no easy answers, Polo Ralph Lauren and Louis Vuitton share a clearly defined style identity, a patina of authenticity and a timeless quality, brand experts say. By contrast, Mark Ecko and Baby Phat have lost their bite, and in some ways, have not evolved with their audience. “Both Louis Vuitton and Ralph Lauren have done an excellent job creating authentic, long-standing images that attract both high income and aspirational shoppers,” said Wendy Liebmann, chief executive officer and chief shopper of WSL Strategic Retail, a marketing consulting firm that works with manufacturers and retailers. “And I think that works for African American shoppers who are very interested in designer fashion.”

While Mark Ecko and Baby Phat would be defined as urban brands, Louis Vuitton and Ralph Lauren would not—but that doesn't mean the latter two don't appeal to a sophisticated, urban audience. **Indeed, part of what defines an urban aesthetic is rooted in the richness of African American culture, said Amy Shea, executive vice president and director of brand development for Brand Keys, the brand consultancy. And while it might not seem so on the surface, that sensibility has something in common with luxury fashion brands. African American culture—which is really synonymous with urban culture— has “pushed the boundaries,” Shea said. “If you look at what urban culture really means, it stands for who exists on the edge of fashion, art and music. It's about pushing against what's happening now” to usher in the new—“and that's what couture and luxury brands are all about,” she said.**

