Luxury fashion web-shops, a successful distribution channel?

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Abstract
Purpose: Can luxury fashion brands use websites and web-shops and still keep a sense of drama and exclusivity around their brand and at the same time avoid brand dilution?

Background: The e-commerce opened up for new possibilities for the luxury fashion brands but due to the dotcom crash around the year of 2000 did many of them become reluctant to the Internet as a selling channel. LVMH was one of the first in this genre to start up a web-shop. It name was eluxury (eluxury.com), and sold products from LVMH’s brands like Louis Vuitton, Dior and Donna Karan. It started off in the US market and then spread to France and the United Kingdom. This inspired other brands like Gucci and Armani to also invest in e-commerce. Even though the success of these web-shops is there still an ongoing debate about whether or not luxury brands should adopt e-commerce. The major concern is the dilution of features like exclusivity and prestige of the brands, if they are present in this channel.

Method: To meet the purpose a qualitative research approach was chosen. The qualitative data was collected through eight in-depth interviews with luxury fashion interested Swedish females. The answers from the interviews generated a picture of their online shopping habits, and the likes and dislikes of the websites and web-shops of Louis Vuitton, Burberry, Dior and Gucci. In addition it showed what makes a web-shop exclusive and well designed from a consumer/visitor point of view.

Conclusion: The result of this research showed that it is good for luxury fashion brands to have distribution online because it makes the products a lot easier to get hold of for the consumers. Although there were several criteria that was needed to be fulfilled in order to design and create a well functioning and good web-shop. It was evident from the result of the study that the Internet can really be a good distribution channel, with only a little risk of brand dilution depending on how the web-shop is designed. To summarize, we say that a good website and web-shop meeting the criteria of the consumers can really create a stronger brand image and online sales, although a luxury fashion brand should also have good physical stores, a web-shop can in many ways really be a very suitable complement for marketing and distribution.
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1 Introduction

In this initial section we introduce the reader to the research area as well as a discussion of the problem are of this thesis. This will be followed by the stated problem along with the research questions. Included are also delimitations and definitions that will enable the reader to follow the reasoning throughout the thesis. Finally is a disposition of the content of the thesis presented.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 The history of luxury fashion

The history of luxury fashion has its beginning during Egypt’s glory days, according to Okonkwo (2007). Since then has some key eras and events played a crucial part in the development of luxury fashion branding. These eras and events have for example its origin in the industrial revolution and the dissolution of the world’s monarchies, upper classes and social class systems, the later especially after World War I. Fashion has constantly been affected by historical, societal, religious, political, financial, emotional and technological changes, and has therefore also been a symbol of our society (Okonkwo, 2007, pp. 14-15).

Some of the most significant events of the history of luxury fashion, after the Egyptian glory days, can in short be presented as a number of points, Okonkwo (2007). In the Renaissance’s art and fashion, in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, had garments and accessories an important function in the society as it showed a person’s social rank and education. Thereby clothes had come to be an investment for many. Italy became a midpoint for fashion and especially the luxury genre. The production and trade of jewellery had its centre in Florence, and Italy also produced the best silk in all of Europe. The next historical highlight was the era of the King of France, Louis XIV (1638-1715), also known as the Sun King. He had a massive power and influence concerning politics, economy and also social lifestyle and fashion. By his taste for luxury products in fashion, food and art for example, he affected all the royal families and aristocrats in Europe. During his regime the French luxury fashion raised again, much due to his support of the fashion industry by implementing government reforms which gave designers and craftsmen financial support.

Another person that had a significant part in the development of luxury fashion was Charles Fredrick Worth who in 1858, in Paris, invented haute couture. At that time was dressmaking only done by women so he became the first male tailor and he was the private designer for the empress Eugenie. Worth also introduced the private fashion shows and he reduced the time it took to produce a dress with more than 50 percent, when it earlier had taken six fittings it now only required one. The next historical highlight was the start of modern luxury which took place in Paris in the beginning of the twentieth century. The era contained designers like Coco Chanel, Jeanne Lanvin, Madeline Vionnet and Elsa Schiaparelli among many others. In Italy did however a number of soon to be prominent designers start up their businesses like Mario Prada and Guccio Gucci. In the 1960’s and 1970’s Italy had a fashion upswing with designers
like Emilio Pucci, Valentino Garavani, Giorgio Armani and Franco Moschino. Italy’s influence on fashion increased again also due to its growth in the market of accessories. A significant change in the management of luxury fashion brands appeared in the 1980’s; it became more common with mergers and alliances. The two largest corporations are LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy) and PPR (Pinault Printemps Redoute). The most recent major highlight is the era known as the Internet revolution in the 1990’s and by that also the e-commerce (Okonkwo, 2007, pp. 14-35, 57; Tungate, 2008, pp. 9-17).

Due to the dotcom crash around the year of 2000 had many of the luxury brands become reluctant to e-commerce. One of the first in this genre to change their attitude was LVMH which started up an online shop called eluxury (eluxury.com). The online shop sold products from LVMH’s brands like Louis Vuitton, Dior and Donna Karan for the US market. It became a success and was then launched in 2005 both in France and the United Kingdom. Other brands like Gucci, Hermès and Armani got inspired by eluxury to start with e-commerce. Although, there are still a debate going on about luxury brands should or should not adopt e-commerce. The major concern is the dilution of the features like exclusivity and prestige of the brands, if they exist on the Internet (Okonkwo, 2007, p. 35).

1.1.2 The present situation

In December 2009 the journalist Marie-Louise Gumuchian, wrote that luxury consortiums are concentrating on winning clients as they arise from the worst economic crisis in decades. According to the consulting agency Bain & Company and their annual study Luxury Goods Worldwide Market, they expected sales to drop 8 % to € 153 billion, for the year of 2009 (Gumuchian, Reuters, 2009).

The authors of the earlier mentioned report foresee that a full recovery of the luxury market will not take place until 2011, but then the growth will be 4.2 % for the whole year. The luxury market is stabilizing which is shown by fewer mark-downs and a growing consumer confidence. While the sales at direct-operated luxury stores are forecasted to decline with 4 % will the sales online increase with about 20 % (Maktoob News, 2009). Bain & Company means that the luxury shame, or in other words the fear of being seen shopping for luxurious products in an economic crisis, is perhaps one of the factors for the growth. With a 20 % increase the online sales will stand for € 3.6 billion, which just represents 2.35 % of the total sales of luxury goods (Gumuchian, Reuters, 2009).

1.2 Problem discussion

Marketing experts of today are discussing the be or not to be when it comes to luxury fashion brands that are selling their products online. Those who take part in this discussion advice luxury brands to only use the web as a tool for communicating information and not as a medium for distribution. But is this really the only good way for these brands to use the web? Can luxury fashion brands be on the web and still keep their brand status?
To find out what attitudes Swedish consumers of luxury fashion have concerning luxury fashion brands distributing online, will be a good tool for luxury fashion brands (in Sweden and the rest of Europe) to use when launching or remaking their web marketing strategies.

We find this topic particularly intriguing since the marketing experts disagree and because of this, there are still questions that have not been answered. Examples of these questions are; can luxury fashion brands use websites/web-shops and at the same time maintain a sense of drama and exclusivity and still safeguard their brand? (Kort et al., 2005) Can luxury goods be successfully sold online without diluting their brand aura and brand equity? (Okonkwo, 2007)

The theme of this thesis is to research and answer the question: if luxury fashion brands can use the web and web shops and at the same time avoid brand dilution? If we come to the conclusion that it is possible, we want to found out how and if it is not possible, what is the reason behind that.

1.3 The problem and the normative purpose

Can luxury fashion brands use websites and web-shops and still keep a sense of drama and exclusivity around their brand in order to avoid brand dilution?

The result of this thesis will be useful for luxury fashion brands in distributing their products in Europe, because they can see if they should distribute on the Internet and how they should design their website to meet the consumer’s demands. The results will also show what traps it is easy to fall into when using the Internet as a marketing and distribution channel, but also what the consumer see as exclusivity online and what they do not like. In addition there will be some useful information for the four chosen brands and what the consumers think of their websites and web-shops.

1.4 Delimitations

In this thesis we are delimiting our research to looking at web-shops and websites only from a consumer perspective. In other words we will not look at how the companies thought when building their sites or how they look upon them as distribution channels.

1.5 Disposition

Our purpose with this study is to understand if luxury fashion brands can use the web and web-shops and still keep a sense of drama and exclusivity around their brand in order to avoid brand dilution. The reason for this is it has become known to us that today are numerous of marketing experts discussing whether or not luxury fashion brands should be selling their products online. The question is if luxury fashion brands can do this without going against what luxury brands stand for. In order to fulfil this purpose, we have organized our study as follows.

The introduction is followed by a literature review where the hypothesis about luxury brand factors, brand integrity, brand dilution and distribution channels for luxury fashion products are presented. The literature review is then more focused on the Internet as a selling channel
and presents proposition of researchers who are both for and against luxury fashion brands selling their products online. To give a whole picture of the conditions for luxury consumer behaviour online, the Internet as a retail location and the design of websites and web-shops is therefore also presented. With help from this litterateur reviews were we then able to distinguish which areas our interview question should cover.

We first formulated a set of questions which were tested during two pilot-interviews. The questions and the studied brands were then alternated in order to suit our purpose. The interviews were then carried out as so called in-depth interviews in order to get more comprehensive answers. We did eight interviews and then we acknowledge that the answers were starting to repeat themselves and therefore were the number of interviews sufficient.

The result of the interviews is presented in the following part; empirical results. This chapter starts with the presentation of the answers to the first two sections of questions. The third and fourth sections of questions are then divided according to brand in order to let the reader get an easier overview of the findings of each brand. These findings are then compared with the theoretical framework in the section; A theory of luxury brand consumers, where we continue our analysis. In the subsequent chapter we present our conclusions, answer our research questions and what we think about the future for luxury fashion brands’ online distribution. At last we also present our own thoughts and reflections about the thesis process, and give examples for further research.
2 Theoretical framework

In this section we present and discuss the needed theory to answer the stated problem. The discussed theories deals with research within the field of online distribution and marketing for luxury fashion brands.

2.1 Introduction to the theoretical framework

To be able to meet the purpose, we researched different theoretical frameworks within the area of online distribution and marketing for luxury fashion brands. The first section shows the difference between marketing luxury fashion products from so-called normal fashion products, here the ideas of Kapferer & Bastien (2009) on how to market luxury goods are presented. This gave us an idea of the main differences between marketing and distribution online and offline.

The next section gives a picture of the difference between brand integrity and brand dilution for fashion luxury products, e.g. how to maintain the brand status but still keep the demand at the right levels, which are views from Kort et al. (2005). This section shows the specific needs of luxury brands and gave us an understanding of the importance of upholding the demand balance.

After this, distribution systems of luxury fashion products are presented, this section shows how distribution for these products normally is done and how the brands can use these systems, again the ideas come from Kapferer & Bastien (2009). From this part we gained an understanding of how luxury products are being distributed offline and this was useful when looking at online distribution for luxury brands.

The next section deals with luxury branding online, which discusses the role of the Internet as a marketing and communication strategy for luxury fashion brands. Here the views of Riley & Lacroix (2003) are presented. In addition, a paragraph about the dilemmas of using the Internet as a distribution medium by Kapferer & Bastien (2009) is added. The following part is dealing with digital luxury, or in other words, the pros and cons of e-commerce and these are the ideas of Okonkwo (2007). The theory presented here contributed to a further understanding and knowledge about the difficulties that luxury brands can face when being present online and how this can both decrease and increase the brand status and image.

After this, there is another section with ideas by Okonkwo (2007), about luxury consumer behaviour online, to more in depth see how this specific consumer group behaves and how the luxury brands should design their website to meet the demand from these consumers. To further investigate the usage of the Internet as a retail location, further ideas from Okonkwo (2007) are presented. This section show what senses that are missing in e-tailing compared to in a physical store, and how to compensate these. As well as giving a useful picture of the behaviour of the online consumer.

The final section deals with how to design a website and web-shop to succeed in giving the visitors an experience while visiting the site. In addition, several attributes such as visuals,
sound and usability are discussed. The ideas presented here are from Okonkwo (2007). This part was very valuable for us in order to understand and identify the differences between the websites of the chosen brands in this research.

These theories were chosen because they will all, in different ways, help us gain a deeper understanding of the chosen subject and be very useful when analyzing the empirical results in order to find answers to our purpose.

2.2 Luxury brand’s factors

Kapferer & Bastien (2009) have put together a number of management suggestions concerning dealing with luxury brands. They call them anti-laws of marketing peculiar to luxury since these laws are often contradictory to what traditional marketing recommends. One of these laws says that it should be difficult for consumers to buy the brand’s products. According to them must the luxury product be earned and the more difficult it is to get hold of it, the greater is the desire. Luxury has a built-in time factor which includes the time spent on searching, waiting and so on. This is the opposite of traditional marketing which proclaims quick and easy access through mass distribution and the Internet for example. For luxury products there should be some difficulty to get hold of them in order to increase the consumer’s desire. These difficulties can concern financial-, logistical- and time issues (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009, pp. 61-62, 67).

2.3 Brand integrity and brand dilution

For luxury fashion brands, consumers pay more money for the products that are brand-named than the ones identically the same but lacking a brand identity (Kort et al., 2005). Within the fashion luxury industry, the functionality of the products is much less important than the brand of these products, because it is in the brand the style and exclusivity lies. In other words, this means that if a brand like Dior has very expensive products, then the consumers of Dior most certainly buy these products to show their wealth to others. All luxury fashion brands are today being challenged with the problem of maintaining their brand integrity, e.g. to be able to create that indefinable atmosphere that persuades the consumer to pay a large amount of money for a product they could have bought much cheaper somewhere else (but then without the brand, or a copy).

The opposite of brand integrity is called brand dilution, dilution occurs when a luxury brand becomes too popular, according to Kort et al. (2005). What happens in this case is that too many consumers become interested of a certain brand’s products and starts to consume their products heavily, this means that the specific products then loses their exclusivity because it is no longer only a few people who owns them and therefore consumers do no longer consider the products to be worth their extreme price, in addition this also lowers the brand status. There are certain ways for luxury brands to avoid dilution; one way is to minimize the sales of products online, because when selling online the products become available to all kinds of consumers in many different areas of the world. Another way is to keep the prices high, and sometimes even raise the prices to make the general access smaller and thus raise the brands
exclusivity status, because for fashion luxury products, a low price often means a lower demand in the long run.

The hardest part for a luxury fashion brand is to balance the sales volume, the profit and the brand integrity (Kort et al., 2005). If this balance is not upheld there are several risks; selling too few products minimizes profit opportunities, selling too many dilutes the brand. Another problem is that the changes occurring in brand integrity and image do not happen all at once, they occur over a long period of time, this is why brands are often tempted to over-supply and when doing so it is easy to fall in the traps.

A further risk for fashion luxury brands, mentioned by Kort et al. (2005), is that the product they are really selling is their brand, therefore selling very few products in order to trying to create exclusivity can backfire and become brand obscurity in the consumers’ minds. For luxury fashion consumers, a brand name only has its high value if the people that the consumer are trying to impress by wearing the brand knows the brand and values it to the same level. Some luxury brands have started to use exclusive channels to control and restrict the availability of their products in the markets, as an attempt to prevent brand dilution.

2.4 Distribution of Luxury fashion products/brands

Kapferer & Bastien (2009) refers to a proverb which says that “when you are not seen in a store, you cannot say that you have distribution there” (The luxury strategy: breaking the rules of marketing to build luxury brands, p. 198). Distribution is an important part of the brands communication and the store is a place where they can show the consumers the brand history and a place for setting the desire at a distance, to raise consumers’ desire. The store is where the products are presented and must for that reason be shown at their best, but also in a suitable context. It is a scene for the brand to present its assortment. Luxury brands’ communication is never directly focused at the price. The price level should be communicated through the store image and interior and the exact price by the salesperson.

In the beginning of luxury was it only available for the elite and thereby is rarity one of its cornerstones. If then luxury becomes available for everyone, it democratizes, it loses this factor and becomes common and the only thing that differentiate the luxury product from the rest is the price. In order to prevent this, Kapferer & Bastien (2009) says that rarity should be maintained at all levels, through the following points; few selling points, specific locations, excellence sales personnel, the shop as a showcase and merchandising as staging the product (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009, pp. 198-199, 203).

2.4.1 Distribution systems

Kapferer & Bastien (2009) mean that more or less any distribution system can work for luxury products. Own brand stores is the easiest way for a brand to present themselves and their products in the way they please. They have full control over the products, the prices and the store image. To have their own stores is also better from a financially point of view; they get higher margins than when using an intermediary. Another significant factor is the brand’s own sale personnel, which are a part of the brand and personifies the brand for the consumers.
This system is the only one that totally protects consumers from counterfeiting. On the other hand is this system very inflexible and it requires that products are sold in a certain amount and pace in order for the store to make profit.

Another system is called exclusive distribution and this type of agreement should specify the location, the personnel and the transparency concerning the consumers and the conditions settled for them. If this is the case can the brand still keep a personal relationship with its consumers. This system is more flexible and it does not require the same amount of sales since the store costs are shared with other brands, according to Kapferer & Bastien (2009).

The third system is selective distribution where the brand does not choose sale points themselves. The brand sets a number of conditions and the sale points which fulfil these are allowed to distribute the brand’s products. In this case has the brand no longer a personal relationship with its consumers, it cannot control the price on the products and it can be difficult to make sure that all the sale points fulfils the conditions in the long run. The advantage of the system is that the products can diffuse widely (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009, pp. 204-206).

2.5 Luxury branding online/brand integrity online

In later years the Internet has been given a fundamental part in the marketing and communication strategies of many luxury brands (Riley & Lacroix, 2003). For many luxury brands the Internet is a very good media for accessing, organizing and presenting information directed towards their suppliers and consumers. The websites of the luxury brands present online today differs a lot in interactivity, level of consumer service, personalization, style, design and experience giving. Many different tactics and ways of presenting information online are tested by luxury brands regularly, but few seem to have really found the exceptional way of doing it.

Researchers Riley & Lacroix (2003) say that the Internet can be very effective as a communication medium for luxury goods mostly due to these products having high costs, low purchase rates and high value with high differentiation characteristics. On the other hand, since luxury products often are products where the buying experience is a large part of the buying decision, the Internet might be better as a source of information than as a selling channel (Riley & Lacroix, 2003, pp. 96-104).

2.5.1 The Internet dilemma

The Internet is an indispensable mean for luxury brands when it comes to communication, advertising and as an experiential tool. However, according to Kapferer & Bastien (2009, pp. 207-208) the Internet is not a suitable distribution channel. They think that to use the Internet is contradictory to the core dynamics of luxury brands. The personal human relationship, which is a very important sales tool in the luxury sector, goes missing. However, the Internet is a great opportunity for the brands to communicate with already existing consumers when it comes to upholding a good after-sales service, presenting new products and perhaps a channel where consumers can reserve new products. They pin point that the purpose of this should
still be to make the consumer come to the sale points on a regular basis so the physical link is maintained. The Internet is today also not enough experimental to suit luxury brands. These brands often use multi-sensory components in their sale strategies and since the Internet excludes smell, taste and touch much of the total experience is lost.

According to Kapferer & Bastien (2009, p. 208) is it impossible for luxury brands to deal with the delicate price management of their products on the Internet, since everything is public there. They also think that many people use the Internet to buy products more cheaply which is not coherent with the luxury approach. The Internet is also a place of immediate buying and selling and Kapferer & Bastien (2009) thinks that when a luxury brand puts their products on sale on the Internet they are no longer luxury products. They recommend that if luxury brands still want to sell products online it should be products they have decided to exclude from their luxury assortment.

2.5.2 Digital luxury

Due to the developing technology on the Internet the conditions for consumer behaviour and the way of doing businesses has changed, Okonkwo (2007, p. 178). Consumers have become more empowered and their expectations on the brands have risen. The Internet has made it possible for consumers to get immediate information and easy product comparison at no cost. Because of this it has become more difficult also for luxury brands to keep the interest and loyalty among the consumers. E-retail is now an essential complementary sales channel for retailers that work offline, including luxury fashion retailers. The Internet is also a great channel for increasing brand awareness, reaching new markets and a way of generating competitive leverage and being different.

The Internet is an important factor for these brands in order to reach a global consumer group, as mentioned earlier. Since the fashion trends are becoming more global, the brands can to a greater extent offer the same products to a bigger market, therefore is the Internet a suitable and convenient tool. For the brands is the Internet also a tool to keep a high level of band equity and a way for creating many opportunities for developing deeper consumer relationships (Okonkwo, 2007, pp. 178-179).

To sell luxury products online has been a subject of a varying discussion. There are those that who think that e-retailing has a negative impact on the core attributes of luxury brands, like prestige and exclusivity. Another argument is that luxury products heavily relies on aesthetics and sensory factors at their sale points and therefore questions the ability to recreate this on the Internet. Okonkwo (2007) indicates however that recent advancement in e-retailing, as tools and techniques, has made selling luxury products online practical. It is therefore now vital for luxury brands to be online to be able to compete on the global market. The Internet has also made it possible for consumers all over the world to get access of the same information at the same time, thereby have their desire for more information and purchase possibilities increased. The assortment for luxury consumers has expanded greatly through the Internet. Consumers are now used to have access to product in this way and have therefore
become more demanding and impatient. Product accessibility has for that reason become one of the key decision factors when buying luxury products (Okonkwo, 2007, pp. 179-180).

2.6 Luxury consumer behaviour online

The group of consumers that buy luxury products online is growing fast and steadily, according to Okonkwo (2007, pp. 186-187). They make recurrent purchases in those luxury web-shops that exist today. These consumers are also more willing to do continuous purchases online than offline. However, the consumers most likely to buy luxury products online are those with earlier contacts with the brands. This is due to consumers being affected by their earlier shopping experiences, both offline and online. If consumers already have a good brand experience it enhances their evaluation process whether or not to buy the product online.

There are several differences between the offline and online buying behaviour. The offline decision making process most often starts with the recognition of a need for a product, then comes the information search about the product, purchase, the use of the product and then after-use estimation. Buying a luxury product, both offline and online, follows a different process due to the significant role that emotions and psychology have in luxury purchasing decisions. Consumers that buy luxury fashion are rather having emotional relationships than cognitive relationships with luxury brands (Okonkwo, 2007, p. 187).

A model originally developed by Mohammed et al (2002) which is presented in the book Internet Marketing and then modified by Okonkwo (2007) explains the different phases a consumer goes through when shopping online, see figure 1. It is a four stage process which begins with the moment when a potential online shopper enters the brand’s homepage and ends with his or hers post-purchase evaluation process.
Due to consumers emotional involvement there is a need for luxury brands to develop an attractive, unforgettable and pleasant experience for those shopping online. Okonkwo (2007, p. 188) pin point that it is however also important that the website is consistent with the total brand strategy to keep a similar customer interpretation of the brand associations. To achieve a better consumer experience is it vital to develop a website that highlights the brand characteristics for all the consumers online. The brands that will manage to obtain and keeping loyal online consumers are those that adopt the correct mix of branding marketing, customer relationship management and transactional strategies in order to improve the experience for the customers.

In order to carry out successful e-retail strategies it is vital to understand online luxury consumers’ characteristics. They are empowered, have high expectations and think that even though luxury web-shops the available products have to be designed to be suitable for only their niche segment. Other characteristics for the online luxury consumers have a disposable nature, are restless, fashion-savvy, convenience-driven, cash-rich and time-poor. They are also media and brand saturated, individualistic and independent, well-educated and financially-, socially- and environmentally aware. These consumers are more likely to do brand-hopping and they are also very busy (Okonkwo, 2007, pp. 189-190).

Even though these consumers are more likely to be brand disloyal are they also more likely to be repeated visitors and buyers if they find a website they like. At the same time is it also not to be expected that they return to a website they not find enjoyable, than they are to return to an offline store. The reason for this is offline store can be situated in the same area as other
store the consumer goes to. According to Okonkwo (2007, pp. 190-191) shows current information that the chance of promotion by word-of-mouth of successful online stores against successful offline stores is more than 50 percent. It is also recognized that viral marketing is most successful with online consumers that are satisfied.

In order to design a successful e-retail strategy is it important to understand what luxury consumers look for in a web shop. Okonkwo has modified a table original developed by Mohammed et al (2002) in the book *Internet Marketing*. This table includes several web elements and how they affect the consumer, see figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Web element</th>
<th>Effect on consumers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity</td>
<td>Compensates for the lack of human presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast service</td>
<td>Saves time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td>Provides goods and services anytime and anyplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalization</td>
<td>Empowers consumers to be co-creators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customization</td>
<td>Gives a sense of individual recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy</td>
<td>Associates the brand with ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real-time communication</td>
<td>Shows excellent customer relationship management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>Breeds brand trust and loyalty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instant product availability</td>
<td>Provides instant gratification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low transaction costs</td>
<td>Saves mental energy and time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional features</td>
<td>Creates an enhanced experience, personal enhancement,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>education and social benefits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2. The effect of Internet features on consumers*
*Source: Okonkwo (2007) Luxury fashion branding: trends, tactics, techniques, p. 191*

### 2.7 Internet as a retail location

A well-known saying in retailing is, according to Okonkwo (2007, pp. 182-183), “the three most important things in retail is location, location and location” (Luxury fashion branding: trends, tactics, techniques, p. 182), which says that location is a vital part of retailing. This can also be used when it comes to the Internet and call it a retail location.

E-retailing of luxury fashion is still in an introduction phase since many brands has not yet recognized the Internet as a place for retailing. Okonkwo (2007, pp. 184-185) thinks this unwillingness of luxury brands to adopt e-retail is due to fear of weaken the brand image through increasing the product accessibility and also that it could have a negative effect on the offline sales. Another reason is their concern about the retail atmosphere, overall experience and especially the sensory aspect which they think cannot be recreated online. According to Okonkwo (2007) are luxury consumers known for their appreciation of the high aesthetics of luxury products when viewing them physically, through the use of the senses touch and feel. This also brings out the emotional brand response from them. The traditional shopping experience also goes missing. Most luxury brands think that the above mentioned things and the level of interaction that is necessary for selling luxury products cannot be reproduced on a computer screen.
In reality the value for the consumer does not diminish if some of the sensory elements go missing when using the Internet channel. There is however strategies that can reproduce the sensory elements, compensate for the lack of human interaction and also improve the shopping experience. The physical viewing and interaction with products before buying them has become less significant for consumers, especially for those who had earlier experience with the brand. Consumers are more and more using both offline and online channels to make a specific purchase. Convenience and accessibility has become important factors and for that reason there is a need for luxury brands to develop new strategies in order to be successfully also through the Internet channel (Okonkwo, 2007, pp. 185-186).

2.8 The design of the website and web-shop

A very important part for selling luxury products online is the design of the web-shop, Okonkwo (2007, p. 212). Luxury fashion web-shops should try to accomplish more than the basic requirements, by focusing on offering an improved experience for all the web-shop visitors. This is needed because in e-retail there is a continuous flow of new-thinking concepts in order to stand out in the crowd. A tool used for designing effective websites and web-shops is called web-atmospherics or webmospherics. The meaning is to recreate the luxurious atmosphere found in the brand’s offline store in the online store. This is done by using specific elements to recreate the associated look and feel with the specific brand. According to Okonkwo (2007) the webmospherics concept became widely known thanks to Knowles & Chicksand at the 2002 IBM E-business Conference in Birmingham and by Harris & Dennis (2002) in their book Marketing the E-business. The tool is based on the human senses and should therefore add to a more effective experience for the web-shop visitor, hopefully resulting in higher purchase likelihood, a help for visitors to recall the website and to keep consumer loyalty. To create a successful web-shop for a luxury brand it is important that the features are united and carefully applied to fit the specific brand’s characteristics.

2.8.1 Visuals

The most effective and powerful medium to catch the interest of the web-shop visitor is sight. Visual tools consists of the colour scheme, picture, slide shows, video films, 3D product view, the possibility to zoom, text font, style and size, interactive media, full screen mode and graphics, according to Okonkwo (2007). The homepage must be designed so that it creates a high-impact and strengthen the brand’s luxury features, like personality and heritage, since this is the first contact the visitor has with the brand and its web-shop. This page should be frequently updated and keep a consistent level of extraordinary features. If using for example flash animations to catch interest of the visitor is it important to also offer the visitor control tools so he or she has the possibility to skip opening videos clips, animations and sound. When updating or redesigning the website is it not a good alternative to shut it down or replace it with a ‘coming soon’ message, because this will affect the visitor’s experience with the brand negatively. Closing down a website can be compared with closing down a physical store without offering an alternative store. The messages on the homepage should be coherent with the brand’s offline communication strategies otherwise it can cause confusion for the
consumer who uses both the offline and online shopping channels (Okonkwo, 2007, pp. 212-215).

Videos are a vital visual element in webmospherics, because it adds colour and excitement to the web-shop and awakens the online consumer’s attention and thereby making him/her staying longer on the website, Okonkwo (2007, pp. 215-216). The use of videos also adds to the visitor’s recollection of the website and reoccurring visits. Videos do as well create a feeling of human presence and contact. These clips should be short, understandable, have quick downloading time and be provided with tools for enlargement or skipping. To use interactive animation is one more way to enhance the web-atmosphere. Examples of interactive animations are online flip-open catalogues and to provide an avatar, which the online consumer can modify to her own size, to see how a garment fits. Colour is also an important visual element, due to that product features are most improved by the quality of the images, their colour scheme and their position. The suitable colour chosen for the homepage should also be applied on the sub pages for a balanced result and there ought to be some space left empty on all or most of the pages to attain a harmonious effect.

Next to the products there are often information presented, this text should be short and easy to read but at the same time also be thoroughly. The language and the tone as well as the text font and size should be consistent throughout the whole website and suitable for the brand. A product text should be no longer then three sentences. Indispensable tools for selling luxury products online are 3D and zoom since these provide a greater visualisation of the product and also empower the consumers to see the product as they like to (Okonkwo, 2007, p. 217).

2.8.2 Sound

In physical stores music are often used in order to evoke consumers’ subconscious feelings (Okonkwo, 2007, pp. 217-218). Different feelings are evoked by different music, for example loud and funky music stimulates consumer to buy on impulse and fast music generates high shopping traffic, but also well-known sounds like bird signing and waterfall can evoke emotions that enhances purchasing. This tool can also be used in online stores. The most effective way of using sound is to make sure that it is suitable for the brand’s personality and what it is associated with. However, there should also be clear control tools so the visitor can do adjustments.

2.8.3 Usability

The groundwork of a website is usability, concerning navigation, functionality and interactivity. These attributes can have a significant effect on a luxury web-shop’s atmosphere, according to Okonkwo (2007, pp. 219-221). The level of a website’s usability is evaluated by its application of tools that facilitates the navigation, speed of operation and the total web-atmosphere. Navigational tools consist of suitable design and layout of the website and also elements like full-screen mode, the possibility to return to the homepage from all sub pages etc. Features that involve functionality add to the easy of the shopping process. Interactive tools ought to be used in sense and with a total focus on the brand’s personality
and equity. The selection of tools for usability ought to reflect the brand’s purpose and core strengths and enhance the online shopper’s experience.

2.9 **Summary of the theoretical framework**

As shown in this theoretical framework there are many different discussions going on about the risks and benefits of luxury fashion brands distributing and marketing themselves online. All of the researchers in this framework are agreeing on the fact that the Internet is a good communication medium for luxury fashion brands, but they do not agree on it being an equally good distribution channel. There are almost as many pro-arguments as there are con-arguments around this subject, but there are also many thoughts on how the websites and web-shops should be design to best meet their purpose. Due to all these un-agreements, we intend to turn to the consumers of these luxury fashion products (in Sweden) to find out what they think and to get a view of if these brands should be present online according to their consumers.
3 Method

In this chapter we will describe how we conducted the different parts of the investigation. This section will therefore include a discussion of the chosen approach, how the interviewees were chosen and how the interviews were conducted.

3.1 Pilot study

In order for us to meet the purpose of this research we started off by making pilot-interviews to see if the perception about brand dilution among luxury fashion brands online could be researched by doing in-depth interviews. In addition we wanted to test our first set of questions to see how the respondents would interpret the questions and if the chosen brands were suitable for the study.

The two pilot-interviews were done over the phone with two friends of us, whom we knew had a deep interest in luxury fashion brands. The interviewees were not at all prepared, so they did not have any time to think through the answers before the interview was conducted. In addition, the interviewees were told before the interview started that they would be anonymous in the thesis.

During the pilot-interviews we asked the respondents questions around luxury fashion like; what is luxury fashion for you? What distinguishes (features) a luxury fashion product from other fashion products? If many people own and use the same fashion luxury item as you have, how would that make you feel?

Second we asked the interviewees questions about specific brands (Burberry, Dior, Chanel and Prada) and in the end of the interviews the respondents were asked to visit the respective website of each brand and answer questions around those, some examples are: Did this website change your view on the brand? Was there anything that bothered you/anything you found annoying? What feelings do got get from visiting this website? How does it matter if it is the company’s own website/online shop or some other company selling these items? Will you visit this website/online shop again?

The answers from these questions generated a picture of how female consumers think around luxury brands selling products online or not. Although these pilot-interviews showed that two of the brands (Prada and Chanel) were not good representatives due to problems with visiting their websites (uploading) and that Chanel and Dior had very similar websites. Due to the mentioned reasons we decided to replace Prada and Chanel with Gucci and Louis Vuitton. The pilot-interviews also showed that some questions needed to be moved and others taken away and further ones added. It was indeed very valuable to have done pilot-interviews to minimize the mistakes and to make sure that the answers from the respondents helped us to answer the purpose.

The goal of this thesis to understand if luxury fashion brands can use the web and webshops and still keep a sense of drama and exclusivity around their brand in order to avoid brand dilution. Therefore we chose to make a qualitative study, which is according to Saunders et al
(2007, p. 321-322) about understanding a phenomenon, exploring issues and with help of this – answer posted questions. By doing a qualitative research instead of a quantitative one, we are not using either numbers or statistics to show the result. The conclusions are generated from comparing the hypothesis and the in-depth interviews (with the luxury fashion interested females in Sweden).

### 3.2 Data collection

In this thesis we have used primary data and literature. The primary data have been collected through interviews as will be explained in section 3.1.1. The literature has been collected mostly in form of earlier research published in academic journals found through the Internet. We have also used literature sources found both on the Internet and in different libraries in Sweden. The literature sources have been useful to find hypothesis, to guide the research questions and help to answer the purpose.

Most of the primary data collection took place in late April 2010, during this collection the authors made eight in-depth interviews with different luxury fashion interested females in Sweden. The primary data and the literature sources were collected in the period from Mars to May 2010.

The interviews were conducted the following dates:

- Mikaela 2010-04-21
- Ulrica 2010-04-21
- Erica 2010-04-22
- Susanne 2010-04-23
- Birgitta 2010-04-26
- Monica 2010-04-26
- Sophie 2010-04-27
- Victoria 2010-04-27

#### 3.2.1 Interview method

We have conducted eight in-depths interviews with luxury fashion interested females living in Sweden. The interviews were done in order to see what their perceptions and interpretations of luxury fashion brands distributing and marketing their products online were.

When conducting interviews there are three different methods to choose from: structured, semi-structured and in-depth, Saunders et al. (2007, pp. 320-321). Structured interviews are questionnaires based on standardized and predetermined set of questions, with pre-coded answers. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to have a set of themes and questions that may vary depending on the informer. Some questions may be more structured and others may be open-ended, this also gives room for asking additional questions. In-depth interviews are very informal, here the interviewer does not have any pre-written set of questions, and instead it is more like a conversation about the aspect of interest. In the i-
depth interview case the person conducting the interview is not leading the informer in one way or another.

These types of interviews allowed us to gain more information from the people we interviewed, because it would give a richer understanding of how these luxury fashion interested females think around these brands and their marketing and how much knowledge they have within the online/web-shop field. The non-structured layout gives the informants the possibility to answer the questions with their own words (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 321).

To save time, the interviews were divided so that one of us was present during the interviews, and the interviews usually lasted for about 50-65 minutes. Three interviews were conducted during telephone meetings and five were face-to-face interviews. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, so the answers were translated into English before they are presented in this thesis.

3.2.2 The studied brands

In this study, we have included four luxury fashion brands: Burberry, Dior, Gucci and Louis Vuitton. We have chosen these because they have several attributes in common, they are all old, well-established fashion brands, they have the approximately same price range, they are all European and they are well known among women. They are also brands that have distribution in stores on several locations in Sweden. In addition they have differences that made them specifically interesting for this thesis, they all have websites with web-shops, but they have totally different designs on their websites and the platforms are built very differently. Even though they are all European brands, their origin is from three different countries; France, England and Italy. Additionally they have all different styles and sell different lifestyles to their consumers. The access to their websites and web-shops are also easy and most computers can handle them. A more elaborated presentation of each brand can be read in appendix 2.

3.2.3 The interview questions

Prior to conducting the eight interviews we made two pre-interviews to test the set of questions and the brands. We wanted to see how the females being interviewed interpret the questions and if there were questions they did not understand correctly. The result from our pre-interviews showed that the questions needed some modifications and that some of them should be changed to better suit the purpose. It was also noticeable that there were several questions missing, and that two of the chosen brands needed to be changed.

After redoing the interview questions, the final set included four different parts of questions which are all crucial since they will in different ways help us to reach the purpose, see explanations of the different sets below:

The first set of questions (see appendix 1) that was asked was general questions about the luxury fashion interested females and their habits of shopping. These were questions like;
Where do you live? What do you work with? How much time do you use for shopping each week? How much do you spend on luxury fashion products per year? What is luxury fashion to you? What distinguishes (features) a luxury fashion product from other fashion products? Name a few brands that represent luxury fashion? These questions were meant to give us general understanding about the female and her views on luxury fashion.

The second set of questions were related to general Internet issues, such as if you want to find out information about a luxury fashion product, were do you search? Do you have Internet access daily? How many hours per week do you spend online? Do you search for information about products/garments/fashion online? Do you shop online? (If yes: What kind of products? Why?) Is online shopping less exclusive than shopping in stores for you? Why? What makes an online shop exclusive according to you? If luxury products are sold online should the price be the same as in the stores?

The third set of questions was all about the knowledge of the chosen brands so these questions were asked to each respondent a total of four times (one time for each brand).

These were questions like; do you recognize this brand? What do you know about this brand? What do you think of/associate when hearing about or seeing products from this brand? Do you identify with this brand? Have you ever owned/bought an item from this brand? If yes, what, when, were and how? Have you ever visited a store in which these products are sold? If yes: Where and when? Have you ever visited the website of this brand? If yes: How often and when most recently? What expectations do you have on their website?

These were all questions that gave us an understanding of the respondents’ knowledge and thoughts about the chosen brands. These questions were aimed to make the analysis easier and clearer, but also to make sure the respondents had the interest and knowledge they needed to be a part of this research.

The fourth and last set of questions was all related to evaluating their experience from each website. Here the questions asked were for example: What are your thoughts about this website? Where your expectations fulfilled? Did this website change your view on the brand? Does this website provide the information you need or are you missing something? Was there anything that bothered you/anything you found annoying? What feelings do you get from visiting this website? What do you think the brand wants you to feel? What are the differences in buying items from this brand online vs. in an offline store according to you? Will you visit this website/online shop again? These questions were asked in order to see what they thought about the idea of these brands having web shops, and also how they interpret the websites in general to get a hint of what the consumer values.

We aimed to meet the purpose by using the answers from the different female respondents combined with theory to gain an understanding about if luxury fashion brands can be successful in distributing and marketing their products online.
3.3 Data analysis

The meaning of the qualitative research is to provide us with a material that will allow us to interpret accordingly to answer the stated purpose. However, the intricate part is to make sense of all the data collected and find significant patterns which are the analysis of the research. There are no rules or formulas on how to perfectly analyze the data and we can only use our full intellect to fairly represent the data collected. On the other hand, there are guidelines for how to do an analysis but they might have to be modified from case to case as each purpose and qualitative study is not like any other. The analysis is thus depending on the human factors which can be considered both a weakness and strength as skills, intellect, training, discipline and creativity come into play (Patton, 1990, pp. 371-372).

For the qualitative research, the description is the first part of the analysis which answers the basic descriptive questions such as what and how. This must be separated from the interpretation part that includes a more analytical framework. This part puts the different answers from the interviews into patterns and answers the why-questions. By presenting the descriptive data first, the readers are allowed to make own interpretations before reading the author’s. When putting together the analysis a cross-interview analysis will be used, this means that the authors will connect answers from the different interviewees. This will help when answering the purpose as well as reaching a conclusion to the thesis (Patton, 1990, pp. 374-376).

3.3.1 The interviewees

We chose to only interview luxury fashion interested females that live in Sweden, because even if this topic have been researched before, the researchers have not really come to a conclusion, or at least not to the same conclusion. In order to get females to conduct the interviews with we assembled a list of women we knew or whom our parents knew that were known to be very interested and up to date of luxury fashion. We contacted each of these women to see if they were interested to contribute to the thesis and we managed to get eight out of ten to agree on participating.

Since we had personal connections to the interviewees, it made it easier to get hold of them and to make them agree on being interviewed. We managed to collect samples from many different age-groups; the interviewees were aged 26, 30, 32, 39, 50, 55, 63, and 65. If it is found that the results are approximately the same, no matter the age of the respondent, the conclusion and results will be valid to more age groups, and probably to more luxury fashion brands and in that way generate a broader understanding of this issue and a larger contribution. On top of this, we will then be able to present more future online marketing and distribution suggestions for other luxury fashion brands.
3.4 Credibility of research findings

3.4.1 Reliability

Reliability shows if the data collection methods used in one research will give the same result if done in a similar way on another occasion (Saunders et al, 2007, p. 156). There are several issues to consider when it comes to reliability. One of them is participant bias, this is when the interviewees say things they think others want them to say. In this research, there might be a bias since we knew all of the interviewees personally and this might affected their answers in mainly two ways. Either, they took the extra time and effort to answer as honest and correct as possible (for example that they did not have any knowledge) because they found it harder to lie to people they knew. Or, they answered the way they thought the authors wanted them to answer because they felt empathy with our work.

Another issue for this research may be observer bias, which means that different people interpret the same answer in different ways. Since we divided the work so that only one and always the same person conducted the interviews they avoided the problem were the person interviewing have understood an answer in one way were as the other one would have understood it differently. We also discussed every question carefully before making the interviews. It would have been optimal if we could have done all interviews together but due to lack of time this was not possible. A third issue may have been observer error but since it was only one of the authors conducting the interviews, all the questions were only posted in one way which made sure all the interviewees were asked the exact same questions (Saunders et al, 2007, pp. 156-157).

3.4.2 Validity

Validity is dealing with the relationship that is found between several variables, i.e. if it is a true relationship or not. In qualitative studies, like this one, the validity shows if the result is correct, if it can be trusted. In quantitative studies, validity is more useful to see if the result is representative for a population and if the researcher has drawn the right conclusions (Saunders et al, 2007, p. 157).

There are some issues and confirmations to validity in this project. One of them is the economic state of the country and as Sweden is now currently in a recession the luxury fashion consumers maybe face hard times economically and therefore they do not spend as much money on these products as they did before the recession. Another issue is doing a test of the interview questions, in order to increase the validity of the empirical findings. We made a set of interview questions which were tested on two interviewees before conducting the real interviews. These pilot-interviews showed that we had to change some of the questions to easier meet the stated problem.

3.4.3 External Validity

External validity shows whether the result from the research is valid in other situations as well. A threat to generalisability can be that there are two few respondents in a research to
actually make a representative sample for the whole country. The respondents may also have too similar characteristics – like gender and interest etc. if this is the case, the research result will hold true for other people with the exact same conditions. (Saunders et al, 2007, p. 158)

To increase the external validity of this project the authors have interviewed eight luxury fashion interested females, and the only thing they have in common is their gender, interest for fashion and shopping habits. Otherwise they are different in age, living in different cities, have different working-life experiences and they have different amounts of money and time to spend on luxury fashion products.
4 Empirical result

In this section we present the empirical result, i.e. what the interviews generated. It starts with the result from the two first sections of questions which consists of more general questions about the interviewees’ attitude towards luxury fashion and online shopping. The next section is then divided according to the studied brands.

4.1 Luxury fashion online according to Swedish females

For the participating women is luxury fashion about products that feel exclusive, is being produced in limited editions, have a unique design, a superior quality and are rather expensive. In total, luxury fashion products should build an image that is glamorous and gives the consumer that little extra. What distinguishes a luxury fashion products from other fashion products has mostly to do with the exclusivity, that the products should feel specially chosen for you as a consumer and you should be able to identify the products with the person you are or want to be, according to the interviewees. Two other important features were that the quality and tooling should be better and the design should represent something extra. Brands that represent luxury fashion for them are for example Dior, Chanel, Prada, Armani, Lars Wallin, Hugo Boss, Mulberry, Burberry and Louis Vuitton. When we asked how they would feel if many people they knew owned and used the same luxury fashion products as them, six of the women thought that it would be a small catastrophe, that they would feel cheated and no longer feel special and therefore they would not use the item anymore. The two others considered this to be totally okay.

They all use the Internet when searching for information about luxury products and three of them use magazines as well. The women have Internet access daily and they spend an average of 19.5 hours per week online. All eight of them also said that they use the Internet to find specific information about fashion products and garments. Nearly all of them shop items online, mostly books, music and trips, but three also purchased clothes, shoes and other accessories. When being asked if shopping online was less exclusive than shopping in stores did four answered yes, the main reason was that it is more fun to see, try and touch the items and in that way get a larger experience when shopping. The other women answered that it is not less exclusive to shop online because it is convenient, saves time and the wide range of choice creates a unique experience.

An online shop is exclusive if it feels virtual, like the visitor enters a special world, according to the interviewees. It is also exclusive if it has nice photographs, it should look professional, it should be easy to navigate and it should give the impression that it took long time to build the site. The visitor should be impressed already when seeing the first page. Another important thing was that it should not contain any commercials like banners and blinking advertisements.

A majority, six of the women, thought that the products should be cheaper online since this way of distributing products is much cheaper for the company than having a store. Two of the women said that it is up to the company to decide about the prices and they did not see why it
should be a difference in price between an online store and a physical store. The differences between buying luxury items online and in a physical store is according to the interviewees mainly the possibility to feel and try the products, also to see them in real life since pictures tend to lie a lot. In addition the encounter with the personnel in the store is important in some cases. On the other hand, shopping via Internet is very convenient, time saving and comfortable since one can stay at home. The last question in this section was about how they interpret the increasing supply of products from luxury fashion brands now when some of them also distributed to everyone on the Internet. Here all the women said it is good that more people are able to buy the products, and they thought that since everyone cannot afford it anyway it will not create a mass consumption trend.

We divided the rest of the interviews into talking about four different brands, namely Burberry, Dior, Gucci and Louis Vuitton. Here we have divided the interviewees’ answers on the questions brand by brand, starting with Burberry.

4.1.1 Burberry

All the interviewees had previous knowledge about Burberry; they knew that it is an English brand and that it is recognized by its check pattern. The brand also reminded them of a rainy London day, English country side and old heritage. Burberry was also associate with old women’s clothing, umbrellas, tweed, high quality and the colours beige, red and black. Six women said that they identify with Burberry as a brand, while the other two said they did not. It was also six of them who had owned or bought a product from Burberry, examples were a T-shirt, a bag, scarf, shoes and a trench coat.

Almost all of them had visited a store in which Burberry products were sold, these visits had occurred both in Sweden and in other countries. The website of Burberry, however, had only two visit previous to the interviews; one had visited it very recently and the other many years ago. They expected the website to be stylish and clean, contain clear and good photographs and have the typical Burberry colours – red, beige and black. In addition, it should show the check pattern and have an English countryside influence. The website was also expected to show all the products in a neat and informative way and have no flash.

All the women were asked to search for a specific bag on the website of Burberry, see appendix 3, which they all found. After having visited the website they all said they really liked it (some even said they loved it) and had found it very informative, easy to use and navigate, that it had very nice product presentations and that it looked youthful and fresh. They thought it really creates a must-have-it-all-feeling and it made them want to buy products from Burberry. The expectations on the website had been fulfilled for all of them, some thought the website was even better then they had expected. When being asked if the website had changed their view of the brand, all of the women said yes. Many of them were surprised by how young the brand seemed today and they really thought that Burberry had changed for the better. Half of the women thought that the brand image was the same online as in the physical stores and the rest thought that Burberry was better online than in the physical stores.
The women were asked if they would like to buy products from the online store (considering that it was 100% safe to buy products online, no credit card problems) and almost all of them wanted to buy products from Burberry’s web-shop. However, a couple of them missed information like pictures of how the bags looked inside and measurements of the bags, and one also wanted more history of the brand and the company on the website. Half of them could not think of anything special that had annoyed them during the website visit, while the other four found the music on the website a bit disturbing.

After visiting the website of Burberry the women expressed a strong liking and wanting to buy numerous things from the website, furthermore they became surprised by the change in target group and that it was positive that they are now more youthful. Some also mentioned the feelings of a nice but rainy London day, an oxford student style, British high-class people and high product quality. The website really changed their view of Burberry for the better said many of them. The feelings Burberry was trying to mediate thought the interviewees was a sense of luxury but still a classy and clean feeling, a feeling of desire of their products and that the visitor to be surprised of the change. It became evident that four of the women would rather buy the products online while the others would rather buy them in a store. The main reason for buying online was that the range of products was much broader. They all thought that it was important that Burberry themselves owned the website and that their products only were sold through their there and not through any other company’s web-shop. The main reasons for this were the risk of buying copies and for the exclusive feeling – in other words, to keep the brand’s status.

All of our interviewees claimed that they would visit the website again. They also thought that Burberry should have a web-shop and it what it would not be enough to only have a website containing pictures of the products and product information. The women were asked if they would be more willing to buy Burberry products online if they already owned Burberry products and knew all their products well from before, here all women answered yes. The main reason was because then they know the sizes, the quality and more easily what to expect.

4.1.2 Dior

The women associate Dior with products like make-up, perfume and sunglasses, but also with black dresses and classical French styled clothes. Other things they associate the brand with are luxury, exclusivity, glitter, glamour and Monaco and St Tropez, France. The majority of the women could identify with the brand and all of them had bought or received Dior products. Six of them had perfume or make-up products from the brand while the others owned sunglasses and shoes. Only one of the interviewees owned a Dior garment; a top. All of them, except for one, had visited a Dior store. However, the situation was the reverse when it came to the website; only one of them had visit Dior’s website.

The expectations of Dior’s website were that it would look exclusive and glamorous according to three of the interviewees. One said she expected a small amount of products and that the style would be pure while another women expected beautiful people to show the
clothes. Another of them had large hopes on the website and that it would be easy to use where as another did not expect much besides that it would be informative.

All but one found the specific product we asked them to search for. The website was easy to navigate according to four of the interviewees while one said that she found it difficult to navigate and that the website did not appeal to her. The grey background was not appreciated by half of them who thought it looked boring and a few missed the glamour and thought that it should have been more sparkly. One interviewee said she liked the catwalk shows but thought that The House of D part felt really boring and unprofessional whereas another woman thought the information about the brand was good. The expectations of the website were not fulfilled for the majority of them.

After having visited the website we also asked if their view on the brand had changed. The majority answered no while one said; yes for the better, because she had received more information about the brand. The majority also thought that the website and Dior’s physical stores had the same brand image except for one of them who thought that the stores were more luxurious. Half of them could consider buying items from Dior’s website. The other half would not consider buying Dior items online and one said that it was because she was really unsure if she would be able to order the correct product due to the navigation of the website.

The majority thought the website provided the needed information, however one missed bag measurements and inside pictures of the bags. After having visited the website did five of them say that there was not really anything that bothered them or anything they found annoying about it. The others were not as pleased with the website, one found the grey background boring, another was bothered by the film and the last one thought the website was a bit slow and that it was a little difficult to find products.

The feelings they got from visiting the website was rather diverse. One answered that she did not feel invited, that it was unfriendly to use and she got a feeling of emptiness. Three of the others did not get any direct feelings around it and one of them said she did not get in the mood for shopping, while a group of three thought the website gave them the feelings of luxury and exclusivity. The last interviewee did not find the website as glamorous as she had expected. Two of the women thought that Dior wanted them to feel that there was some type of club or secret society that they should become or be part of, but neither of them felt invited. Half of them thought the brand wanted them to think of the old, classy and exclusive Dior standard. One had no ideas what Dior wanted her to feel while another thought the brand was trying to lure her in to buying their products and that they wanted to show off.

Almost all would rather purchase Dior products in a physical store then online. However if they would buy Dior products online did the majority say that they would rather make purchases in Dior’s own web-shop, then in from another web-shop, due to usually wider assortment, no risk for piracy and they would feel more certain of the level of quality. For the other two it would not matter. Furthermore, most of the women thought that Dior should have an online shop while the other two thought it would be enough for the brand to show the products and the belonging information on the website.
If the women had known the brand very well from before, would that affect four of them to consider buying products online because then they would be more familiar with the brands sizes and quality. That scenario would have no affect on the other half of the interviewees. The majority said that they would not visit Dior’s website again, one said maybe and two said they would visit it again.

4.1.3 Gucci

All of the interviewees recognized Gucci as a brand and immediately thought of Italy and also luxury and exclusive. Otherwise the knowledge level about Gucci was diverse among the women; one said that she really did not know that much about the brand while another mentioned a lot of things and said that she had read a book about the brand Gucci and the Gucci family.

Some associated Gucci with young girls’ fashion while one associated Gucci with old female Italian luxury. One of them who related Gucci with younger fashion also said that she associated the brand with showing off and thought the brand felt a bit fake. Half of them thought about accessories like sunglasses, bags, belts and shoes when hearing the brand Gucci. Further associations were luxury and glamour but also with the colour black and stylistically pure fashion.

Almost all the women did not identify with the brand. The one standing out from the crowd said that she could identify a little with the brand. Three interviewees had never owned or bought a Gucci item. A group of three had bought or received make-up or perfume. One had received a scarf as a present and the one standing out from the crowd had bought and received a larger amount of Gucci products; bags, shoes and dresses. Five of them had visited a Gucci store and two had visited the brand’s website.

Their expectations of Gucci’s website were that it would contain golden colours, and look exclusive and glamorous. Some of them expected the website to have a beach influence and to be cool and youthful. One thought that it would be too much of everything while another did not have so many expectations on the website a part from that Gucci would use sexy models.

In order to test the website’s navigation we asked the interviewee to find a specific product from the web-shop, which we showed them a picture of. Five of eight could not find the specific product we had asked for. After the interviewees had the opportunity to visit the brand’s website and look it through, five of them thought that it was difficult to navigate or that that the website had a bad navigation system and that the platform was weird. One even thought that Gucci should redo the website quickly due to the difficulty to find things. On the other hand did one woman find the website easy to navigate, and very detailed and another thought that the web-shop was nice, had good pictures of the products, good zoom and that the product presentation was funny when you click on the product.

One woman who found it difficult to navigate on the website thought that it however looked nice and had good pictures and appreciated all the details and that it was only the products in the pictures and not a model showing them. On the other hand, one interviewee wanted
models to show the products so she can see how the items look on somebody. Three specifically said that they thought the brown background was boring and ugly, and two other said in more general terms that they found the whole website boring, non-inviting and uninspiring. Half of them thought that their expectations of Gucci’s website had been fulfilled while the other half said the opposite.

After visiting the website, had their view of the brand been improved for three of them. Two said that their view of the brand had not changed at all and the remaining ones said that their view had changed for the worse and they were disappointed or even sad when seeing the website. Of the five women who had visited a physical Gucci store, two said that the website and the physical store had the same brand image. The others did not agree and thought that there were differences in style and exclusivity between the stores and the website.

Half of them said that they would like to buy items from Gucci’s website while the other half had the opposite opinion. The information offered on the website was satisfying for half of them, were as the other half wished for a better overlook of the categories, better measurements of the bags and more pictures of different angles of the products. The navigation system was something that five of the interviewees were disturbed by and found really annoying. The others could not think of anything in particular that had bothered them.

The ugly colours and the navigation problems particularly upset two of the interviewees, since they found it annoying and irritating. Two experienced the website as user unfriendly and non-inviting. A bit mail-order like and therefore not very luxurious was another experience and one woman had split feelings about it because she thought the pictures were very nice but not the web-design. There were those who had a bit more positive point of view of the website; one got the feelings of sunny southern Europe and the other got in the mood for shopping, due to the good pictures. Some of them thought that Gucci wanted them to get a feeling of luxury or of youth and a day at the beach or that Gucci was only trying to make them want to buy their products.

The majority would rather buy Gucci products in the brands physical stores, while three could consider both channels for purchasing. Although if buying their products online would the women preferably do it through the brand’s own web-shop and not through some external actor online, because it would feel more genuine and there would be no risk for piracy. One also mentioned that the assortment is wider if it is the brand’s own web-shop.

Gucci should have their own web-shop and not only show the products and belonging information about them online, according to five of them. If they knew Gucci’s products very well from earlier would that affect half of them when considering whether or not shopping online. They would feel more secure because then they would know which size to choose and the quality, style and colours of the brand, while the other ones said that not affect their choice. The majority would not visit Gucci’s website again.
4.1.4 Louis Vuitton

The women associated Louis Vuitton with superior luxury, heritage, that they sell mostly bags and sunglasses and that they have had cool and unique commercials throughout the years. When hearing the brand Louis Vuitton the women thought of the different flower patterns on the bags, the LV-logotype, modern French progressive girls, and design for different cultures. Two said that they identify themselves with Louis Vuitton, while the rest did not. Most of them had never owned or bought anything from Louis Vuitton, but the two who had owners’ sunglasses, perfume and bags. The majority had visited a store where Louis Vuitton products were sold, but only one had visited the brand’s website.

They expected Louis Vuitton’s website to be exciting and give the visitor an experience, it should be cool and have a young feeling but yet stylish. It should also be easy to navigate and have a French touch, as one of the interviewee expressed it “it should look something like their flagship store in Paris”.

All the women were asked to find a specific Louis Vuitton bag in the brand’s web-shop and they all found it. They thought it was a really nice site, the pictures were good and that it felt inspiring. A negative thing that most of them mentioned was that there were a bit too many choices and odd names on the menus which made it difficult to find the item they were looking for. They said that it felt like this website was directed towards the real Louis Vuitton consumers who know the brands every move and every collection by heart so therefore the names of each collection can work if the consumer is enough educated. All found that their expectations on the website of Louis Vuitton were fulfilled.

The visit on the website changed their view of the brand for the better for three of them, because they became surprised of how many products the company sold through that channel. The others said that their view had not changed after visiting the website. The majority thought the website and the physical store had the same brand image. The other two did not know, one had never visited the store and the other woman was unsure of the real brand image of Louis Vuitton. Half of them did not want to buy products online from Louis Vuitton, were as the others wanted to make purchases through that channel.

The provided information on the website was sufficient according to all of them and one said that she got more information than she thought she needed in order to make a purchase. A few of them found things that annoyed them with the website of Louis Vuitton; there was too much flash which made the uploading time longer and the second thing was the menus, due to the odd categorisation of the products. A given suggestion was to classify according to type of bag instead of name of the bag collection.

The feelings that arose after visited the website was that it felt a bit identity-less, that the products were really nice but the pictures are not that good. Some thought that it felt like you should belong to a special group of people to enter this website (in a positive, exciting way). The feelings they thought Louis Vuitton wanted to mediate was a wow-feeling, a need for an exclusive brand or a French lifestyle and pure luxury. Some thought that the brand wanted them to crave for being a part of their secret society.
Nearly all of them would prefer to buy Louis Vuitton’s products through the physical stores however one interviewee said she could buy them online too. It mattered a lot that it was Louis Vuitton themselves that owned the website and web-shop due to many of the women being afraid of receiving a copy since many Louis Vuitton bags have been heavily copied through the years. A slight majority said that they would visit the website again. Five of the women thought that the brand should have a web-shop on their website, while the others said that it would be enough with only a website for this brand. Half of the women would be more willing to shop online if already knew the brand and its products very well would because then the size, colour and quality problems are gone. Three said that would not matter, two because they would never shop Louis Vuitton online anyway and one because she would shop their products online even if she had never experienced their products in real life before.
5 A theory of luxury brand consumers (analysis)

In this section we compare the theoretical framework against the result from the interviews we carried out.

5.1 Luxury brand's factors

According to Kapferer & Bastien (2009), luxury brands should not distribute their products so that they are easy to get hold of for the consumers, because the desire will be greater if the product is very hard to get hold of, therefore using the Internet as a distribution channel is actually not good for luxury brands. On the other hand, according our respondents, many of them thought that the luxury brand presented should have web-shops because the products would then be accessible for more people, which they meant was a good thing. Many of the women said that luxury products for them is products that are produced in a limited edition, but this answer was more directed to being one of the few to own this special product than the product being hard to get hold of for them.

It turned out that when the women had a hard time finding a product, for example the Gucci bag, they gave up searching after only a short time (about one minute) and then they were frustrated with the total website for quite some time and this, they said, lowered the brand image in their minds. So, it seems that there can be a risk that a website which is difficult to navigate can create a frustration and a strong feeling of giving up. It seems like female consumers today are used to get everything presented to them quick and they have no intention to wait for the product pictures to download themselves, so when the websites took a bit longer to download many of the women were annoyed and this again affected their view of the brand.

5.2 Internet distribution

Our respondents pointed out the main structural differences between shopping online and offline, for them shopping offline meant that they can touch, see and try the items and have an encounter with the store personnel which were all important things for them. On the other hand, they thought that online shopping was more convenient because they could stay at home while shopping and that saves time. Our respondents did not recognize the problems associated with online shopping pointed out by Kapferer & Bastien (2009). Our interviewees considered that the high price would be enough to keep the mass consumption threat at a distance.

One of the most important things the women missed with an online shop was the personal encounter with the store personnel, this is in sequence with the findings by Kapferer & Bastien (2009) about the importance of having own brand stores to build and keep the brand image. The Internet can then work more as an additional distribution channel that is dependent on the physical store image.

When it comes to distribution, the result we reached was that it can be exclusive to shop luxury fashion goods both online and in stores, but in different ways. The respondents
considered online shopping to be exclusive because of the convenience and the wider assortments and offline shopping because of the possibilities to touch, see and try the products. The respondents thought that there was a difference between the brands, for Gucci they rather shop in stores whereas for Burberry they would rather shop online. This shows that the feeling of wanting to buy online has to do with both the brand but also the design of the web-shop. In addition, none of the respondents saw any problems with the fact that the products from these brands are now available to more people since they are being sold through the web-shops. Overall, this means that our respondents did not agree with the distribution suggestions for luxury fashion brands from Kapferer & Bastien (2009).

Almost all the respondents thought it was a good thing that the supply of products is now increasing due to the brands also distributing through the web. They did not think there was any risk of weakening the brand image since everyone will not have these products because everyone cannot afford them. So the unwillingness of many luxury brands to adopt e-retail due to fear of weaken the brand image through increasing the product accessibility, as said by Okonkwo (2007), is not a problem according to our respondents. Another concern for the brands is the risk of a negative effect on the offline sales. However the brands in this study would not have to worry about that when it comes to our interviewees anyhow; the majority of them would rather buy the brands’ products in their physical stores while some of the women could consider both selling channels.

When it comes to the price of the products, six of the women thought that the price should be cheaper online than in the stores, but if that were the case the products would be available to more consumers and therefore they could risk of losing their high status. It seems like the women thought mostly about what they would wish for, but not really considering what effects it would have for the rest of the consumers, because at the same time they want the price to be high enough so that only a limited amount of people can afford the items, but they also want the products to be cheaper online due to lower costs for the company. As Kapferer & Bastien (2009) says that price is now the only thing that separates luxury fashion goods from normal fashion goods is not really true, even if price plays a large role, the quality, design and tooling are all things that the women mentioned as attributes that differentiate luxury fashion products from normal fashion products.

Possibly the women values accessibility and convenience higher today then before and therefore is the physical viewing and the total experience of a store visit less important. If the website is well presented, have a large assortment, is easy to navigate and provides all the needed information would half of the women prefer to shop online than in the physical store, as seen with the example of Burberry. It therefore appears like Okonkwo’s (2007) hypothesis which says that in reality does not the value for the consumer diminish if some of the sensory elements goes missing, is corresponding to the women’s attitudes.

5.3 Brand integrity and brand dilution

All of the four brands (Burberry, Gucci, Dior and Louis Vuitton) used in this research are old brands with strong heritages. Therefore the consumers of these brands have their own view of
what they stand for and which lifestyle they represent. Our findings are in line with the reasoning of Kort et al. (2005) about that for luxury fashion products the functionality is not as important as the style and exclusivity of the brand that means more. No one of the women mentioned any functional attributes instead the comments mostly concerned feelings and styles. Examples of these were; which country the brand comes from, the typical colours and patterns of the brand, for example like red, black and beige for Burberry, and which type of woman that will wear the products like; old women for Burberry, elegant French ladies for Dior and Louis Vuitton and younger girls for Gucci.

It was clear that the women had a shared, stereotypical image of the different brands. An example of this was that all of the women had the picture of Burberry as a brand for old ladies in rubber boots with umbrellas living in rainy London and that the check pattern was all over all their products. All of the women became very surprised about the Burberry products and the image they saw on the website and that they had no idea that Burberry had changed their target group. Our result showed that the brand image in the consumers’ minds can sometimes be very different to what the company want it to be and therefore it is very important to reach the consumer with the right message when doing a change. Internet can therefore be a suitable distribution channel to use when wanting to reach many people worldwide at the same time. So, as Kort et al. (2005) says, it can really be a problem for luxury brands that changes occurring in brand integrity and image do not happen all at once, they occur over a long period of time, so therefore it can be hard to change images of the brand that the consumer have from before.

Another aspect of brand integrity is for the brands to own and manage their website and web-shop themselves. According to our respondents it was very important that it was the brand’s own site due to piracy and copying problems, and also to be able to keep the exclusive feeling around the shopping. This can be referred to Kort et al. (2005) who thinks that when the brands themselves have the web-shops, they have a larger chance of creating that indefinable atmosphere that persuades the consumer to pay a larger amount of money for a product they could have bought much cheaper somewhere else.

According to Kort et al. (2005) many luxury brands face the problem of brand dilution, especially those who distribute through the Internet since there is a risk that the brand becomes too popular and thus loses its exclusivity. Our respondents seem to hold high prices as an adequate barrier for too many people to consume. Or in other words, the respondents said that for the chosen brands it comes down to a price issue, because as long as they keep the prices high they hinder many people from consuming their products online.

5.4 Luxury branding online/brand integrity online

A web-shop for a luxury fashion brand feels exclusive if it is virtually appealing and creates a feeling of entering a special world for the visitor. It should also contain nice photographs, look professional, be easy to navigate and give the impression that it took long time to build the site, according to our respondents. Another important thing was that a luxury fashion
brand’s website should not contain any commercials like banners and blinking advertisements, because it makes it look cheap and thereby lowers the brand status.

Whether or not shopping online is less exclusive than shopping in physical stores, did the women have differing opinions about. Four of them thought that online shopping was less exclusive due to it does not provide the same experience. Two of the other women said that it does not have to be while the remaining two thought that shopping online is not less exclusive since it is more comfortable, simple and less stressful. This has to do with their personal experiences and what features they prioritize when shopping. If they find shopping in physical stores stressful and live far from the bigger cities they might prefer online shopping. If they think shopping is a physical experience and perhaps have personal relationships with store personnel they might prefer physical stores. It can also concern the respondents’ Internet maturity and thereby how accustomed they are with online shopping.

The majority thought products sold online should be cheaper than the same products sold in physical stores. This confirms the hypothesis of Kapferer & Bastien (2009) that people tend to think of the Internet as a cheaper market, which is not coherent with the luxury approach. So here it is clear that a demand for a balance is being created, and for luxury brands to decide how to deal with prices online.

The Internet can be a very effective communication medium according to Riley & Lacroix, (2003). The websites the interviewed women got to visit differed quite a lot concerning this area. For Burberry the interviewed women thought that the navigation was easy and they were really tempted to buy items from that site, so the brand had obviously succeeded to deliver a good and well functioning website and web-shop. Dior and Gucci on the other hand did not succeed as well as Burberry, for Dior most of the women were disappointed on the website, they thought it had boring colours and attributes such as catwalk films that were disturbing. For Gucci, most of the women found the website very difficult to navigate and thus the women became irritated and not at all pleased with the website and web-shop. Many of the women even said it lowered the brand value and status for Gucci in their mind. Even though they were disappointed with some of the websites, most of the respondents still thought that the brands should have online shops, and not only websites containing information. So there still seems to be a longing for the possibility to buy items online even if the consumers seem to have high criteria on how the web-shop should be designed to really sell.

All the women we interviewed had daily Internet access and they all used it for searching information about fashion and luxury fashion products. They are therefore used to get immediate information about the things they are looking for and are thereby perhaps more impatient and more demanding then before the Internet era. The majority of the respondent shop online, mostly products like books, music and travelling tickets. Only three said they purchased clothes, shoes and accessories online. It seems like among our interviewees the e-retail for luxury fashion is not established as an essential sales channel, which is not in line with the hypothesis of Okonkwo (2007). Even though they all use the Internet to find information about luxury fashion products we found it a bit contradictive that five of them had never visited any of the websites of Burberry, Dior, Gucci and Louis Vuitton, before the
interviews. A possible explanation is that they are visiting multi-brand web-shops like yoox.com and net-a-porter.com instead.

5.5 Luxury consumer behaviour online

If the respondents already knew the brand and its products very well did three of them say that not affect them concerning any of the brands concerning shopping online or not. One thought that would affect her concerning Burberry and Louis Vuitton but not for Dior and Gucci. The other four women answered that it would affect their decision whether or not shopping online. The majority would be affected by that type of knowledge, which is in line with Okonkwo’s hypothesis about consumers who are most likely to buy luxury products online are those who have had earlier contacts with the brand.

According to figure The four-phase online customer experience hierarchy (see figure 1, p. 11) a customer is going through four different levels when shopping online; functionality, familiarity, internalization and evangelism. When asking the interviewees what their thoughts were about the brands’ websites we got many answers which can be referred to the first level of experience as it concerned navigation, usability, the pictures, the colours, the design and layout of the website. Familiarity is the second level and is reached when the customer can customized/personalize the webpage, the product and the service. This is probably easier to reach when the customer makes an actual purchase, but we could not request that from the interviewees. Instead we asked if they had found all the information they needed in the websites. Nearly all of the women were satisfied with Louis Vuitton’s and Dior’s websites. At Burberry’s website did some missed more extensive product information about the bags, like measurements and inside pictures of the bags.

Level three, internalization, is achieved from previous exceptionally positive experience and that the customer now regularly visits the website. This cannot be confirmed since the majority of the women had not visited these websites before. There is however possibilities for the women to reach this level concerning Burberry since all them said they will visit that website again. The website of Louis Vuitton said five of the women that they would revisit. The chance for the women to reach level three concerning Dior and Gucci are small since only two of them would consider visit those again. The last level is called evangelism and is reached when the customer feels obliged to share the brand’s website with others. The women are also closest to this level when it comes to Burberry, given that we got comments like “Very nice!” and “I love it!” from the women after they visited that website.

Almost all the women thought that Louis Vuitton’s and Burberry’s website and stores had the same image, regarding the last mentioned did some of the interviewees even think the brand image was better presented online. Dior and Gucci did not get a similar throughout positive judgement. This can also be referred to the fact that the women were most pleased with the websites of Burberry and Louis Vuitton. We can therefore assume that it is important for brands that their website is consistent with the total brand strategy in order to keep a similar customer image of the brand. If these do not correlate the customer’s brand image can be diminished.
The majority of the women had high expectations on all the websites like for example “stylish but clean, typical Burberry colours (beige, red, black) nice photos and little text” for Burberry’s website. Therefore can Okonkwo’s (2007) hypothesis be confirmed; online luxury consumers have high expectations. The women expected as well the websites, especially Dior’s and Gucci’s, to look exclusive and glamorous, which is in line with that the hypothesis saying; online luxury consumers thinks luxury web shops ought to be designed to feel suitable for only their niche segment.

When it became evident that all the women liked Burberry’s website and they all said they would visit it again, we could verify the Okonkwo’s hypothesis about luxury fashion consumers being more likely to be repeated visitors and buyers if they find a website they like at the same time they having a tendency of being brand disloyal. Furthermore, the websites of Dior and Gucci were not liked by many of the women whereas only one of them said she would visit Gucci’s website again and two or three would visit the website of Dior again.

An exclusive web-shop should, according to the interviewees, provide the visitors with an experience and as one of the women said “it feels virtual, like I enter a specific world”. This can be referred to what Okonkwo calls interactivity (see figure 2, p. 12) - to compensate for the lack of human presence, and additional features - to create an enhanced experience and personal enhancement. Also the answers that an exclusive online shop should have good pictures and that it should look professional with nice colours and stylistically pure can be categorized as additional features. Many of the women also answered; easy navigation or user-friendliness and short down load time which can be referred to fast service – to save time, and low transaction costs – to save mental energy and time.

5.6 The design of the website and web-shop

To interpret this according to Okonkwo’s (2007) ideas about web-design, some of these brands have succeeded more than others. We can see that Burberry is the brand all the respondents liked the most, and Burberry’s web-shop had several of the attributes Okonkwo (2007) mentioned, such as giving an experience, having the same brand image online and offline, the visitors wanting to visit the website again and the website really seemed to stick in the minds of the women. Although the music was not appreciated on the website of Burberry, so this shows that the sense of hearing is not maybe the most important sense to please when designing a website. Gucci, on the other hand, was a disappointment for many of the women, they found it difficult to navigate and that it had ugly colours and therefore it did not create a sense of wanting to buy anything. Gucci did not give the same atmosphere online as they did offline and the majority of the women did not want to visit the web-shop again. Dior also made a fairly bad impression on the respondents, they thought it looked ugly and the colours were depressing, they missed the exclusivity and the extra “Dior-sparkle” so the majority did not want to visit the web-shop again. Louis Vuitton on the other hand, succeeded with the visuals but had a confusing navigation which resulted in the women feeling unininvited and uneducated on Louis Vuitton’s collections.
The visual tools on websites consists mostly of the colour scheme, picture, slide shows, video films, 3D product view, the possibility to zoom, text font, style and size, interactive media, full screen mode and graphics. All the brands studied in our research used some or all of these tools, but all in different ways.

According to the interviewees, Burberry had a nice, balanced colour scheme that really showed the products in a good way. For Dior, they said that the colour scheme was boring (grey) and they missed the glamour and sparkle feeling. For Gucci the women thought that the colour scheme (brown) was boring and ugly and did not fit into the brand’s image. The colour scheme for Louis Vuitton was very natural (almost the same colours as Burberry used) and no one mentioned anything specifically about the colour other than the website looking good and showing the products in a good way. If the interviewees did not react on the colour was it possible due to the colours were suitable for the brand’s website and it was not distracting them when viewing the products.

Even though Okonkwo (2007) says that videos are a vital visual element because it adds colour and excitement, awakens the online consumer’s attention and thereby making them stay longer on the website, was this nothing we saw as a common feature from the respondents. Regarding Dior’s website for example, some liked the catwalk movies on the site while others found them disturbing and could not see the purpose of having them there and it did not make them stay longer on the website.

All of the studied brands succeeded rather well in presenting the right information to their products, the only information a few of them missed were exact measurements of the bags and this was for Burberry, Dior and Gucci (that information did exist but perhaps these women did not notice that). There were no further comments about how the information text was perceived so therefore we assume it was satisfactory. Only a few of the women mentioned that they thought some of the sites had a good tool for zooming and therefore could provide with good close-up pictures of the products. The other ones did not take any notice of this, on the other hand they more pointed out what they thought was unsatisfactory, for example inadequate numbers of angels of the products and inside pictures of the bags, for some of the websites. If the amount of information and numbers of pictures was sufficient for the respondents, they might have been more willing to make purchases online.

Burberry and Louis Vuitton were the two brands that used music in this study. For Burberry all the women who had the sound on, on their computers thought that the music was disturbing and muted it. This affected Louis Vuitton since they all had muted their computers when visiting the web-shop of Louis Vuitton, which was the last brand in the visiting order, so therefore they never heard the music on the site of Louis Vuitton. According to Okonkwo (2007) is the most effective way of using sound is to make sure that it is suitable for the brand’s personality and what it is associated with. Perhaps this was the reason why the women found the music annoying at Burberry’s website; it did not correlate with their picture of the brand.

The usability was a significant feature in the websites for the respondents and there were large differences between the brands. Burberry’s website was experienced as having the easiest
navigation and very clear menu, Gucci on the other hand they thought had a difficult navigation system and very few of them found the product they were asked to search for. Louis Vuitton was considered as having odd menus with names of the collection instead of the type of product which made the women feel uneducated and confused. They all found Dior’s web-shop to be easy to navigate and user friendly. Okonkwo (2007) indicates that usability can have a significant effect on a luxury web-shop’s atmosphere and the easy of the purchasing process. We could see a connection between the women’s likes and dislikes of the websites, the easy of navigation and whether or not they would revisit the websites. If the navigation was experienced as easy, they most often liked the website and could consider visiting the website again.

5.7 Summary

It seems like the view on luxury products has changed. The luxury brand’s factors that have been discussed are not the same as the opinions of the interviewed women; they wanted the access to luxury products to be quick and easy. The major differences between shopping online or in a physical store are the ability to feel and try on the products and the encounter with the personal, according to them. However, they thought online shopping is more convenient, saves time and is less stressful, they also thought all the brands we interviewed them about should have web-shops, but it ought to be the brands’ own web-shop in order to keep the exclusive feeling around the shopping. The respondent did not see any problems with the fact that much more people would have access to the products and the risk of brand dilution, since everyone cannot afford them anyway. So, the hypothesis which says that luxury fashion brands should not have distribution online is not in line with the opinions of these women.

A web-shop for a luxury fashion brand should, according to the interviewees, be virtually appealing and create a feeling of entering a special word as well as have nice pictures, be informative, look professional and be easy to navigate. The navigation system was really important for them, if it was difficult to understand, they got annoyed and thereby the brand value and status decreased in their minds. For the website to be coherent with the brand strategy seems also to be important for the respondents. Since they already had an image of the brand they became disappointed if that did not correspond to the actual website.

All of the women use the Internet to find information about luxury fashion products and even though the majority of them had not visited the websites we asked them about before or usually purchases clothes and accessories online, they all thought the brand’s should have web-shops. Perhaps there is a change going on concerning their shopping habits for these types of products. The majority of them also said that if they knew the brand and its products well from before, they would have a more positive attitude towards online shopping.

Online shopping does not have to be less exclusive than shopping in stores, according to half of the respondents. It is possible women values accessibility and convenience higher today than before and that convenience is seen as luxury. If a website is well presented, have a large assortment, easy to navigate and provides all the needed information it seems like at least half
of the interviewed women prefer to shop online than in the physical store, as seen with the example of Burberry.

We can see that some of the brands have succeeded better than others concerning their web-design. Burberry’s web-shop seems to be the one all the women liked the most; it gave the visitor an experience, had the same image online as offline and was easy to navigate. All the women wanted to visit the website again and the website really seemed to stick in the minds of them. Dior, on the other hand, made a fairly bad impression on them, they thought it looked ugly and they did not think it looked exclusivity enough. Therefore the majority of the women did not want to visit the web-shop again. Gucci was also a disappointment for many of them, they found the navigation difficult to handle and that it had ugly colours and it did not create a craving for shopping. The brand did not provide the same atmosphere online as they do offline and the majority of the women did not want to visit the web-shop again. With Louis Vuitton’s website was the women fond of the visuals but thought the navigation was confusing which resulted in the respondents feeling uninvited and uneducated on Louis Vuitton collections.
6 Conclusion

In this chapter we present our conclusion of this study and thereby also answer the purpose.

The purpose of this study was to investigate if luxury fashion brands should use the Internet as a distribution channel. The question we asked was;

Can luxury fashion brands use websites and web-shops and still keep a sense of drama and exclusivity around their brand in order to avoid brand dilution?

The result of this research showed that it is good for luxury fashion brands to have distribution online because it makes the products a lot easier to get hold of for the consumers. Although, in the eyes of the female consumers, there were several criteria that was needed to be fulfilled in order to design and create a well functioning and good web-shop. Examples of the criteria for the web-shop were; it should be easy to navigate, it should be in accordance with the brand image in the stores, feel exclusive, create an experience for the visitors, the product range should be wider than in the physical stores, and it should have good products’ pictures and information. It was evident from the result of the study that Internet can really be a good distribution channel, with only a little risk of brand dilution depending on how the web-shop is designed. We found no evidence that a weak design of the web-shop would decrease offline sales, since the women in the study said they simply would rather shop in the stores when they were unsatisfied with the web-shop. Although, we could see that when the website were consistent or even better, than the brand image from the stores it had a large positive impact on the consumer image of the brand.

The result also showed that it can be exclusive to shop luxury fashion goods both online and in stores, but in different ways. This can be explained by the possibility that the women values accessibility and convenience higher today then before and therefore is the physical viewing and the total experience of a store visit less important. No real risk of the brands becoming too popular and thus lose their exclusivity due to brand dilution was detected. Instead, the female respondents considered that the high price would be enough to keep the mass consumption threat at a distance.

In order to strengthen the brand integrity, it was important that the brand owned and managed their website and web-shop themselves, due to piracy and copying problems, and also to be able to keep the exclusive feeling around the products. In addition, we could see a connection between the women’s likes and dislikes of the websites, if the navigation was experienced as easy; they liked the website and considered visiting the website again.

To summarize, we say that a good website and web-shop meeting the criteria of the female consumers can really create a stronger brand image and online sales, although a luxury fashion brand should also have good physical stores, a web-shop can in many ways really be a very suitable complement for marketing and distribution.
7 Final discussion

In this final section we present our own reflections on the thesis process. We also review the sources we have used to show our understanding of the thesis reliability. To conclude we give suggestions for further research which we find interesting for this subject field.

7.1 Our reflections on the thesis process

We chose the topic for this thesis due to our interest for luxury fashion and the Internet with the purpose of giving us more knowledge about how consumers perceive the existing websites and web-shops of luxury fashion brands. Thereby also give us better understanding of how a successful luxury fashion website should be designed.

We have fulfilled our purpose since the result we found was that a web-shop can be a good additional marketing and distribution tool for luxury fashion brands, but the physical stores should still be the main marketing and distribution tool. It was very interesting to experience the large difference there was between the different brands and how the respondents in the study interpreted these. To be accurate, there seem to be a large diversity in the success online depending which brand we look at and how they have designed their website and web-shop. We have now gained a larger understanding to why the other researchers did not agree with each other in this matter, because the answer is not easy and it really differs depending on the case. The results we found we can only really be sure that they hold true for Swedish fashion interested females in the age groups we chose. We have a feeling that if we would have asked younger females the answers would have been different and more towards a larger acceptation of online shopping.

7.2 Critique of investigation

As far as our theoretical framework goes, we could have used more sources for every heading, this would have increased the validity, however this is again a time-related issue. The sources we used are all academically renowned sources whom we choose to trust and felt that they all, in different ways, contributed to the theoretical framework of this thesis.

The interviewees were chosen because they belong to the brands’ customer segments. We also knew they had a strong luxury fashion interest, and therefore we saw them as suitable to for our study. Since the time for our study was limited we turned to people we had some personal connection to because we thought that would increase the chance of them accepting participation. If we would have had more time we could perhaps have found consumers to the specific brands whom we did not know personally. However, interviewing that type of consumers would have taken far longer time.

7.3 Suggestions for future research

Interesting further research could be to extend the number of interviewees so it also includes both genders, to see if there are any significant differences in their attitudes and their perceptions of these types of websites. An additional suggestion is to select the interviewees
to fit two separated age groups, in order to get a clearer picture of differences related to different ages. To get another perspective is an option to select interviewees from two different countries, to see if the results are related to country of origin. Another alternative is to select a single brand for the interviewees to answer questions about. That would allow a deeper analysis of all the existing function on the website.

Another research topic related to ours can be to look deeper into how a web-shop should be designed, build and programmed to really make it simple to navigate but still look exclusive and luxurious. In other words, what is the ultimate web-shop design and functions for a luxury fashion brand? Examples of research questions could be;

- How should a luxury fashion brand’s website be designed? (Is there a golden ratio?)
- How can the website of X be more luxurious? How should X’s website be design in order to attract their customer segment?
8 References

Literature sources


Internet sources


Appendix 1: Interview questions

Section I

How much time do you spend on shopping? (Per week)
What is luxury fashion to you?
What distinguishes (features) a luxury fashion product from other fashion products?
Name a few brands that represent luxury fashion?
Do you have any favourite luxury fashion brands? (Would you call yourself brand loyal?)
If many people own and use the same fashion luxury item as you have, how would that make you feel?

Section II

If you want to find out information about a luxury fashion product, were do you search?
Do you have Internet access daily?
How many hours per week do you spend online?
Do you search for information about products/garments/fashion online?
Do you shop online? (If yes: What kind of products? Why?)
Is online shopping less exclusive than shopping in stores for you? Why?
What makes an online shop exclusive according to you?
If luxury products are sold online should the price be the same as in the stores? Why?
What are the differences in buying items from a brand’s online vs. in an offline store according to you?
How do you interpret the increasing supply of products from luxury fashion brands now when some of them also distribute through the web?

Section III

Do you recognize this brand?
What do you know about this brand?
What do you think of/associate when hearing about or seeing xxxx’s products?
Do you identify with this brand?
Have you ever owned/bought an item from xxxx? If yes: What, when, were and how?
Have you ever visited a store in which xxxx products are sold? If yes: Where and when?
Have you ever visited the website of xxxx? If yes: How often and when most recently
What expectations do you have on their website?

Section IV

*Showing them the website and let them navigate* Ask them to find one specific product. Use pictures to show them so they know what to look for.
Did they find the products?
What are your thoughts about this website?
Where your expectations fulfilled?
Did this website change your view on the brand?
(If they have visited an offline store) Did the website have the same brand image as its offline stores, according to you?
Would you like to buy items from this website? Why, why not?
Does this website provide the information you need or are you missing something?
Was there anything that bothered you/anything you found annoying?
What feelings do you get from visiting this website?
What do you think the brand wants you to feel?
Where would you rather buy xxxx items in a store or online, and why?
How does it matter if it is the company’s own website/online shop or some other company selling these items?
Will you visit this website/online shop again?
Should the brand have an online shop or is it enough to only show the products and all info about them online?
If you already knew the brand and their products very well would that make you consider online shopping in a different way?
Appendix 2: Brand presentations

Burberry
The history of Burberry began in 1856 when Thomas Burberry opened a small outfitters shop, selling men’s outerwear garments, in Basingstoke, England. In 1901 the brand adopted the Equestrian Knight trademark together with the word: prorsum, which is Latin for: forwards. The iconic trench coat was developed by Burberry in 1914 to be worn by the British military. Another characteristic symbol for the brand is the Burberry check, which was registered as a trademark in 1920 and was first used as a lining to the trench coat. (Website: www.burberryplc.com, 2010)

According to the brand’s website is Burberry defined by its genuine British legacy and the unique democratic positioning on the luxury market. The brand’s principles are founded on quality, function and modern classic style, which are rooted in the integrity of their outerwear. (Website: www.burberry.com, 2010) Burberry’s current chief creative director is Christopher Bailey and he has been with the company since 2001. Before joining Burberry he had been working for the brands Donna Karen and Gucci. He has during his time at Burberry transformed it into a profitable and a more modern brand. (McDowell, 2009)

Burberry has four different product lines for men and women; Prorsum, London, Brit and Sport. The most exclusive line and the one shown on the catwalk is Prorsum. Burberry also offers accessories like shoes, bags, watches, jewellery, scarves and fragrances. Children’s wear are available as well. All the product lines are available in the brand’s web-shop. Burberry has an extensive website with product- and brand information and inspiration. They also have a special website called Art of the Trench (artofthetrench.com) where one can find out more about the history of the Trench and people can send in pictures of themselves in their trench coat to be published on the website. Burberry was the first fashion brand that presented their fashion show by live global 3D broadcast to New York, Paris, Dubai and Los Angeles. It was also possible to see it live on the Internet. (Website: www.burberry.com, 2010)

Dior
In 1947 Christian Dior started a couture house in Paris and at the same time was his first own collection launched. The collection’s features were soft shoulders, small waist and long skirts, which was a success and was given the name ‘the New Look’. Only 52 years old Christian Dior passed away suddenly in 1957. The successor was Yves Saint-Laurent, which had been Dior’s assistant. In 1960 he had to leave due to military duty and was then replaced with Marc Bohan. The current creative director is John Galliano who came to Dior in 1996. (Website: www.dior.com, 2010)

The brand is today a part of the corporation Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy (LVMH) which is owned by the Arnault family. The corporation also includes brands like Louis Vuitton, Marc Jacobs, Givenchy and Fendi. (Website: www.elle.se, 2010)
In the brand’s web-shop is it possible to purchase products like shoes, bags, jewellery, fragrances, cell phone and other accessories. The website presents detailed information about the skin care and make up products. There is also information about Christian Dior, John Galliano and the brand and the visitor can see the brands latest fashion shows for the haute couture and prêt-a-porter collections. Video clips showing behind the scene of for example the making of campaigns and commercials. (Website: www.dior.com, 2010)

**Gucci**

In 1921 Guccio Gucci started up a leather goods business and a small luggage store in Florence, Italy. In the 1930’s the brand attracted many intercontinental clients that was looking for products like bags, gloves and shoes with an equestrian inspired look. Due to this the brand applied the motives of the horse bridles and the stirrup on their collections, which is still being used in Gucci’s collections today. The ‘Bamboo Bag’ that has become an icon was introduced in the 1940’s and in the 1950’s Gucci trademarked the green-red-green web, inspired by the saddle girth. 1953 Guccio Gucci passed away and his sons Aldo, Vasco, Ugo and Rodolfo took over the company. Other product icons from Gucci were introduced in the 1960’s; the ‘Jackie O Bag’, the ‘Hobo Bag’ and the Flora silk scarf, which originally was designed for Grace Kelly. (Website: www.gucci.com, 2010)

After being very successful in 1970’s and 1980’s while expanding into the Far East, the brand started a downward trend due to internal conflicts and bad decisions made. At one point the company was near liquidation. It was not until Tom Ford joined the company it all turned around. Tom Ford stayed with Gucci until 2004 when his contract ended. Gucci’s present creative designer is Frida Giannini who started to work for the company 2002 and got her current position in 2006. (Websites: www.nymag.com, 2010; www.style.com, 2010)

A strategic alliance was formed between Gucci and Pinault-Printemps-Redoute (PPR) in 1999. What is now called the Gucci Group also includes the brands Alexander McQueen, Balenciaga, Bottega Veneta, Boucheron, Sergio Rossi, Stella McCartney and Yves Saint Laurent. (Website: www.gucci.com, 2010)

In Gucci’s web-shop visitors can buy, for example, prêt-a-porter garments, handbags, shoes, jewellery, fragrances, scarves, sunglasses and luggage. The website holds information about the company, visitors can see their fashion shows and behind the scenes of the those, get the latest news about the company and its collections and so on. (Website: www.gucci.com, 2010)

**Louis Vuitton**

The trunk-maker Louis Vuitton Malletier opened his first store in 1854, in Paris. He created and sold luxury luggage for the wealthy people. The Louis Vuitton trademark signature, the brown and tan checked pattern, was first introduced in 1888. George Vuitton took over the business when his father passed away in 1892. He was the one who created the monogram canvas, which has become iconic. Gaston-Louis Vuitton, the son of George, took over in 1936
and he made expanded the brand internationally and the collection was enlarged with purses and wallets. Iconic women bag models was introduced in 1959; the ‘Speedy’, the ‘Steamer’ and the ‘Pochette’. (Websites: www.nymag.com, 2010; www.lvmh.com, 2010)

In 1987 Louis Vuitton merged with Moët et Chandon and Hennessy. Together they created LVMH which today includes many companies in different genres; fashion, leather goods, wine, spirits, perfume, cosmetics, jewellery, watches, catering and department stores. (Website: www.lvmh.com, 2010)

The first ever prêt-a-porter collection from Louis Vuitton was launched in 1998. It had been designed by Marc Jacobs who is still the brand’s creative director. During his time has the brand work together with artist like Stephen Sprouse, which resulted in bags with graffiti written over the monogram pattern, and Takashi Murakami, with the outcome of the Monogram Multicolour canvas and the Cherry Blossom pattern. (Websites: www.nymag.com, 2010; www.style.com, 2010)

The visitor at Louis Vuitton’s web-shop can purchase handbags, travel goods, other smaller leather goods, jewellery, sunglasses, watches, books and other accessories. The website contains a lot of video clips of campaigns, events and happenings, interviews and the possibility to see their latest fashion shows. It is also possible to order personalized luggage. (Website: www.louisvuitton.com, 2010)
Appendix 3: Product images

Burberry

**Small Haymarket Check Sling Bag with Metallic Rivets**

€395.00

Small Haymarket Check canvas sling bag with metallic trims in a metallic finish and polished brass rivet detailing. Leather piping on seams. Patent leather trims on corners. Open top. Belled strap with buckle comes over top and closes with one magnetic button.

**Style Number:** 1000000029

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Quantity: 1</th>
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</thead>
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ADD TO SHOPPING BAG

**Dior**

**Black Leather Court Shoe, F 0 M**

€340

Court shoe in Cannage® stitch and black patent leather.
- Box with silver-tone metal label engraved with 'Dior'  
- Heel: 7 cm  
- Ref.: 40674564 N0

PUMPS

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<tr>
<th>SELECT SIZE:</th>
<th>PURCHASE</th>
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SANDALS & MOLES

BOOTS & BOOTS

BALLERINAS

CASUAL

SEARCH BY SIZE

NEXT STYLE

PREVIOUS STYLE

BACK TO CATEGORY PAGE
Gucci

'sunset' medium tote with engraved interlocking G studs.

- beige/ebony GG fabric with sand/grey/white signature web and white leather trim
- nickel hardware
- double handles with 20 cm drop
- push lock closure
- bottom feet
- inside zip, mobile phone, and pda pockets
- linen lining

232973 FWCF18533

£690

For additional assistance or information, please consult a personal shopper.

Louis Vuitton

ROSEWOOD

Large enough to fit a long wallet and accessories, the glamorous Rosewood bag can be used daily. Its simple shape accentuates the beautiful Monogram Vernis leather.

Size (LxHxD): 5.5" x 5.5" x 12.2"

- Wide zip opening with a press stud
- Large interior patch pocket
- Carried on the shoulder
- Natural cowhide leather trimmings and adjustable handles

COLOUR: POMME DAMOUR

£605.00

ADD TO SHOPPING BAG