

The Online Experience of Luxury Consumers: Insight into Motives and Reservations

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Abstract

Several research efforts provide insight into the corporate online strategies of luxury brands. However, little research has focused on how consumers perceive the luxury online experience. This research aims to understand the underlying motivations and reservations towards online luxury purchase. The perceived online experience of luxury consumers is examined within the framework of the functional theory of attitudes, rooted in the work of Katz (1960) and Shavitt (1989). An exploratory approach yielded a typology of five motivations: independent browsing, personalized communication, accessibility, and convenience; and three reservations: purchase of unfamiliar brands, lack of spontaneity and uninspiring online retail environments. This research contributes a much needed consumer perspective of luxury online retail to the existing literature. The findings have resulted in a comprehensive understanding of the online shopping luxury experience. Theoretically, the findings support the functional theory of attitudes and the influence of both hedonic and utilitarian dimensions on the online luxury experience. More practically, this work shows that recognition of the underlying motivations and reservations of online luxury consumers informs marketers and brand managers on how to adapt their online presence and initiatives.

Keywords: digital consumer, luxury brands, luxury consumer, internet

1. Introduction

As new technologies evolve, it became increasingly challenging for luxury brands to maintain integrated brand communication and a clear-cut brand identity (Kapferer, 2017; Uché Okonkwo, 2009). Within the context of the digital revolution, scholars and researchers are increasingly acknowledging the effects of the digital on luxury brands. It has also been acknowledged that the internet presents companies with increasing opportunities to relate to customers and support branding initiatives (Holmqvist, Wirtz, & Fritze, 2020; Liu, Shin, & Burns, 2019).

However, some luxury brands are still cautious and not fully engaging in innovative online strategies (Chandon, Laurent, & Valette-Florence, 2016; Hennigs, Wiedmann, Klarmann, et al., 2012). For brands targeting mass markets the intent is to sell as much as possible with maximum brand exposure (Forman, Goldfarb, & Greenstein, 2018). The internet with its very accessible nature is a highly relevant medium for these brands (Quach & Thaichon, 2017).

While many studies promote the use of the internet for luxury branding (Dall'Olmo Riley & Lacroix, 2003; Heine & Berghaus, 2014; Wiedmann, Hennigs, & Klarmann, 2012), numerous studies have illustrated the reluctance of luxury brands to fully embrace the digital (Baker, Ashill, Amer, & Diab, 2018; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Seringhaus, 2005). Brand identity for most luxury brands was diligently built over many decades even centuries (Balmer & Burghausen, 2015). This inherited sense of legacy and weight of history is still pushing some big luxury brand players from engaging (Hennigs, Wiedmann, Klarmann, et al., 2012). As such, luxury brand management varies and is demonstrated through different online behaviors.

Mostly the internet was accepted and deemed essential for luxury branding, but with obvious reservations expressed by various scholars. There has been a call for luxury brand managers to sustain exclusivity through a very selective choice of internet mediums (Geerts & Veg-Sala, 2014).

In contrast to the ample body of literature on the online strategies of luxury brands, limited amount of scholarly attention was devoted to luxury consumer online purchase experience. The literature that examines the effects of the internet on the luxury industry mostly focuses on luxury brands' online strategies (Baker et al., 2018; Dall'Olmo Riley & Lacroix, 2003; Heine & Berghaus, 2014; Hennigs, Wiedmann, Klarmann, et al., 2012). Üçok Hughes et al. (2016) points to an existing gap in the luxury literature relating to the understanding of the online consumption behavior. Quach & Thaichon (2017) also called for research that investigates the luxury online experience from the consumer perspective.

Early research focused almost exclusively on the utilitarian aspects of the online shopping experience (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Past research has demonstrated that most online shoppers are goal-directed. Notably, in this regard, Overby & Lee (2006) found that utilitarian value is a more pronounced predictor than hedonic value to preference towards online retailers (Overby & Lee, 2006). More recently, this trend has been complemented by theoretical explanations based on a hedonic online purchase motives (Moon et al., 2017). These studies, however, focused on mainstream brands, overlooking luxury brands.

The present study contributes to the emerging literature on luxury consumer motivations by examining the consumer perceptions that may influence the importance of hedonic and utilitarian values derived from the online retail experience. In light of existing research, which has predominantly focused on the influence of utilitarian dimensions, the academic relevance of this paper stems from enabling a better understanding of online consumer behavior as dynamic and complex, rather than uniform.

This phenomena warrants further exploration and a qualitative research approach is deemed appropriate to examine how consumers perceive the online purchase experience. The functional theory of attitude is used in this study as a theoretical lens to understand online consumer motivations and reservations towards the luxury purchase experience.

Emerging from the literature review arise general research questions, which guided this study: RQ 1: What motivates consumers to purchase luxury brands online? RQ 2: How are online consumers influenced by utilitarian and hedonic values? RQ 3: What features of the online retail experience are luxury consumers attracted to?

The article begins by positioning the present study within extant literature. Following a discussion of the qualitative exploratory methodology of this research, the interview findings are presented. The paper concludes with theoretical and practical implications.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Internet

The internet is a breakthrough phenomena that dramatically changed branding strategies (Alam, Ali, Omar, & Hussain, 2020; Arli, Gil, & van Esch, 2020; Valos, Haji Habibi, Casidy, Driesener, & Maplestone, 2016). Following its widespread use, the internet became a fashionable concept within today's academic community (Forman et al., 2018; Valos et al., 2016). Pomirleanu, Schibrowsky, Peltier, & Nill, (2013) evidenced apparent academic interest in internet marketing research through a review of internet marketing articles published between 2005 and 2012. Their findings indicated that internet marketing strategies, and internet communications are among the areas that retained academic interest.

Due to wide reach (De Chernatony, 2001; Forman et al., 2018), enhanced personalization (Jun, Park, & Yeom, 2014; Truong, Simmons, McColl, & Kitchen, 2008), greater rapidity (De Chernatony, 2001), boosted interactivity (Hoffman & Novak, 2009; Kapferer, 2017), the internet is particularly effective in reaching and engaging customers. Accordingly, it has been argued that the internet offers the opportunity to co-create value for mutual benefit through customer engagement (Baker et al., 2018; Hoffmann & Coste-Manière, 2016; Uche Okonkwo, 2016; Üçok Hughes et al., 2016). Most of the examples in the current literature on online consumer behavior focused on regular brands and mainstream brands, overlooking the luxury brands (Üçok Hughes et al., 2016).

2.2 Luxury Brands and the Internet

In one of the first articles addressing the internet as a communication tool for luxury brands, Nyeck & Houde (1996) saw the internet as inevitable, despite the reluctance expressed by most of the luxury brand managers interviewed. The focus of their articles was unique in that it depicted an early trend for luxury brands. In fact, some scholars have argued that the internet presents luxury brands with the opportunity to creatively express their identity while sustaining brand narratives consistency and value (Geerts & Veg-Sala, 2014).

Nevertheless, the dynamic online environment poses distinct challenges in the design and administration of the branding content and requires additional understanding. The internet with its democratizing interactive nature has brought a paradigm shift to traditional luxury communication strategies (Kapferer, 2017). Successful internet presence entails a highly creative branding strategy to appeal to its users. For instance, to be considered internet relevant, interactivity must be a key feature of companies' online presence (Kapferer, 2017; Yadav & Varadarajan, 2005). While the internet was found engaging for customers, it also leads to a loss of control over the branding message and a shift of power from companies to customers (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2015). Consequently, scholars cautioned about the use of the internet for luxury brands by asserting the need to sustain exclusivity through a very selective choice of online mediums (Aiolfi and Sabbadin, 2019; Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2008; Geerts & Veg-Sala, 2014).

Notably, the way brand managers choose to embark on the online venture is dependent on their perceived ability to control their brand message. Brand management among different companies differs in terms of how tolerant they are when it comes to opening boundaries online and the degree to which they monitor and control the entire process (De Chernatony, 2001). In instances where corporate boundaries are too strong, digital presence is usually closely monitored through strategically designed websites and through limited visibility to preserve the consistency of the brand image. Such control measures help brand managers with a more conservative approach refine the boundaries with the public and carefully integrate the overall marketing plan (Uche Okonkwo, 2007; Uché Okonkwo, 2009). An example of an attempt to sustain the luxury branding image online is the House of Balmain. The conservative online presence of Balmain led to a website that was perceived as "antiquated, bland and un-inspiring" (Abrams Research, 2013). The static brochure like website is a pitfall of overprotective brand strategies that fail to capture the unique benefits of interactivity and personalization presented by the internet (De Chernatony, 2001).

The main issue facing luxury brands is to selectively send a message that's just meant for a small segment of customers and retain their aura of prestige (Vigneron & Johnson, 2017). The loss of control over the branding message arising from expansive online exposure results in luxury brand managers becoming risk adverse (Uché Okonkwo, 2009). However, the extent to which they are willing to engage will vary as they face a challenging tension to sustain their image. Burdened by this tension, luxury brand managers balance the extent of digital presence based on their different perceptions (De Chernatony, 2001; Hoffmann & Coste-Manière, 2016; Holmqvist et al., 2020). Under these conditions, where the luxury image is challenged necessary steps are carefully designed to keep control of value. Barnes, Mattsson, & Hartley (2015) emphasized the challenge of sustaining the emotion value of luxury brands in virtual worlds.

Several studies have explored corporate online strategies of luxury brands and have made online positioning suggestions (Dall'Olmo Riley & Lacroix, 2003; Heine & Berghaus, 2014; Hennigs, Wiedmann, Klarmann, et al., 2012). Other studies have explored luxury consumer online behavior by focusing on the purchase behavior of the younger age group generation (Ladhari, Gonthier, & Lajante, 2019; Purani, Kumar, & Sahadev, 2019), consumer response to social media marketing (Algharabat, Rana, Alalwan, Baabdullah, & Gupta, 2020; Godey et al., 2016; Kefi & Maar, 2018; McClure & Seock, 2020), online value co-creation (Quach & Thaichon, 2017; Thomas, Brooks, & McGouran, 2020; Üçok Hughes et al., 2016) and consumer-generated content through online reviews (Mohammad, Quoquab, Thurasamy, & Alolayyan, 2020). However, little consideration was paid to how consumers perceive their luxury online experience. As such, this literature review reveals a need to further up to date research on how luxury consumers perceive the online experience. The present study aims to contribute to this gap.

2.3 The Functional Theory of Attitudes

To examine how luxury consumers perceive the online purchase experience, the functional theory of attitudes will be used as a theoretical framework. The functional theory of attitudes posits that motives underlying attitudes influence the behavior of consumers; therefore, to change consumer attitudes brands need to appeal to the functions underlying those attitudes (Katz, 1960; Shavitt, 1989). Products can serve either a single or multiple functions and evoke specific motivations across individuals (Shavitt & Nelson, 2000). Numerous attitudes serve utilitarian functions (Katz, 1960), aiding in maximizing rewards and minimizing punishments associated with certain products. Attitudes also serve an important value expressive function, helping to express one's identity (Katz, 1960).

The functional theory of attitudes was used to understand consumer attitudes in a variety of domains including: food with health claims (Žeželj, Milošević, Stojanović, & Ognjanov, 2012), store atmosphere (Kum, Bergkvist, Lee, & Leong, 2012), political consumerism (Gotlieb, 2015), consumer religiosity (Pace, 2014) and counterfeit

purchase intention (Sharma & Chan, 2017). The relevance of the functional theory of attitude as a framework for understanding consumers attitudes was subject to various studies within the luxury literature (Bian & Forsythe, 2012; Halwani, 2020; Ioana-Daniela, Lee, Kim, Kang, & Hyun, 2018; Kauppinen-Räsänen, Björk, Lönnström, & Jauffret, 2018; Schade, Hegner, Horstmann, & Brinkmann, 2016).

Within the general marketing literature, few studies have examined the relevance of the utilitarian and hedonic value dimensions for online consumer behavior (Chiu, Wang, Fang, & Huang, 2014; Overby & Lee, 2006; Spence, Puccinelli, Grewal, & Roggeveen, 2014). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to employ the functional theory of attitude for understanding the online purchase motivations of luxury consumers.

3. Methodology

Given the limited knowledge on the effects of the internet on luxury purchase behavior and the paucity of studies into this phenomenon, this study took an exploratory approach. Qualitative research methods have become increasingly appropriate for examining consumer behaviors. Qualitative research has become popular for examining luxury consumption behaviors (Halwani, 2019; J.-E. Kim, Lloyd, & Cervellon, 2016). As such, an interview-approach allowed respondents to talk freely about their online purchase motives and reservations.

3.1 Data Collection

Data collection took place between February 2019 and May 2019 in western European cities, resulting in a total of 60 qualitative and semi-structured one on one interviews. Each interview lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours and resulted in approximately 70 hours of interview time. Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

Purposive sampling was used for recruitment (Patton & Cochran, 2002). Given the focus of this study on online luxury consumption behavior, the sample was restricted to consumers who own at least one luxury item and have actively considered an online luxury purchase. The combined sample for this paper consisted of a total of 21 females and 19 males. The age of participants ranged from 25 to 45 years. Participants' income levels were well dispersed with the exception of lower income level (less than Euro 20,000), which was underrepresented (5%). The focus on higher income groups is because consumers falling into these groups have a relatively high propensity to spend on luxury products (Nia & Lynne Zaichkowsky, 2000). Over 60% of the participants had completed a university degree.

A semi-structured interview guide derived from the literature (Katz, 1960; Shavitt, 1989) was used for this study. It intended to implicitly cover the following themes: utilitarian and value-expressive motives. The guide included a predetermined list of general, research-driven questions, based on insights gained from a review of the existing literature. The guide asked questions about general attitudes towards using the internet for luxury purchases including motivations and reservations.

The primary interview questions helped explore consumer online experiences (e.g. "What characteristics of the online luxury experience do you like?") and to probing questions about purchase decisions (e.g. "What attracts you to the online luxury purchase experience?"). This progressed on to more specific questions about consumer motivation (e.g. "What motivates you to purchase luxury brands online?" "What are your suggestions on how luxury brands can enhance consumer online experiences?"). To gain a deeper insight into the underlying motivations, participants were also asked to elaborate on their personal online experiences. The follow-up questions helped elicit detailed narrative responses from participants describing their own experiences, views, thoughts and feelings.

3.2 Data analysis

In line with interpretive research methods, this study focuses on interpreting the phenomenon from the viewpoint of participants, looking at how they give meaning to the online purchase experience. Interview data were analyzed using the interpretive grounded approach (Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Transcripts were organized using NVivo 11 qualitative software package. Transcribed data were uploaded into the software immediately after each interview to enable ongoing interplay between data collection and analysis (Goulding, 1999). This allowed new data to be analyzed in light of the previous round of data collection.

At the micro level (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), open coding helped detect common categories in interview transcripts such as 'self-dependence' or 'no pressure'. The coding categories were not predetermined; rather, they emerged from the analysis of interviews with participants (Spiggle, 1994).

Next, in the second stage of coding, coded interview data were constantly compared against codes from the same interview and those from other interviews. At this level, constant comparison of data led to another level of

abstraction where key patterns were identified and assigned to categories. This practice persisted until a point of theoretical saturation was reached, wherein no new insight was added (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

As a result of this analysis, we coded 'independent browsing' as occurring when respondents referred to online purchase experience as 'empowering', 'pressure free' and 'none dependent'. Another set of codes emerging from the transcripts include 'exclusive sales', 'sense of privilege', 'exclusive shopping', 'special treatment'. These identified codes led to the emergence of the category 'personalized communication'.

Table 1. Sample participant comments

<i>Motivation for Online Luxury</i>	<i>Illustrating Comments</i>
<i>Independent Browsing</i>	
<i>Freedom to Browse</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>When I shop at boutiques, I can't really serve myself. I have to wait for someone to attend to me.</i> • <i>You can't just grab something without permission. When I'm browsing online I can look and think about my options as much as I want.</i> • <i>Sometimes sales people are a bit intimidating. You don't get that kind of physical pressure online.</i> • <i>There's nothing pressuring about it. You know, some of the people you have to deal with in such fancy stores are way too uptight [...] that's why I don't even go to stores anymore, the internet is much more relaxed for me.</i>
<i>Intimidating Assistance</i>	
<i>Personalized Communication</i>	
<i>Personalized Notifications</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I really enjoy getting those private sales and exclusive pre-shopping.</i> • <i>They send me an email whenever when my favorite line gets an updated style</i>
<i>Feeling Privileged</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>But I deserve some special treatment</i> • <i>I feel special when I get an email whenever when my favorite line releases new styles.</i>
<i>Accessibility</i>	
<i>Wide Selection</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>You know I'm almost always sure that I won't find the items I like in the stores. Trendy stuff sells out so fast. Even if they had them they're either on hold or in some closet where u can't see them. The only way is to get them is online. I don't really have to worry about that.</i> • <i>Anything I want I can find online. I don't have to go around shops hunting and wasting my time.</i>
<i>Product Information</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Online I can compare prices, brands, products. It's really important for me.</i> • <i>It's super easy and simple to get information online.</i>

Table 2. Sample participant comments

<i>Reservations toward Online Luxury Purchase</i>	<i>Illustrating Comments</i>
<i>Unfamiliar Brands</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The easiest for me to get alone is the brand I'm used to buying. That's an easy choice and buying online makes my life easier. But with brands I've never bought before I can't really take that risk.</i>
<i>Risky Purchase</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>You can't just grab something without permission. When I'm browsing online I can look and think about my options as much as I want.</i> • <i>I don't really consider brands that I don't already know. With brands I know, I feel sure of what to expect. It's like I won't be surprised.</i>
<i>Avoiding Disappointment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I'm really worried I'd get disappointed and regret it later.</i>
<i>Lack of Spontaneity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>To me buying online is a serious exercise. I compare brands. I also go through other customer reviews and compare prices. It's like there are many things I need to do before I decide on what to buy.</i>
<i>Calculated Online Decision</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I just like something and get it. It feels good sometimes to just like something and get it. There's no hard work needed like when you're buying online.</i> • <i>The feeling you get when you get into the fancy stores cannot be matched online. It's like you get swept away with the magic and you get to actually enjoy it and that makes your decision much easier.</i>
<i>Store Induced Purchase</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>It's like you get swept away with the magic and you get to actually enjoy it and that makes your decision much easier [...]</i>
<i>Uninspiring Experience</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I actually still have to pay crazy prices but miss on all that fancy store feel.</i>
<i>Missed Value</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I don't know there's still something different about shops. I just love the atmosphere. They just have the fancy marble, colors, music, smell and even perfect temperature [...] you just can't get the same feeling online.</i>
<i>Regular Transaction</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I buy really routine things online like groceries, electronics and stuff like that. So buying my luxury online makes it just as a regular thing just like the rest.</i>

4. Findings

4.1 Motivations for Online Luxury Purchase

Interviews with participants revealed the following overarching themes as their main motives for online luxury shopping: 1) independent browsing 2) personalized communication 3) product accessibility. The fourth theme that arose from the interviews was convenience offered through online shopping.

4.2 Independent Browsing

Many of the participants emphasized that the digital nature of the online world made them feel more engaged with the luxury brand. The impersonal online environment appeared to provide participants with a certain level of independence. Three participants favored this independence over the assisted store visit experience. The following quote is indicative of this perception:

When I shop at boutiques, I can't really serve myself. I have to wait for someone to attend to me. You can't just

grab something without permission. When I'm browsing online I can look and think about my options as much as I want. There's always someone watching you at the brand shops [...] I'm really more of an independent shopper. Well sure, I appreciate help but first I like to look around the store on my own.

Another participant expressed similar sentiments:

It is true the service you get in the store is impeccable [...] sometimes sales people are a bit intimidating. You don't get that kind of physical pressure online.

There are even a few participants who do not consider buying from physical stores, as they were more at ease with the online world. As this quotation reveals, the online world is perceived as a comfortable atmosphere:

I know how it works. There's nothing pressuring about it. You know, some of the people you have to deal with in such fancy stores are way too uptight [...] that's why I don't even go to stores anymore, the internet is much more relaxed for me.

Such statements clearly refute the core assumptions of conventional approaches to luxury sales service that attentive all-time present service is a core requirement for luxury store service.

4.3 Personalized Communication

Although the desire for independent shopping was appreciated by interviewees, so was the desire for personalized online communication. An important theme echoed across many of the interviews was the sense of privilege felt by consumers when receiving personalized communicative messages. Personalization of services was mentioned by many interviewees as a factor that led to a purchase consideration. The mode of communication made an impact, with a general preference for individually tailored communication, rather than undifferentiated offers. These comments seemed to reflect that personalization was best used to build a bond relationship, especially to offer consumers personalized offers. Participants generally valued the relevant information and resources shared by online retailers, and the insights and feedback they gained from personalized notifications. The perceived benefits of receiving customized communication included sense of privilege, pride, and sense of entitlement. Some quotes demonstrated the sense of entitlement: *"I really enjoy getting those private sales and exclusive pre-shopping. But I deserve some special treatment"*.

Two participants commented that they get "an email whenever when my favorite line releases new styles" and received "exclusive private sale".

This analysis aligns with others (Baker et al., 2018; Hoffmann & Coste-Manière, 2016; Uche Okonkwo, 2016; Üçok Hughes et al., 2016), in suggesting that the internet presents luxury brands with the opportunity to develop deeper relationships with consumers.

4.4 Accessibility

All interviewees spoke about the vast online pool of brand information. They also appreciated the array of possible products and brands. Participants mentioned that they appreciated the wide selection available online. The 'out of stock situation' was a major frustration for most participants when shopping in brick and mortar stores. Some also complained about the limited accessibility to in-store products *"You actually need their assistance. A lot of the things are not even on display, you'll need them to get those from some hidden place."* The backroom inventory was perceived as a significant issue. One participant summed up this frustration as follows:

You know I'm almost always sure that I won't find the items I like in the stores [...] Trendy stuff sells out so fast. Even if they had them they're either on hold or in some closet where u can't see them. The only way is to get them is online. I don't really have to worry about that.

4.5 Convenience

The convenience of online purchase was the most frequent occurring code in the data analysis. Participants indicated that one of the most beneficial aspects of luxury internet shopping was convenience. They were delighted by the continuous technical advancements that led to shorter delivery time and access to merchandise. The convenience discussed by the participants was summarized into 2 main categories: purchase time saving and timely information. As one participant revealed, *"I don't have to endure being in a crowd, or standing in check in lines, you know they only let few people in at the same time"*. Particularly valued was the fact that participants "can shop any time and for less time instead of all the waiting time".

4.6 Reservations toward Online Luxury Purchase

Participants described limitations and constraints they believed prevented them from fully enjoying their online

purchase experience. They identified three such barriers: unfamiliarity with brands, lack of spontaneity and uninspiring experience.

4.7 Unfamiliar Brands

Participants addressed issues of risks associated with online purchase. These perceived risks seem to significantly influence the online behaviors towards 'unfamiliar brands'. However, the extent to which the perceived risks seem to deter the online purchase of 'familiar' brands was more modest. When participants have enough brand-related information about a luxury brand, they will evaluate whether the online perceived image can be reconciled with their own pre-conceived image. When participants had any hesitations towards a brand, they seemed to look for references in the actual market. Two participants comment:

The easiest for me to get alone is the brand I'm used to buying. That's an easy choice and buying online makes my life easier [...] with brands I've never bought before I can't really take that risk.

If I don't know the brand I don't buy it online. That simple. What I do is go to the shop get a feel of the quality, design. Try it on then decide [...] I mean it's really pricy so you've got to know the brand if you're buying blindly.

Similarly, a number of participants referred to positive attitudes they have towards familiar brands. However, most participants still had difficulty predicting luxury brand value for brands they haven't concretely experienced before the internet encounter. Most found it difficult to reliably predict important quality cues solely through the internet. The following participant verbatim demonstrates this perception:

I don't really consider brands that I don't already know. With brands I know, I feel sure of what to expect. It's like I won't be surprised [...] you can't risk it when you're paying that much.

These comments seemed to reflect that the internet was best used to support an existing brand relationship, especially to offer access to 'familiar brands'. In fact Zeng and Reinartz (2003) argued that consumers rely on existing internal knowledge when assessing online product information.

4.8 Lack of Spontaneity

Lack of spontaneity was a frequently discussed issue, with some of the participants stating that this was a significant barrier to hedonic shopping. Several participants browsed the web more frequently when considering an online purchase. Participants reported often deciding to visit luxury shops without a shopping agenda, sometimes with a vague notion of what they are looking for. Many of the participants interviewed appreciated the spontaneity associated with the store purchase. One participant explains:

The feeling you get when you get into the fancy stores cannot be matched online. It's like you get swept away with the magic and you get to actually enjoy it and that makes your decision much easier [...]

In contrast, internet shopping was largely perceived as need and research driven. One participant, for instance, referred to the research part associated with internet shopping as a usual necessary step in luxury online purchase. Two interview participants spoke at length about the process they go through before buying luxury brands online:

To me buying online is a serious exercise. I compare brands. I also go through other customer reviews and compare prices. It's like there are many things I need to do before I decide on what to buy.

When I buy from shops I get carried away by what I like in that moment. It doesn't feel like I have to do all the research [...] I just like something and get it. It feels good sometimes to just like something and get it. There's no hard work needed.

This is consistent with Park et al. (2012) finding that utilitarian internet browsing has a negative effect on impulse buying.

4.9 Uninspiring Experience

The most common complaint participants reported relates to the lack of luxury appeal of the online transaction. Two participants stated that the somewhat none sensory nature of the internet was uninspiring and would have preferred to embark on a more enticing luxury shopping experience. One participant summed up this frustration "I actually still have to pay crazy prices but miss on all that fancy store feel".

Aesthetic aspects in the retail atmosphere are amplified in luxury fashion (Atwal & Williams, 2009). During the luxury retail experience, hedonic values derive mostly from enhanced shopping environments (Chung, Youn, & Lee, 2014; Spence et al., 2014). Participants emphasized the effect of aesthetic elements on the luxury retail experience. However, as the following two quotes indicate they are ambivalent about website design efforts of

luxury retailers:

I don't know there's still something different about shops. I just love the atmosphere. They just have the fancy marble, colors, music, smell and even perfect temperature [...] you just can't get the same feeling online.

This concept appears consistent with the findings of Türk, Scholz, & Berresheim (2012), who found that despite the efforts of luxury brands to project online styles that are consistent with the design of the physical stores, the transfer of the luxuriousness is compromised.

5. Discussion

The current study deepened present understandings about the online luxury consumer experience. Participants viewed the luxury purchase experience as a fulfilling activity that helped them shop conveniently, enjoy independent browsing, gain access to more merchandise and receive personalized communication. However, participants indicated that such convenience was tempered by the risks associated with the purchase of unfamiliar brands, lack of spontaneity and uninspiring online retail environments.

During the traditional retailing process in brick-and-mortar luxury stores, self-service is uncommon (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2007). In fact, products are deliberately made inaccessible to consumers (Joy, Wang, Chan, Sherry Jr, & Cui, 2014). Interviewed participant appreciated the opportunity of shopping independently which helped them feel empowered during the online shopping process, thus serving their value expressive needs. Participants seemed to be drawn by the online experience in an effort to avoid 'intimidating physical pressure' of personnel in brick-and-mortar luxury stores. In this context, Katz (1960) suggests that attitudes that serve an ego-defensive function allow people to avoid unpleasant aspects of the external world. These findings, which are quite counterintuitive from the perspective of luxury literature, suggest that independent browsing might enhance consumer luxury experience.

Analysis of the interview data also showed that consumers evaluate whether the online perceived image of a brand can be reconciled with their own pre-conceived image. Participants reported less willingness to purchase 'unfamiliar brands' as they found it difficult to reliably predict important quality cues solely through the internet.

Most participants felt that individually tailored offers encouraged them to consider an online luxury purchase. This is consistent with previous research; both Üçok Hughes et al. (2016) and Quach & Thaichon (2017) argued that digital marketing has the ability to strengthen customer relationship as the technology is well suited to engage in personalized communication.

The functional theory of attitudes was found to be relevant for understanding the online behavior of luxury consumers. In accordance with the theory, underlying motivations toward online luxury purchase were significant determinants of attitudes and intentions. The successful application of the functional theory of attitudes to luxury consumption is consistent with other research in which the theory helped explore consumer behavior (Bian & Forsythe, 2012; Halwani, 2020; Ioana-Daniela et al., 2018; Kauppinen-Räsänen et al., 2018; Schade et al., 2016; Wilcox, Kim, & Sen, 2009).

The challenge arising from the online venture of luxury brands received some scholar attention with most focusing on corporate online strategies (Baker et al., 2018; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Larbanet & Ligier, 2009; Uché Okonkwo, 2009; Seringhaus, 2005). However, findings pertaining to this consumer oriented study go beyond previous research to suggest that independent browsing, lack of spontaneity and uninspiring experience are important for understanding the luxury online purchase experience.

Luxury atmosphere has often been discussed in the literature as a key aspect of the overall luxury experience (De Barnier & Valette-Florence, 2013). In traditional contexts, luxurious designs and aesthetics contribute to a positive customer experience (Elliot & Maier, 2014). The perception of luxury has been identified as pleasure enhancing and gratifying (Lyons, Wien, & Altintzoglou, 2019; Yani-de-Soriano & Foxall, 2006). However, the consumer perceived hedonic value seemed compromised when presented online. In fact, participants seem to be less stimulated by luxury website aesthetics. Participants reported that a lack of spontaneity and luxurious atmospherics frequently compromised their luxury online purchase experience.

In this study, the lack of perceived online luxury was impeding participants' ability to engage in the luxurious experience. While they did notice online retailers' efforts to reflect online styles that are consistent with the design of the physical stores, the luxury experience seemed compromised.

Lack of spontaneity was also frequently referred to by participants as a significant barrier to hedonic shopping. Participants felt an urge to make use of all accessible online information when considering an online purchase. They were rather motivated by utilitarian values as they tried to optimize their purchase choice through thorough

comparisons and research. Within the context of the internet, findings of this study refute the suggestion that utilitarian values play a less prominent role in shaping luxury consumer preferences (Grewal, Mehta, & Kardes, 2004).

6. Conclusion and Limitations

While several authors have analyzed corporate online strategies of luxury brands (Baker et al., 2018; Dall'Olmo Riley & Lacroix, 2003; Heine & Berghaus, 2014; Hennigs, Wiedmann, & Klarmann, 2012; Roux & Floch, 1996b), few existing studies have evaluated consumer online luxury experiences.

The qualitative research method employed provided a comprehensive analysis of the perceptions that positively or negatively influence consumer perceptions of online shopping. Hence, this study provided a more nuanced view of consumer motivations by also focusing on the factors that negatively influence consumer behavior.

The interview data that this study analyzes provide rich verbatim data where emergent patterns determined the depth of detail conveyed in the results. A large scale study, however, could confirm these results and further examine other ways that consumers use the internet in the selection of brands. Finally, the study was conducted in European countries, which limits the generalizability of our findings, research could replicate our studies in other countries to investigate whether consumer motivations vary across countries.

The study findings have several important practical implications. Luxury online retailers need to appeal to the appropriate attitude functions through their online communications strategies. For example, luxury brands should try to shorten the search time during the purchase phase as is likely to compromise the hedonic value of the consumer online shopping experience. Similarly, communication online strategies should help consumers shop independently and make them feel empowered during the browsing and purchase process, thus serving their value expressive needs. Given the strong preference reported by participants for personalized online communication, a potentially successful online marketing strategy should be tailored to respond to the needs of diverse customer segments.

Another implication of the findings concerns the luxury aesthetics reflected online. Websites should be carefully designed so as to project a luxurious atmosphere. For instance; it is apparent that luxury online retailers need to be attentive to the aesthetic feel of their websites. They should seek to determine how the internet technology can be further leveraged to ultimately produce a high-quality luxurious atmosphere. The aim of this research is not to present a thorough list of luxury designs suggestions but rather provide the basis for identifying appropriate internet strategies. This study has also clarified how luxury retailers can overcome consumer reservations by focusing on elements that could enhance the luxury experience.

Many participants found it difficult to reliably predict important quality cues for 'unfamiliar brands'. These brands need to provide reasonable information, allowing the consumer to more realistically predict quality cues. The degree to which attributes such as craftsmanship and details are manifested in a product should be communicated as realistically as possible. Given the findings on the importance of quality cues, luxury online retailers should further enhance such luxury perceived attributes by combining online experience with appropriate offline brand-related communications.

The participants interviewed were purposefully selected through a non-exhaustive method, which might again raise questions about the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, this study has un-covered and analyzed in some detail, the underlying motivations and reservations towards online luxury.

Nevertheless, the present study has focused on the consumer motivations as drivers of online purchase and did not take into consideration consumer attributes that may affect their purchase decisions. Further research may deepen this opportunity and explore how consumer attitude influences online purchase.

Future research might also want to examine other contexts of the effects of the internet on the consumer, such as online purchase outcomes. Additionally, the focus of this study was on the luxury industry. Future research is needed to explore the extent to which the findings and implications can be generalized to other contexts. Lastly, this research only considered purchase from luxury retailers' website; it is unclear whether the analytical results can be generalized to other online purchase venues. Further research can apply the research findings to examine other types of internet retailer venues.

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