Dream Perception in the Luxury Industry: Internet, Vector of Democratization or Disenchantment? An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

Recent research shows that luxury brands and online marketing are not so obvious and need strong links to keep dreams alive online. Considering those elements, this exploratory qualitative study explores the perception of dreams in the luxury industry, focusing on the Internet as a vector of democratization or disenchantment. Six customers and four corporate experts were interviewed. The main results show that (1) for customers, luxury brands need to have a website but they refuse to buy online because of the lack of senses solicitation. On the contrary to the in-store experience, the virtual window does not bring them into the imaginary of the brand: they do not dream anymore. And (2) for experts, website and e-shop are essential. They agree with customers regarding the lack of polysensoriality on the Internet. The dreams inspired by the virtual window remain a dividing topic.

KEYWORDS

Luxury, Dream, Internet, E-shop, Polysensoriality.

1 INTRODUCTION

Antagonism between luxury and the digital world has been infusing both scholar and managerial literature for some years. However, experts are pointing out that, nowadays, luxury brands’ online presence is an absolute necessity. Thus, how should those brands approach consumer enchantment? Does the consumer have the same ability to dream through the luxury brand’s website as he or she does when visiting the physical shop? Are appeals to the senses the same in an online and in an offline context?

The purpose of this exploratory study is to develop an understanding of the different elements that lead consumers to dream. We are focusing on the importance consumers give to the polysensoriality staged by luxury brands. Considering these elements, our research question explores the perception of dreams in the luxury industry, focusing on the Internet as a vector of democratization or disenchantment.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.a. The Context

The current study draws mainly from Geerts and Veg-Sala's seminal academic paper [1]. Their managerial contributions show that the presence of the luxury brand on the Internet is crucial to communicate the brand's values. However, this presence has to be carefully adapted and conceived on each device, taking into account their specificities. It is also clear that matters of relationships or interactions with
consumers have to be considered (social networks may be dangerous, buyers’ club seem a good alternative). Nonetheless, the use of e-commerce by luxury brands is a source of debate among scholars and managers alike. Focusing on the consumer side, their contributions undercover different realities. First, the Internet is considered as a way to communicate and gain access to information. It is also a crucial media to spread the brand’s universe, as well as its history and values. Yet, there is no consensus on the use of e-commerce by the luxury brand among consumers; some of them are reluctant to use e-shops and store experience is deemed as more valuable, as a result of a lack of trust induced by the online shopping experience and of a need to interact physically with the product. Counter-intuitively, their results reveal that there is no direct link between the consumer’s age and her perception of the use of the Internet in the luxury industry.

To be considered, a luxury product must meet at least three criterions [2]. First, it must enclose highly artistic content (aesthetic criterion; possibility to assimilate the product to a piece of art), as well as handcrafting know-how (handmade production, sometimes resulting in generational transmission as it can be witnessed in the case of the Hermès seamstresses), and an international dimension (presence of the luxury brand in the most famous cities worldwide).

Kapferer and Bastien [3] point out the sociological aspect of luxury: “What is luxury is defined by society […] Thus, luxury’s DNA is the symbolical desire to belong to a higher class which each individual will have defined according to his dreams.” Here, we understand luxury’s DNA, and thus, brand’s DNA as a collection of elements assembled in a “unique, decisive and final way – the way in which the brand will be perceived.” Moreover, such characteristics are at the roots of the brand’s differentiation from its competitors [4]. François-Henri Pinault, chief executive officer of the Kering Group (owner of brands such as Gucci, Saint Laurent and Boucheron), put it this way: “dreams are the driving force of luxury” [5]. To produce the desired effect on consumers – to make her dream, sensorial marketing must entwine and infuse the shopping experience related to luxury goods. Sensorial marketing is grounded on the enhancement of one or several senses, thus allowing companies to increase buying while fostering memorable and singular in-store experiences [6]. Hence the use of polysensoriality stands for the materialization of the perception of dreams, made by luxury brands to stage in-store shopping experiences through a carefully crafted dramaturgy of space. It thus allows the consumer’s complete immersion in the brand’s universe. As stated by Lipovetsky [7], consuming luxury goods is consuming at the same time a product, a legend, a myth, a tradition, know-hows and rituals.

2.b. Online Branding Strategy

Luxury brands must thrive to distinguish themselves. To achieve this goal, a well thought branding strategy – a marketing strategy based on the use and enhancement of the brand [8], is key. Nonetheless, it is a real challenge to take into account sensory limitations induced by online environments, and to build the adequate brand perception. Some key elements need particular care [9] [10].

Usability: as the cornerstone of a website, it enhances consumer’s experience through navigation and design. Consumers await reliable and fast services as well as a strong level of interactivity.

Personalization: as the online version of the personal shoppers, it aims at providing consumers with a high level of service as well as tailor-made products and offering.

Visuals: visual tools (slide shows, video clips and so on) have a key role in grasping – and keeping, online shoppers’ attention as well as appealing to their emotions.
The online values of luxury rely on four criteria [11]. First, the financial value implies that the e-shop must preserve products price premiums associated with their high quality and exclusivity, along with limited distribution. The functional value takes into accounts the usability, uniqueness and quality of the online interface. Senses like touch and smell cannot be stimulated through online media. However, brands can use pictures, videos or music as reminders of for consumers. The individual value is the support given by the luxury product to the consumer’s identity project. Allowing consumers to define themselves, it also enables a transfer of the brand’s social symbolism on their own, real or aspired, identities. Thus, managers shall take extra care in transferring a brand’s identity and values online in order to engage consumers. Finally, focusing on social networks, social values address the cognitions of the consumers’ social groups – membership groups, but also reference or aspirational groups.

2.c. Luxury Consumers and E-business

Regarding e-business, Veg-Sala and Geerts’ work [1] brings out the double challenge facing luxury brands: the loss of the product’s uniqueness leads to both a banalization process, and a democratization process. The Internet as a media is accessible by all social groups. As such, it seems that luxury brands are becoming too accessible – loosing somewhat of their aura in the process.

Typologies of consumers of luxury goods are numerous in academic literature. Among them, the one established by Kapferer and Valette-Florence [12] establishes three kinds of profiles. Exclusive consumers favor premium pricing and product’s rarity. Qualitative and aesthetic aspects of the products are less looked after. On the other hand, median consumers favor quality and aesthetics as well as product’s history, rarity and premium pricing. Aesthetes’ consumers favor most aesthetics and quality, whereas product’s rarity and premium pricing are easily looked over.

To conclude on the relationships between luxury goods, consumers and the Internet, a survey led by Google in 2008 revealed that 95% of the 263 French millionaires were buying luxury goods online. Moreover, 91% of the sample said that they relied upon users recommendations before actually buying a product. Such figures show that consumers’ bargaining power gets stronger in a sector that managed to remain relatively spared for some years.

Luxury brands’ values tell myths and histories [13]. In-store salespersons relay those values – which play a decisive role to consumers, in the buying process. Luxury brands can be defined as cultural imaginations and their consumption relies essentially on emotion and desire [1]. They engage senses and encourage dreaming through narratives spread by a broad variety of media. Brands appropriate themselves those stories, which can be genuine or made-up. Thus, the Internet is imposing itself as a new media on which to follow sociocultural evolutions and perpetuate the narrative.

3 GAPS AND RESEARCH QUESTION

If polysensorial marketing has received much attention from scholars since the mid 1990’s [14][15][16], the transposition of polysensoriality on the Internet is an issue quite left aside by academic literature. Yet, it strongly impacts the consumption experience of luxury brands’ consumers. The World Wide Web also changed drastically their consumption patterns: their values and desires are today less in harmony with the authentic and traditional vision proposed by luxury brands. Finally, a few papers only tackle the notion of dreams, either to define it [17] or to provide an analysis of its use in the selling process of luxury products [18]. Dreams only appear through the
brands’ history, but no connection is made with polysensoriality [19]. Furthermore, there is no comparison made between the dreams as experienced in-store and online. Considering those elements, our research question explores the perception of dreams in the luxury industry, focusing on the Internet as a vector of democratization or disenchantment.

4 METHODOLOGY

To carry out this qualitative exploratory study, we focused on the impact of virtual storefronts of luxury brands as vectors of democratization or disenchantment. Consumers’ perceptions and feelings when interacting with luxury goods, either in an online or offline environment, are the main subjects of interest in this study. We also chose to show an interest in the matter of polysensoriality in the buying process.

Methodology. Individual semi-conducted interviews were carried out on a sample of 10 individuals (4 experts and 6 consumers). To serve this purpose, two interview guides were produced, focusing on three main themes: luxury at large, luxury goods and the Internet, and polysensoriality in the luxury sector. All the interviews were faithfully transposed. Then the corpus was coded [20] and a thematic analysis [21] carried out.

Sample constitution. Two different kinds of agents were interviewed: experts and consumers. In order to do so, we constituted a convenience sample. Experts had to practice in the luxury sector, regardless of their specific activities (cf. table 1). Due to the difficulty of interviewing marketing executives of luxury brands, mainly because of confidentiality reasons, semantic satiation could not be attained [22]. However, this is of little importance as our goal was to explore and compare consumers and experts perceptions. Consumers have been chosen on the basis of their consumption of luxury goods: the purchase of at least one luxury product a year was set as a discriminatory criterion. This criterion allowed us to include Millennials in the sample. Diversity regarding the socio-professional category of respondents was looked after. Variations of purchasing power and familiarity with the online environment allowed us to obtain more diversity in the answers (cf. table 2).

Table 1. Corporate experts’ sample constitution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Company</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joanna</td>
<td>Creative writer</td>
<td>Digital branding agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>Marketing director (France)</td>
<td>Luxury Company 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariette</td>
<td>International media/ CRM director</td>
<td>Luxury Company 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgane</td>
<td>Assistant project manager – marketing development</td>
<td>Luxury Company 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*To preserve respondents’ anonymity, all names have been changed.

Table 2. Consumers’ sample constitution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Analyst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthieu</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Communication officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurène</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Job hunting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosalie</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Certified public accountant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christophe</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Veterinary surgeon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*To preserve respondents’ anonymity, all names have been changed.

5 FINDINGS
5.1 What Experts' Interviews Reveal

Experts’ interviews reveal that luxury goods and digital marketing are not antagonistic. Indeed, luxury brands thrive to innovate, to differentiate themselves from competitors, and to increase their market shares. While using digital marketing, luxury brands must be careful to preserve the brand image. First, Claire points out the need to optimize the “selection of key words for referencing”. Mariette and Morgane underline the fact that the website must comply with the brand’s DNA and visual identity. All experts agree on the need for the brand to develop a real shopping experience through their online e-shop. Through respondents’ answers appear the three key elements on which a luxury brand must focus when trying to transfer the adequate brand perception to its website: usability, personalization and visuals (Okonkwo and Chadel). The brand must “recreate the codes of the physical shop in the online environment” (Morgane). 360-degree product views, stimulation of the senses, and online interactions with staff members: those are the keys to success. “Brands should try to arouse several senses, and recreate the physical shop’s atmosphere while offering exclusive online services: product embroidery or engraving, free delivery, newsletter subscription, preview of new collections… lots of little services which create consumers’ loyalty.” (Joanna).

**Democratization and accessibility.** Concerning luxury brand image and democratization, Mariette points out that “the evolution is logical and legitimate. It would be ridiculous for the brand not to be where the consumer is.” Moreover, the brand’s website is a place where it can express its luxury positioning: personalization, consumer acknowledgement, careful sending and packing of products. Luxury brands can express themselves differently from the “trigger email plans, follow-ups or retargeting strategies of traditional mail orders selling actors” (Mariette), all the way to the post-buying stage. All experts consider luxury brands’ online presence, because of its ability to give access to the brand to an increased number of consumers – as well as enhanced brand visibility, to be a vector of democratization. Joanna states that “democratizing luxury does not mean the brand has to lose its share of dreams and some of its worth. […] Brands present this share of dreams to the world without damaging it.” Moreover, e-shop offers consumers who would not have felt right in the physical shop, the possibility to buy themselves some of the dreams without feeling intimidated or out-of-place.

On the other hand, a brand’s prestige can be impaired by Internet users’ negative reviews, not because the brand has an e-shop but simply because consumers share their experiences on the Internet. Simply put “if the brand refuses to be on the web, consumers will talk about it anyway. And it will be worse, because then the brand will not be able to control it.” (Claire). Thus, respondents establish a link between the possible damages made to brand image and a bad e-reputation management. E-reputation control is then of strategic importance to prevent being vulnerable to anything that could damage one’s reputation online.

**Dream perception.** The dreams’ preservation problematic divides experts. Morgane states, “it is not the same thing at all, because the in-store experience is missing.” Indeed some luxury stores are established in iconic locations. Online, consumers inevitably lose this whole aspect of the shopping experience. For Claire, consumers who value the rarity and exclusivity of luxury goods may tend to reduce the perception of dreams they associate with the luxury brand. As Mariette sums it up, “there is a loss of the sense of exclusivity which the traditional luxury goods consumers do not get along well with.” Nevertheless, the respondent stresses brands like Chanel, Dior and Louis Vuitton, which managed to keep dreams alive on their websites. She adds that “the relationship established with the consumer through the website will keep dreams going.
[...] Lots of things can be done to create dreams, sometimes more than what can be achieved in-store. [...] In-store, we are bound with human (the sales force), which can prove to be unmanageable. If the consumer has to deal with an incompetent member of staff, it can kill the brand in the consumer’s mind.” It is true that, on the Internet, the brand can ultimately control everything it says or do.

The brand’s online presence gives it powerful tools to stage off dreams through storytelling, visuals, or live streaming of fashion shows. Brands can also make a successful use of social networks, and include VIP’s and high hand bloggers as brand endorsement. “It allows the brand to rejuvenate the dream: the consumer realizes that the products they thought as not for them, they could in fact totally wear them!” (Joanna). On their websites, luxury brands offer principally entry-level products. This strategy allows brands to deal with some difficulties. “Putting online extremely rare products desacralizes them and brings the luxury brand down.” (Claire), moreover some pieces of jewelry or leather goods cannot possibly be sold online “because the raw material is excessively rare and expensive, as well as the workforce: the demand would skyrocket and the brand would have difficulties keeping up.” (Morgane). It also allows lessening the perceived risk experienced by consumers when purchasing online – such as loss or theft of parcels. As such, it enables consumers to “treat themselves with a small luxury product [...] Furthermore, it is a real opening to the ordinary consumer who can realize that this luxury brand is actually within one's reach.” (Joanna) In this regard, this strategy aims also to recruit new consumers. Mariette defines it as a “segment opening that will give way to an increase in market shares. [...] We are losing some consumers, but gaining others. The ones that will make their firsts steps into the brand’s universe.”

Polysensoriality in online and offline environments. Visiting luxury brands’ physical points of sales appeals to the senses. The respondents evoke appeals to their sight, smell, and touch. Claire mentions, “First, I will be dazzled by everything. And I will touch the products if I dare, because sometimes it looks so much like a shop window that you do not really dare.” In-store polysensoriality is part of the brand’s DNA, allows the design of a full consumption experience. In order to transpose the brand’s universe on its virtual window, visual brand’s identity must be complied with. The brand’s brick and mortar shop and e-shop have to follow the same guiding line in order to stay congruent: the same visual style and product highlights must be used. Musical atmosphere and visuals can be called on to serve this purpose. Mariette evokes the use of evocative images and sounds to “faithfully transpose a smell, allow consumers to form a virtual representation of a perfume.” How to circumvent impediments imposed by the Internet? Our experts claim that images and videos have a major role to play, especially with the use of 3D or simulation technologies. Videos allow consumers to “enter a completely different universe” while 3D gives brands the chance to “simulate the experience, [...] to make consumers believe they actually live it.” (Mariette). Even if some experts stress that “we have not find any real answer yet” (Claire) to the lack of polysensoriality in an online setting, they envision the Internet as a realm of possibilities for consumers services and nourish numerous expectations towards new technologies to fill the gap. In Asia, “where consumers spend a lot on luxury cosmetics and hate strong odors” (Morgane) e-shops could be a way to seduce even more odor-sensitive consumers. If new technologies offer many development opportunities, execution must be flawless otherwise. As Claire puts it, “it will be disastrous” for the brand image. Point of sale digitalization is also seen as an incentive for consumers to use digital media. It can help them to familiarize themselves with those new technologies through help and counseling provided by the staff. Hence, the sales force has
a role of reassurance. But in-store digital devices can help design a new customer path. Consumers would then go to the brick and mortar shop, where they will be able to interact with luxury goods and seek advice, and finally purchase the product on the e-shop. By doing so, consumers will be reassured when interacting with the e-shop, because they will have realized that “the website and the brick and mortar store are echoing each other, everything is linked.” (Joanna) There is a necessity “to constantly go back and forth between online and offline settings” to follow the consumers’ path. Moreover, “in-store digital devices allow consumers to gain access to more content than the staff would be able to give them” (Mariette), and fosters the creation of a unique consumers’ experience. However, such settings are expensive, and some experts are reluctant to use them, either because doubtfulness about their ability to bring consumers online, or because they do not see the fit with the brand’s identity. As Morgane states, “even for Chanel, which is a really contemporary brand, such settings would not fit at all Rue Cambon [the brand’s historic headquarters]!” Others are not so assertive, Claire moderates “it is not a problem for luxury brands deeply rooted in traditions: if the execution is very sophisticated, it can be integrated to the point of sale at the level of material used, at the level of consumer’s experience or at the level of the advices provided. It is not a self-service, where consumers help themselves.”

Respondents willingly admitted that luxury brands made them dream through their universes, products and outstanding services. They stated favoring brick and mortar stores, where polysensorial experience and product interactions can easily occur. Nonetheless, the brand’s virtual window will be a part of dreams by means of detailed storytelling, narratives about the brand’s history, heritage and know-how, as well as an innovative and inspiring design and a fine staging of the products. Hence, consumers can dream and reach the brand, even if they cannot actually visit the store.

5.2 What Consumers’ Interviews Reveal

For consumers, luxury is “surrounded by extreme quality, high refinement, uniqueness and rarity” (Laura). But it is also, as far as experts are concerned, a know-how, the craft of high quality raw materials. Hence, luxury is an art of living – but also one’s way to stand out in society. Luxury is perceived as timeless and inaccessible to most people. Luxury goods are vectors of dream, and when purchasing this kind of products, consumers seek a sense of uniqueness. Rosalie explains: “luxury brands must be demanding on crafting, on materials… because a luxury good is not made with anything, by anyone. Perfection and beauty are sought after.”

Dream perception. Some respondents distinguish two kinds of luxury products: mass luxury goods, and exceptional ones following premium-pricing strategies. The latter foster dreams and aspirations among consumers. Laura then states, “When you are buying a Hermès branded product, having access to this kind of prestigious product makes you feel exceptional.” A feeling she will not recall with a Louis Vuitton or a Prada handbag, for example, because uniqueness and quality are not rated as high as for Hermès. Vuitton and Prada launch products that are more associated with fashion trends than luxury for some of our respondents who admit that they have difficulties accepting luxury good becoming mundane. Some respondents do not distinguish mass luxury goods and unique ones and state that all luxury brands make them dream. They allow them to “reach a magic universe, which make them more attractive to themselves and to their entourage.” (Marie). Brands’ universes are also perceived as participating to dreams, through narratives and histories belonging to the brand: “luxury brands’ universes are so
intense and well thought that it is impossible not to want to dive in and live the dream! That is what I am feeling when I am wearing a luxury perfume, a lipstick or more, with heels.” (Marie). Christophe adds that “luxury offers to make your dreams a reality”. He regrets nonetheless that dreams are associated with such a high price.

Luxury and the Internet, democratization and disenchantment. Respondents are all consumers of luxury goods, as one of the sample’s criteria was the purchase of at least one luxury product a year. However, consumption of luxury products varies between the individuals: some are buyers of watches, handbags, cosmetics, and perfumes… some make those purchases for themselves, others as gifts for their relatives. They are drawn by “fine finishing touches, and flawless quality” (Laura), by the product in itself and by the noble materials used as well as the brand is perceived as a token of quality. For Laura, purchasing a luxury good is “a long term investment, and kind of a continuous gift; you know it is going to last and give you a unique enjoyment, provide you with a sense of personal satisfaction”. Some buy on a quarterly basis, others on a biannual basis. Regarding services associated with the purchase of such products, consumers expect a lot from the shopping experience but also want to be taken care of in the after purchase stage. Advice and support provided by the staff, product customization or after-sale services: everything must be irrefutable and take place in a “cozy and confidential environment”. From the “shop’s entrance to the exit, whether you are actually buying or not, advice must be provided and store’s staff is always there to make you feel you are part of the luxury universe, a member of a privileged consumers’ base.” (Marie). Respondents give a central place to customers’ services and advice in their buying experience. In this regard, Matthieu holds high expectations as well: “the staff must be able to answer all of my questions and even give me additional information. […] They must be able to direct me toward the most relevant product when I am looking for a gift. And I also give importance to the way products are displayed as well as to the ceremonial surrounding the whole process.” Other respondents mention their longing for information related to product’s manufacture and raw materials’ origin. Overall, respondents are most satisfied with their in-store experience when there are associated services.

If all of our respondents admit that they have a preference for in-store shopping experience, only two of them, Rosalie and Christophe, are luxury goods online buyers. We identified several motivations: convenience, home delivery, timesaving and also the possibility to compare several products or offers. However, some stumbling blocks are evoked: not being able to touch or try on the product, fewer dedicated services, and a fear for safety issues during the payment process. Other respondents evoke the feeling of being an “anonymous Internet user, and not a privileged consumer” (Laura) when purchasing online. Online buying will be considered only if the consumer previously interacted with the product in-store; but even so, price will remain a major hindrance. Luxury brands’ presence on the Internet through virtual windows and e-shops are seen both as a vector of democratization and disenchantment. For some respondents, e-shops allow “some consumers who do not feel like going in-store for fear of being out of place to break the psychological barrier and access products.” (Laurène). Nevertheless, Laura states that “e-shops are really convenient, but also tend to make luxury goods mundane while weakening products’ aura and uniqueness.” In this regard, luxury brands’ online presence can be seen as a vector of disenchantment affecting consumers’ experience.

Dream perception. Respondents strongly insist on the importance of dreams conveyed by luxury brands. Brands must keep dreams going through “fashion shows, iconic stores, and catalogues, beyond products’ beauty and
aesthetics.” (Laura), because dreams act as a strong incentive in the buying process as revealed by Marie and Matthieu. Online purchases of luxury products can somewhat foster feelings of frustration: the act of buying falls back into the ordinary and unlike in-store shopping experience, is not stirring any particular emotion. Distrust is even experienced by some respondents, because of a lack of interaction with the product. Even if some consumers favor the anonymity provided by online shopping, most of the respondents strongly favor in-store shopping experience.

Concerning online luxury goods shopping, respondents are divided. Some do not perceive any extra services and even experience a loss of human contact, advice and personalization. Others mention “more services on an e-shop, more product’s variety, good customer support because all is made to make easier products return when they do not match consumers’ expectancies” (Rosalie). Respondents are aware of and understand luxury brands’ attempts to enlarge their customers’ base through their online strategies. Laura perceives these attempts as a way to reach upper classes in developing countries that would not have access to the luxury brands’ stores in their homeland. Brands’ online presence is definitely seen as a way to reach new consumers, a way to show that some products are within their reach. It is also seen as “first attempt of seduction” (Christophe).

Nevertheless, for some respondents this strategy impacts negatively the status of iconic brands: it is perceived as incongruent and denying the uniqueness, rarity and outstanding nature of luxury goods. However, other respondents state that a flawless execution would preserve the brand from any negative impact; Matthieu sees the brand as “stronger than its distributions channels”, and this strategy, while allowing more consumers to reach the dream, serves “a need of belonging which is very strong in our postmodern materialistic societies” (Laura).

Polysensoriality in online and offline environments. Respondents evoke the sight as the first of their senses to be engaged with when visiting a luxury brand’s shop. A brand’s universe, ornaments, layout, and product’s display and lighting constitute some of the numerous stimuli engaging with this sense. The sense of touch is seen as fundamental to the shopping experience, as well as the senses of smell (of materials, leather, perfumes…) and hearing. Appeals to the senses allow consumers to dive in the brand’s universe, and is an integrated dimension of the luxury sector at large. Moreover, it is perceived as “an inherent part of dreams, it is part of the brand and defines it” (Christophe). It helps develop a strong consumer-brand relationship and fosters a feeling of uniqueness. For our respondents, more than a feeling of uniqueness, visiting the store stimulates the senses and creates pleasure sensations. Interactions with the product are seen as a way to feel even more emotions and acts as a powerful incentive for in-store shopping. As expressed by Christophe, absence of polysensoriality in the consumption experience could bring consumers to turn away from the brand.

By contrast, respondents point out a lack of impact on their senses during an online shopping experience. Creative and carefully designed websites can hardly fill the gap. Thus, they explain this deficiency acts as a major hindrance to the buying act. Some, as Marie, will even state that the absence of sensorial solicitation will not allow them to experience an emotion, and as a consequence, they will not purchase the product.

For most of our respondents, dreams and luxury are a pleonasm: dreams are deeply grounded in luxury, and the latter aims at turning dreams into a tangible reality. Respondents do not perceive brands’ virtual windows as vectors of dreams and enchantment. Narratives supporting brand’s history on the websites, through visuals and videos, can help convey dreams but not play significantly on the buying decision. Respondents still need to be convinced by
ground breaking and qualitative propositions presenting real consumer-brand interactions possibilities.

6 DISCUSSION

Luxury and the Internet, democratization and disenchantment. Our results show that luxury brands’ e-shops and virtual windows are subjects of dissent between consumers and experts. Experts think both to be necessary to the brand, while consumers are not really disposed to buy luxury products online. Experts see these tools as an opportunity to win over new customers, break down psychological and physical barriers and provide consumers with more convenience. Luxury and the Internet are now closely related. On the contrary, consumers’ interviews reveal a strong preference for in-store product purchase. Brand’s digitalization is even perceived as potentially hazardous for the brand image as consumers consider the amount of services provided through online supports to be less important than in-store. Hence, experts see the Internet as a vector of democratization, while on the consumers’ side it is pictured as a vector of disenchantment.

To explain this discrepancy, the familiarity of experts with the luxury universe can foster trust when considering buying such products online. Furthermore, consumer behavior is largely studied in companies evolving in the luxury sector: our experts could prove to be early adopters of technological innovations, and the desire to stay ahead of competitors can largely influence their discourses on the matter. Finally, they may feel the urge to stimulate those new distributions channels as they provide the companies with new profit opportunities.

Counter-intuitively, the only consumer interviewed who admitted buying luxury products online was not a digital native; Y generation consumers appear to be reluctant to online purchasing. Income level of respondents influences their answers as well, and high-income consumers will be more willing to buy luxury goods via online shopping than middle to low income consumers. For the latter, purchasing luxury goods remains a rare opportunity. As such, they want to enjoy the complete in-store shopping experience.

Yet, experts and consumers alike concede that proposing entry-level products on luxury brands’ e-shops remains a pertinent strategy.

Poly sensoriality in online and offline environments. Experts and consumers alike favor brick and mortar shops when aiming to buy a luxury good. They hold the same desires and expectations. Regardless of their age or purchasing power, they want to buy a luxury good, but doing so they are also seeking to live a memorable experience. This fondness for the shopping experience can be explained by the nature of these shops and the products they are offering: when buying luxury goods, consumers are not looking to fulfill physiological or basic needs, but more a need of belonging and self-esteem [23]. Digital natives separate from their screens and online social networks to seek human contact, while experts slip from overwhelming and stressful everyday life to enter a world of blissfulness. Far away from raging price wars, luxury brands thrive to offer exclusive services and experiences to their consumers. They are not only selling products but taking consumers into a dream world, thus allowing them to justify – if not forget, the expensive price to pay for such goods. By doing so, they develop strong relationships with their consumers.

When considering virtual windows, consumers and experts once again differ in their opinions. Experts consider that dreams are kept alive, while consumers express a deep sense of disenchantment. One of the possible explanations of this discrepancy is the role given by both agents to the virtual window. Consumers see it only as a way to buy products, while experts envision a brand’s online presence as a way to display the brand’s
universe and products. Moreover, the lack of polysensoriality is a major hindrance for consumers; this perceived absence might be explained by a strong focus given to the buying act, which would blind consumers to the numerous tools used by brands to fill-in the gap. Thus, consumers may not have to pay attention to the storytelling, visuals, history staged off by the brand as an attempt to make them dream.

When evoking point of sale digitalization, some experts appear to be reluctant. Some see this evolution as a necessary one, while others stay doubtful and fear for flawed executions. The sample’s constitution may explain this divergence of opinion, which seems to originate from the distinct brand’s universes in which they are practicing. Experts overtly who are open to the use of new technologies in-store work both for particularly innovative brands and for digital branding agencies. Thus, they developed a deep knowledge of digital tools and practices. Both doubtful experts work for French luxury brands deeply rooted in tradition, which makes point of sale digitalization hard to appreciate.

6 CONTRIBUTIONS

Managerial contributions. Storytelling shall be used by brands on their website to leverage the establishment of consumer-brand relationships. Brands should develop and use narratives to bond with consumers, and use online settings to expose their history, giving consumers information they cannot fully access in-store. Showing raw materials and craftsmanship work can also contribute to consumers’ enchantment. Moreover, numerous tools can be used to tell stories on the Internet, while retaining dreams. Managers should address polysensoriality on brands’ websites. New technologies that provide tools to engage the senses in a virtual experience should not be overlooked. Visuals, 3D views, musical atmospheres congruent with the brand’s DNA and values can be used to provide consumers with a memorable experience. New technologies are evolving fast; it is thus vital for brands to stay aware of technological evolutions in order to remain innovative.

We strongly advise brands to digitalize their points of sale since they will have to take the step sooner or later. A step-by-step process aiming to digitalize the brick and mortar shops will allow luxury brands to slowly educate consumers about those new technologies, thus avoiding any feelings of disorientation. However, once again, the setting up of these new tools must be flawless and respect the luxury standards in order to truly benefit and enhance consumers’ shopping experience.

Finally, because of our fast moving context, consumer studies must be regularly carried out. They allow brands to gain insights on consumers’ motivations, expectations and tastes, but can also be a way to pre-test new digital tools and make sure they are answering consumers’ needs. For instance, firms can implement regular netnographic studies to observe, online, consumer attitudes towards their consumption experiences. Many social networks, many blogs, can reveal emerging phenomena and help managers make strategic decisions [24].

Theoretical and methodological contributions. This exploratory study allowed us to bring to light two aspects which were largely left aside by academic and managerial literature: polysensoriality and strategy aimed at offering only a part of the brand’s catalogue on the Internet. This study shows their importance in the buying process, and gives hints on how to optimize them. However, we should underline that there is not any unique recipe to follow when luxury brands aim to achieve a successful digital strategy. As a methodological implication, this study allows us to show inputs provided when interviewing different agents. Confronting consumers and experts' points of view allows us to gain deeper and richer insights on dreams perception in the luxury industry.
7 LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Regarding methodology, experts and consumers samples were not representative enough in terms of socio-professional categories, age, and luxury products buying habits. More diversity in the samples as well as methodological triangulation would have allowed our outcomes to be generalizable. Another limitation lies in the fact that the use of technology innovations is still relatively new in the luxury sector. Thus, this study does not allow us to draw definitive conclusions regarding those tools’ impact on consumers’ dreams’ perception. Carrying a longitudinal study to assess changes in consumers’ online and in-store shopping experience is therefore considered as possible future research.

A comparative study focusing on the use of digital tools by luxury brands would help researchers gain a deeper understanding of the effects of such practices on brands’ DNA and consumers’ dreams’ perception. An exploratory study could also concentrate on mobile applications, as mobile technology was left out of this primary research work. Yet, mobile commerce is growing fast. Thus, further research could address possible utilization of mobile applications by luxury brands to enhance consumers’ experience and convey the brands’ DNA [25]. It could also allow researchers and managers to gain richer insights on consumers’ motivations to use such apps. Last but not least, we could lead an intercultural study among luxury regular consumers. Indeed, we know that American, Asian and European consumers have different behaviors regarding luxury consumption. Brands also need to culturally adapt their digital supports to their different targets around the world.

REFERENCES


