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# **The Tabi Boots Phenomenon. Exploring the Impact of Signature Products on a Brand: A Case Study of Maison Margiela**

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**Abstract:** Some fashion products go beyond their functional purpose and become cultural symbols. In the luxury fashion industry, iconic items can significantly impact a brand. This study aims to discover how companies can benefit from signature products and implement them in their overall branding and marketing strategies. It specifically focuses on the Tabi Boot by Maison Margiela, a unique item that has gained increased media attention in recent years. The analysis of branding concepts and the various case studies on iconic products revealed especially a gap in the research on Tabi boots. The main research problem focuses on how consumer perceptions and what behaviours can be observed in regard to iconic products with a focus on Maison Margiela and Tabi boots. This study uses a quantitative method to collect data using a CAWI questionnaire. The findings present valuable insights about the impact that iconic products can have on branding and marketing strategies.

**Keywords:** Maison Margiela, Tabi Boots, iconic product, luxury fashion, luxury fashion branding

## **1. Introduction**

In fashion, certain products exceed their functional purpose and become cultural symbols that can have substantial impact on a brand. This study focuses on discovering how companies can benefit from signature products and how they can be implemented in their overall branding and marketing strategies. Additionally, this paper explores a specific product which is the Tabi Boot by Maison Margiela. This unique item has received increased attention in media over the past few years and this research analyses its phenomenon and how it impacts the Maison Margiela brand. The significance of this study lies in its potential to provide insights into the strategic creation and promotion of iconic products within the luxury fashion

industry. It may also offer practical information regarding the impact of popular products on brand image, awareness and loyalty.

The research problem is centred on the consumer perceptions of Maison Margiela Tabi shoes and the overall impact they have on branding which can be divided into a few objectives. The first one is to find out what consumers from various backgrounds consider iconic as well as how their perceptions fit with the presented examples of iconic products. The next objective is specifically about the consumers' attitudes and perceptions towards Tabi Boots. The literature review was conducted from December 2023 to May 2024 and the research was conducted during May 2024. The research approach was quantitative and was carried out using a survey and a CAWI questionnaire.

## **2. Role of Iconic Products in Luxury Fashion**

The product plays a central role in the offer of a luxury fashion brand. It could be considered as the foundation which the rest of the brand is built upon. Luxury goods are valued beyond their functional purposes because of the intangible attributes and associations consumers create based on a company's branding efforts. Consumers form opinions based on attributes and benefits of products offered by the brand (Jain, 2017). How companies construct and communicate these values is a crucial part of their strategy. One of the signs of this communication can be seen in a surge of labelling certain fashion items as 'iconic' or 'signature' in the recent years.

Studies emphasise the importance of iconic products and signature design as a vital part of the luxury fashion segment (Bruce & Kratz, 2007; Fionda & Moore, 2009). Research done by Nagasawa and Sugimoto (2015) suggests that iconic products should align with the brand's core values and origins. Iconic products often have a rich history and are deeply rooted in the brand's heritage and tradition. These products are said to represent the brand's DNA (Fionda & Moore, 2009). Additionally, research suggests that iconic products have a halo effect on the rest of the brand's offer which might be considered less iconic or more affordable. This was proven in a study about Hermès Birkin bag and carré scarf – the scarf scored insignificantly lower than the bag on the exclusivity scale (Sugimoto & Nagasawa, 2015).

Luxurious products are meant to represent certain qualities like social status, wealth and style. One of the ways brands can add meaning to their products is via a marketing strategy called celebrity endorsement (Johansson & Bozan, 2017). Iconic products can be promoted using celebrities that the general public is familiar with and associates them with certain attributes (McGuire, 1985). McCracken's research implies that celebrity endorsement can be explained via a process called meaning transfer where a celebrity is able to transfer certain attributes associated with themselves onto the product by various ways of advertising. Finally, the consumer is able to acquire these attributes by purchasing the product. In order for the final stage to be successful and draw consumers to purchase, the product must

represent qualities desired by the consumer. This could mean that iconic items could be created using a celebrity that would transfer the iconic qualities onto it. Products with specific features are one of the main tools for brand differentiation (Okonkwo, 2007). These distinctive characteristics help create a unique brand identity that sets the brand apart in a competitive market, which suggests that iconic products should not be overlooked when it comes to developing a branding strategy.

To further study the concept of iconic products in luxury fashion, chosen items which were described frequently as iconic in literature and various media (movies, TV shows, social media, magazines) were analysed. The results are summarised in Tab. 1.

**Table 1.** Summary of iconic products

Iconic product	Signature feature	What made it iconic?
Hermès Birkin bag	Oversized yet elegant shape, high-quality leather, signature padlock and key closure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebrity endorsement (Jane Birkin)</li> <li>• Extreme exclusivity and rarity</li> </ul>
Lady Dior bag	Quilted pattern, D.I.O.R. letter charms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebrity endorsement (Lady Diana)</li> </ul>
Dior Saddle bag	Silhouette resembling a horse saddle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appearance in <i>Sex and the City</i></li> <li>• A sudden comeback after a few years</li> </ul>
Burberry Trench coat	Classic double-breasted coat silhouette, tan and beige colours, checkered lining	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water-resistant gabardine fabric</li> <li>• Celebrity endorsement (Kate Moss)</li> <li>• Classic silhouette associated with British style</li> </ul>
Chanel suit	Tweed fabric, contrasting trims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovative silhouette that revolutionized womenswear</li> <li>• Association with Coco Chanel</li> </ul>
YSL Le Smoking suit	Masculine silhouette with pants, pristine tailoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovative silhouette, for the first time featuring trousers as evening-wear for women</li> <li>• Becoming a symbol of feminism in 1960s</li> </ul>
Christian Louboutin Red-Soled Shoes	Red soles, high heel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eye-catching design feature</li> <li>• Association with luxury and glamour</li> </ul>
Rick Owens Geobasket sneakers	Exaggerated shape, extended tongue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unique aesthetic</li> <li>• Controversy with Nike</li> <li>• Rarity (for the discontinued version)</li> </ul>
Rick Owens Ramones sneakers	Chunky silhouette, exaggerated rubber toe box	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unique aesthetic</li> </ul>
Balenciaga Triple S sneakers	Chunky multi-layered sole, exaggerated shape	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebrity and influencer endorsement</li> <li>• Bold oversized shape</li> </ul>

Source: own elaboration.

Most of the presented pieces gained their status mainly through unique design elements such as the Birkin bag's padlock, Louboutin's red soles or the Chanel's

tweed fabric. This combined with celebrity endorsements and cultural significance helped to establish them as iconic symbols of luxury fashion.

### 3. Maison Margiela Tabi Boots

The fashion house Maison Margiela was founded by a designer Martin Margiela and his partner Jenny Meirens in 1988 (Holzemer, 2019). The avant-garde design of the garments clearly signal Margiela's rejection of traditional fashion tropes. Tabi boots are undoubtedly one of the most famous items made by Maison Margiela. They have been a constant staple in each of the brand's collection.

The shoe made its first appearance in the first Margiela show in 1988, shocking everyone with its unusual, split-toe design (Foster, 2021). Traditionally the style of Tabis comes from Japan and the split between the toes was made to accommodate traditional sandals (Cox, 2012). Margiela's interpretation of the Tabis captures the essence of his brand. His version has a modern feature – a thick, cylindrical heel that gives the shoes height which adds a feminine touch (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** Tabi boots with an 8 cm cylindrical heel

Source: <https://www.maisonmargiela.com/>

Margiela was challenging the norms of women's footwear by making heels that resembled animals' hooves. Besides the Tabi boots the brand created other versions of Tabis over the years such as ballerinas, Mary Janes, oxfords and even cowboy boots.

Tabi boots are often quoted as iconic and are a flagship item at Maison Margiela due to the cultural impact they made in the last few decades. Fashion editor, Kate Marin, points out the cult status of the shoe being comparable to a Birkin bag saying they are a grail piece for many women (Deleon, 2019). It is rare to find someone indifferent towards Tabis – people are usually either their fans or fiercely dislike

them. Some articles also mention that the shoes have something of the ‘uncanny valley’ (Deleon, 2019; Miller, 2023; Sicardi, 2018). It is clear that they are meant to provoke feelings, thoughts and emotions, whether are negative or positive. The iconic status of Margiela Tabis seems to come from the polarizing attitudes that people have about it. The unique split-toe design is shocking only to those who have never seen it before and are not aware of their important place in fashion. But to fellow fashion enthusiasts it becomes an emblem to be worn with pride. In this case, tabis might be seen as a way to communicate an individual’s grasp of avant-garde and subversive fashion.

Tabi shoes have been becoming more mainstream than ever thanks to their frequent appearances on social media (Miller, 2023). TikTok’s emphasis on trends has also amplified the recognition of Tabi boots, especially after a TikTok user posted about how her Mary-Jane tabis were stolen by her date (Brain, 2023). Many fashion magazines and websites posted articles about this unfortunate story (Hoste, 2023; Rodgers, 2023; Roy, 2023), which proves that TikTok is shaping fashion culture and influencing consumers’ behaviour.

#### **4. Research Methodology**

The literature review revealed a gap in the research on the consumer perception and attitudes towards Maison Margiela’s Tabi boots. To address this gap, the research questions and purpose were formed with the aim of understanding how consumers perceive this iconic product. The research problem can be summarised by the following research questions:

Q1: What is the consumer perception of iconic items?

Q2: How do tabis differ from other iconic products discussed in this paper?

Q3: How people perceive Maison Margiela Tabis?

Q4: How important are iconic products in branding and brand awareness?

The study’s main purpose is to investigate the Tabi boots phenomenon in terms of the impact of signature products on a brand, and provide valuable insights into product development, brand building and consumer engagement in the luxury fashion industry.

A quantitative method was selected for this study. The research tool used is a survey questionnaire which allows for easy collecting data used for the quantitative approach (Sukamolson, 2007). The sample was selected using the snowballing and purposive method, which resulted in a randomized sample of people from various backgrounds. Additionally, the questionnaire was posted on social media by a Polish influencer Liliana Grochowska (@lila.grochowska on Instagram). This encouraged people interested in fashion to fill out the questionnaire, therefore making the sample more tailored to the purpose of this study. The sample size was 230 respondents. The majority of the sample were young people aged 18-25. There is a significant gender imbalance in the sample, with women making up 94% of the respondents.

## 5. Research Findings and Discussion

### Perception of Iconic Luxury Fashion Items

In the survey, respondents were asked to provide examples of iconic products without any prior suggestions, allowing for a genuine reflection of what products come to mind. The products that appeared most frequently are presented in Tab. 2.

**Table 2.** Iconic products mentioned more than 10 times

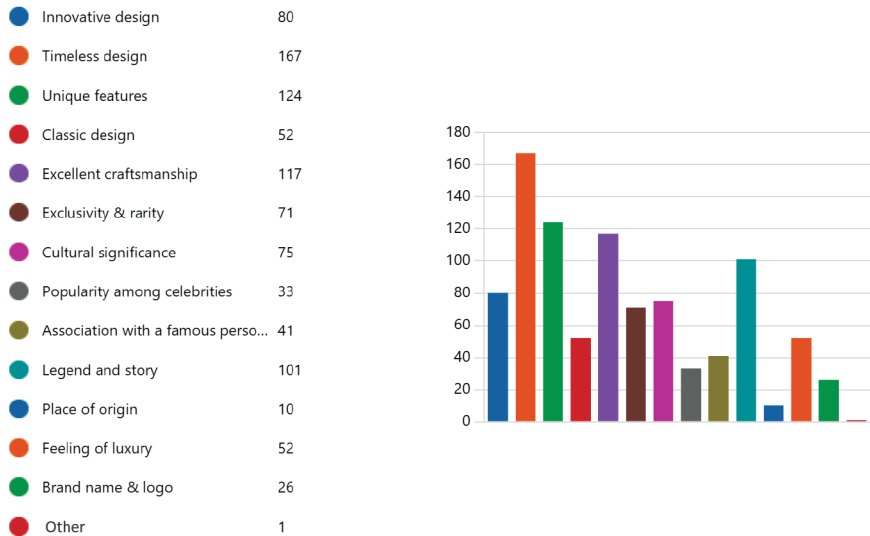
Brand	Product	Number of mentions
Hermès	Birkin bag	88
Maison Margiela	Tabi boots	61
Dior	Saddle bag	16
Christian Louboutin	Heels (overall)	16
Chanel	Bag (model not specified)	14
Burberry	Trench coat	12
Vivienne Westwood	Orb and Pearl necklaces	10

Source: own elaboration.

The Hermès Birkin bag stands out significantly with 88 mentions, indicating it holds an iconic status in the minds of respondents. Tabi boots by Maison Margiela take the second spot, being mentioned 61 times. Footwear and handbags appear much more often than clothing garments suggesting that it is easier or more common to find an iconic shoe or handbag.

The characteristics mainly associated with iconic items are timeless design, uniqueness and excellent craftsmanship (Fig. 2). These characteristics are crucial in defining a product's identity and making it memorable. Surprisingly the luxurious feel of an item as well as brand name and logo were not picked by many respondents, highlighting the fact that consumers might be looking beyond the logo and seeking deeper value in their purchases.

The respondents rated the selected cult products on a scale from 1 to 5 (5 – fits the respondent's vision of an iconic product very well, 1 – fits the respondent's vision of an iconic product very poorly). The results are shown in Tab. 3.



**Fig. 2.** Characteristics associated with iconic products

Source: own elaboration.

**Table 3.** Popular iconic products rated by respondents

Product	Average score
Chanel Tweed Suit	4.37
Christian Louboutin Red Soled Stilettos	4.25
Hermes Birkin Bag	4.12
Burberry Trench Coat	4.00
YSL Le Smoking Suit	4.00
Dior Saddle Bag	3.54
Balenciaga Triple S sneakers	2.07

Source: own elaboration.

The scores are analysed in the following way:

- 4.00 and higher – high alignment with the vision of the iconic product,
- 3.00 to 3.99 – moderate alignment with the vision of the iconic product,
- below 3.00 – low alignment with the vision of an iconic product.

Five out of seven products fit into the first category, which confirms that timeless yet innovative design and excellent craftsmanship are indeed some of the most important features that an iconic product should have. The product that received the lowest score of 2.07 were Balenciaga's Triple S sneakers. This product

is by far the newest item among the rest, being designed for the Fall 2017 collection (Caramanica, 2018), therefore its 'newness' could be the primary reason for such a low score.

### Role of Iconic Products in Shaping Brand Awareness

Exactly 50% of the respondents confirm they have discovered a brand thanks to an iconic product, which underlines their role in shaping brand awareness. To further analyse this topic, respondents were asked to indicate which iconic products led them to discover a brand. The brands which appeared most frequently are presented in Tab. 4.

**Table 4.** Iconic products that led to brand discovery

Brand	Number of mentions	Products with most indications
Hermès	24	Birkin bag
Maison Margiela	22	Tabi shoes
Chanel	10	Bags, tweed suits, no.5 perfume
Burberry	9	Trench coat
Vivienne Westwood	7	Jewellery
Christian Louboutin	7	Red-soled heels

Source: own elaboration.

Brands like Hermès, Maison Margiela, Chanel and Burberry are mentioned most often, which means that these brands have successfully created iconic products that significantly contribute to their brand discovery and overall brand recognition. 22 respondents stated that the reason they discovered Maison Margiela was Tabi boots. This proves Tabi's influence on Maison Margiela's recognition and their significance within the brand.

### Maison Margiela Brand Awareness

While the majority of respondents have a high level of familiarity with Maison Margiela, there is still a big group that has never heard of the brand (see Fig. 3).

Additionally, 32% of the respondents would consider themselves a fan of Maison Margiela, which suggests that the brand has a solid following among the surveyed group. This group could also demonstrate a high level of brand loyalty, if they became customers of Maison Margiela. All of the respondents in this group are young individuals (aged 18-33). Five out of eight men (63%) consider themselves fans of the brand, while among women it is only 53 out of 172 (31%). Majority



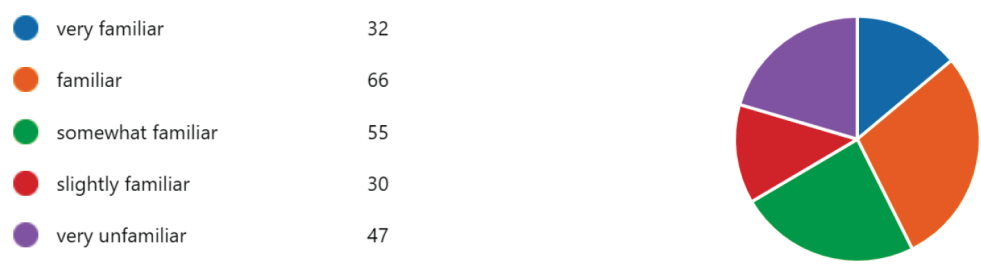


Fig. 3. Maison Margiela brand awareness among the respondents

Source: own elaboration.

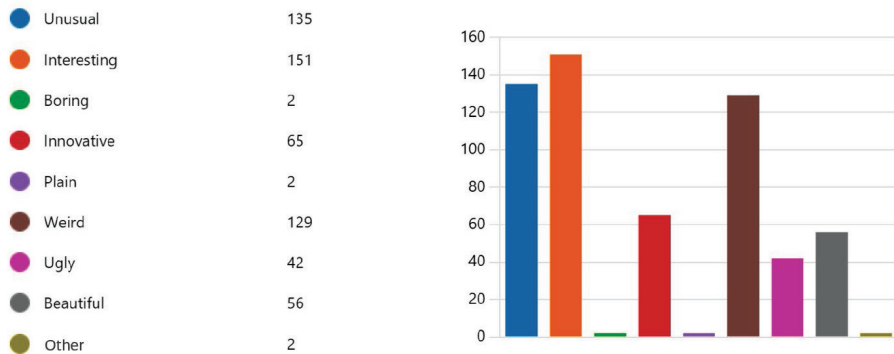
of respondents who are fans of Margiela are students and full-time employees with a monthly income up to 6000 PLN.

Perceptions of Tabi Boots

205 respondents (89%) are familiar with the Tabi boots, which means they have either seen or heard about them. It is significant that such a large majority of the respondents are familiar with the Maison Margiela Tabi boots, which indicates the strong presence and recognition of this iconic product in the fashion sphere. Interestingly, 31 respondents who claim to be unfamiliar with the Maison Margiela brand recognise the Tabi boot citing a photo of them. The majority of the respondents (85%) first encountered Tabi shoes via the Internet and social media. Four respondents own Tabi shoes, and two of them own more than one pair which further underlines the huge appeal of Tabi.

The most common first impressions of this item among the respondents were “interesting” (picked by 66%), “unusual” (picked by 59%), and “weird” (picked by 56%). These impressions highlight the provocative nature of the Tabi shoes which tend to evoke strong reactions due to their unique split-toe design. This plays in favour of Maison Margiela as strong emotions make a lasting impression making the product and brand more memorable in consumers’ minds. On the aesthetic spectrum, 56 respondents (24%) described the Tabi shoes as “beautiful”, while 42 respondents (18%) considered them “ugly” (Fig. 4). This further highlights the polarizing nature of the design and how it challenges traditional ideas of what is attractive in footwear.

In the next part of the research about Tabi Boots, respondents were asked to evaluate them against 11 characteristic features associated with iconic products in luxury fashion. The results are presented in Tab. 5. The first 10 features are sorted from most to least important for the respondents based on this research’s previous findings.



**Fig. 4.** First impressions about Maison Margiela Tabis

Source: own elaboration.

**Table 5.** Evaluation of Maison Margiela Tabis based on characteristics associated with iconic luxury products (in %)

Feature	Strongly disagree	Rather disagree	Neutral	Rather agree	Strongly agree
Timeless design	18	23	22	22	15
Unique	3	2	4	17	74
Excellent craftsmanship	3	4	30	33	30
Legendary	7	13	19	24	37
Innovative design	4	4	12	29	51
Culturally significant	8	15	27	21	29
Exclusive and rare	3	9	25	34	29
Classic design	32	26	18	15	9
Luxurious	6	8	23	38	25
Popular among celebrities	7	14	34	26	19
Trendy	6	9	20	36	29

Source: own elaboration.

Most respondents agree that Tabi boots are unique, innovative, and feature excellent craftsmanship – key features that define an iconic product. 65% respon-

dents view Tabis as trendy, reflecting their current popularity, and 61% agree they are legendary, showing broad recognition of their iconic status, even among those less familiar with luxury fashion. However, the boots received lower ratings for timelessness and classic design – 58% of respondents disagree with the statement that they are classic, and 41% disagree with the statement that they are timeless, probably due to their avant-garde split-toe design. Despite this, 75% of respondents believe Tabis are an iconic representation of Maison Margiela, while most agree they define the brand’s image, some express concern that relying too heavily on one product could overshadow other designs.

**Consumer Behaviour Towards Tabi Boots**

87 respondents (38%) confirm that they consider purchasing Tabis, which suggests that there is a good market potential for these shoes. 54% of those surveyed rate the price of Tabis as similar to other luxury fashion goods, while 22% think the price is slightly lower which, suggests the pricing strategy is in line with the rest of the market. 45% of the respondents who considered purchasing Tabis believe the price reflects their importance to the brand, which is consistent with previous findings. Only 16% of the respondents feel that the price does not accurately reflect their value within the brand.

62% of the respondents do not express the desire to purchase Maison Margiela Tabi shoes. Only 12% of this group of respondents believe that the price of Tabis accurately reflects their value and significance within the brand, 47% is not sure, while 41% do not believe the price represents Tabis value. This means that a significant proportion of these respondents either do not consider Tabis to be good value for the money or are unaware of their value.

Another consumer behaviour aspect that was studied was the likelihood of purchase of other Maison Margiela items (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** Likelihood of further purchases from Maison Margiela

Source: own elaboration.

Figure 5 shows that a large proportion of respondents would be very likely (25%) or rather likely (39%) to purchase other goods of this brand. Four respondents who own at least one pair of Tabi shoes are very likely to make further purchases at Maison Margiela, which indicates strong brand loyalty and trust among their customers. It also suggests that Tabi boots are a great introduction to the rest of the brand's offer.

## **6. Implications for Maison Margiela and Other Luxury Fashion Brands**

The findings presented in this paper highlight several key implications for Maison Margiela and other luxury fashion brands looking to create and market iconic products effectively. First, the research suggests that bags, shoes, and accessories are more appropriate iconic products than clothing. Consumers tend to buy these products, which suggests that it might be best for brands to focus on these categories.

According to the product levels model presented by Kotler and Keller (2016), luxury goods are augmented products, however iconic products should be stepping into the potential product category because they should be constantly evolving in order to stay relevant in the rapidly changing fashion industry. While developing new products, brands should focus on the full range of transformations that a product might undergo. This can be observed in how Margiela often creating new versions of Tabis (Tabi ballet shoes or Tabi cowboy boots) to adapt to current fashion trends.

Another crucial factor influencing the success of an iconic product is achieving a good balance between timeless and unique design. Iconic products should not be boring, but they should not be overly trendy either. This balance ensures that the product remains relevant and desirable over time, appealing to consumers who seek both innovation and enduring style. The study's findings indicate that timeless elegance combined with distinct features is highly valued by consumers. The unique design of the Tabi boots, for example, evokes strong reactions, making it a memorable and recognisable piece. Brands can leverage such reactions to enhance the product's appeal and market presence.

Additionally, iconic products play a big role in creating and maintaining brand awareness. A well-aligned iconic products can serve as excellent introductions to the brand. Products like the Tabi boots not only draw attention but also encourage consumers to explore more offerings from the brand. These signature items can enhance brand visibility and attract new customers contributing to the brand's overall growth and market presence.

By incorporating these insights, Maison Margiela and other luxury fashion brands can strategically create and market iconic products. The implication presented here can serve as a guide that brands could use to ensure their products resonate with consumers and improve their position in the luxury fashion market.

## 7. Conclusions

This study examines the impact of iconic products on branding and marketing strategies, focusing on the Maison Margiela Tabi boots. Through a survey, it analyses consumer perceptions, showing that iconic products such as Tabi boots can become a crucial element of branding strategies. Research proves iconic products play a key role in brand discovery and loyalty. These items are often associated with timeless or classic design, however they are also valued for their uniqueness, innovation, and cultural significance. Striking a good balance between mentioned features proves to be more important to consumers than brand logo and luxury status.

This research highlights that iconic items can enhance brand visibility and attract loyal customers. Based on the example of Tabi boots described in this paper, it can be said that Tabi boots are a perfect example of how an iconic product should possess certain features which are valued by consumers. While they may lack a classic or timeless design, they do have other features that are important for consumers and, what is more, they perfectly capture essence of the brand, which proves to be a key aspect when creating iconic products that will stand the test of time.

This research has some limitations, mainly in the sample composition. The vast majority of the respondents were young female students, therefore the sample does not represent the general population and the research findings may be skewed. The main direction recommended for future research on this topic is to ensure greater diversity of the sample. The second limitation could be attributed to the methodological choice of using a quantitative method. While it is a good method for gathering statistical data about patterns in the consumer perception and behaviour, it does not allow for an in-depth analysis. Interviews with consumers of different demographic and economic backgrounds could fill this gap and provide a more thorough and detailed experiences.

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## Fenomen butów Tabi. Badanie wpływu kultowych produktów na markę na przykładzie Maison Margiela

**Streszczenie:** Niektóre produkty modowe wykraczają poza swoją funkcjonalność i stają się symbolami kulturowymi. W przemyśle mody luksusowej kultowe przedmioty mogą istotnie wpłynąć na markę. W artykule zbadano, jak firmy mogą korzystać z takich produktów i wykorzystać je w strategiach brandingowych i marketingowych. Autorka skupia się w szczególności na butach Tabi marki Maison Margiela. Jest to unikatowy produkt, który w ostatnich latach zyskał popularność w mediach. Analiza koncepcji brandingowych oraz przykładów kilku popularnych produktów modowych wykazała lukę w badaniach zwłaszcza na temat Tabi. Jako główny problem badawczy obrano zatem zbadanie percepcji konsumentów i ich zachowań, które można zaobserwować w odniesieniu do ikonicznych produktów, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem marki Maison Margiela i butów Tabi. W badaniu wykorzystano metody ilościowe do zbierania danych za pomocą ankiety CAWI. Wyniki dostarczają cennych informacji na temat wpływu, jaki kultowe produkty mogą mieć na strategie brandingowe i marketingowe.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Maison Margiela, buty Tabi, kultowy produkt, moda luksusowa, strategia marki