

Digitalization in the luxury fashion industry

A case study on two major fashion houses and their branding strategies in a suddenly digital landscape

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Abstract

In this digital age, most industries are increasingly adopting new technologies, while others are considering social media as an essential part of their daily operations. Despite its conservative and elitist nature, the luxury fashion industry is no exception to the rule. In the past decade, the most important fashion houses were seen to implement digital means into their fashion shows, and use social media in a more creative manner to connect with their consumers. However, these practices were mostly seen as experimental; only up until the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, where the luxury fashion industry was faced with the need to digitalize all operations in order to stay afloat. Hence, this study aims to investigate how major fashion houses are shifting their existing branding strategies into fully digital activities, in response to the 2020 pandemic. Two case studies were chosen for their international influence in the industry: Louis Vuitton and Gucci. A thematic analysis was performed with data from March 2020 until this day, and consisted of 60 newspapers articles coming from important fashion publications – such as, the Business of Fashion and Vogue – as well as nine public interviews of Louis Vuitton and Gucci’s insiders found on YouTube. The aim of using two different sources is to triangulate the data between journalistic analysis and fashion insiders’ perspectives. Results of this study showed that despite being similar their image of luxury fashion benchmarks, Louis Vuitton and Gucci dealt with the Covid-19 issues in a different way. While Louis Vuitton engaged in immediate digital changes, resulting in commercial success in difficult times, it took more time for Gucci to rebound from the pandemic; as a matter of fact, Gucci rose to the top again when the brand started to successfully combine an efficient use of social media and digital shows with a return to a more traditional brand signature. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of luxury fashion branding in the context of (post-)Covid-19 challenges linked to the digitalization of the industry; between traditions, heritage and digital innovation.

Keywords: *luxury fashion industry; Fashion Week; fashion branding; marketing communications; digitalization; social media*

List of abbreviations

FW – Fall-Winter season

SS – Spring-Summer season

RTW – Ready-to-Wear collection

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Chapter I. Introduction

An overview of the modern luxury fashion industry

The luxury fashion market is a very lucrative industry, with a global value reaching no less than €281 billion in 2019 (D'Arpizio & Levato, 2020). Luxury fashion is characterized by its heritage, exclusivity and innovation, which is the reason why some of the most prestigious brands have been in business since the last century, and even before then (Jelinek, 2018). In order to go further in this research and understand what is at stake, it is necessary to establish an overview of the luxury fashion industry and the functioning of its ecosystem as of today.

From an etymological point of view, the word luxury comes from “luxus”, a Latin word that translates into superabundance – the concept of having a very large amount of something – and excess, defined as an amount that is more than expected (Cabigiosu, 2020). For instance, Coco Chanel defined luxury as “the necessity where necessity ends”, similarly to Sombart (1967) who stated that “luxury is any expense that exceeds what is necessary” (as cited in Cabigiosu, 2020, p. 9). Luxury goods have already been in existence since the Ancient Egypt era, as well as during the Roman Empire, where high-quality handmade goods were offered to the most important individuals and divinities. Up until the end of the nineteenth century, the term “luxury” referred to excellency, aristocracy and wealthy classes; it was only during the last century that luxury goods became more accessible to a larger audience (Cabigiosu, 2020). However, fashion designers were mainly creating haute couture garments; this type of apparel were tailor made and often considered as works of art, which means that only a very limited number of individuals could afford to wear luxury pieces. The modern luxury fashion industry, as we currently know it, has started in the 1960s with the contributions of designers such as Pierre Cardin and Yves Saint Laurent. By introducing the concept of *prêt-à-porter*, or ready-to-wear, Saint Laurent democratized the industry, as luxury garments became accessible and more affordable to middle-class consumers (Cabigiosu, 2020).

From an academic perspective, the concept of luxury is much more difficult to define, as it represents a social context and hence, follows a cultural evolution subject to extreme changes (Nueno and Quelch, 1998, as cited in Amatulli & Guido, 2011, p. 124; Jelinek, 2018). Nonetheless, the term “luxury” essentially refers to high symbolic valued goods for which consumers would be willing to spend excessive amounts of money; an amount that is often highly above the average price of a product (Cabigiosu, 2020). According to Jackson (2004),

four main categories of luxury goods can be identified: 1) fashion, which comprehends haute couture, ready-to-wear, footwear, handbags and other accessories; 2) perfumes and cosmetics; 3) wines and spirits; and 4) watches and jewelry (as cited in Amatulli & Guido, 2011, p. 124). However, more recent studies have added new luxury categories such as luxury cars, private jets and yachts, hotels and tourism, fine dining, private banking, home design furnishing and fine arts (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2008; D'Arpizio & Levato, 2020a). The aim of this research is to investigate the luxury fashion category, which corresponds to high-value apparel, footwear, handbags and accessories that are fundamentally unnecessary, but bring a high prestige and sense of distinction to the owner (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004, as cited in Amatulli & Guido, 2011, p. 124).

Nowadays, the luxury fashion industry is largely dominated by three multi-brand conglomerates, each of them owning important fashion houses (Moore & Birtwistle, 2005). Firstly, LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy) is a French-based group which owns Louis Vuitton, Dior, Fendi and Givenchy, along with 71 other prestigious brands from around the world. Secondly, Richemont is a Swiss conglomerate which is more specialized in watches and jewelry, but has acquired luxury fashion brands recently; the brands it owns include Cartier, Van Cleef & Arpels and Chloé, to name a few. Lastly, Kering is another French-based group which owns Gucci, Saint Laurent and Balenciaga, alongside ten other luxury brands. The main reason why all these established names have joined large conglomerates is due to the fierce competition in the industry, and the fact that they would need to acquire more competences and resources in order to grow (Cabigiosu, 2020). As a matter of fact, previous research has proved that many of these brands owe their success to the conglomerate they belong to and “their multi-brand status, and particular ability to exploit the expertise, resource and cost synergies of conglomeration” (Matlock and Edmondson, 2002, as cited in Moore & Birtwistle, 2005, p. 257). Nonetheless, there are still a few fashion houses that operate without belonging to a luxury group, such as Chanel and Hermès.

It is evident to say that luxury fashion is a complex industry, as it is continuously evolving around multiple players working within the same ecosystem. According to Cabigiosu (2020), “the luxury brand experience is never characterized by a single trait; it is multifaced and the result of a mix of innovation and creativity, tradition and history, superior quality and high prices, exclusive communication and selective distribution, the imaginary and storytelling.” (p. 18). An essential aspect of the luxury fashion ecosystem would be the Fashion Weeks, which perfectly capture the forward-thinking mind and creativity of fashion houses.

Traditionally, fashion shows are highly advertised events that are meant to present new collections to the press and consumers, before their release in stores one year later; this duration of time corresponds to the necessary period for presenting, producing and distributing a ready-to-wear collection (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018; Cabigiosu, 2020). However, fashion shows are nowadays also considered as “real shows and marketing events involving many celebrities, testimonials and influencers who increase the visibility of the events on the media and induce the public to desire and buy the new collection” (Cabigiosu, 2020, p. 105). At the moment, the most important brands are used to present their fashion shows in one of the “Big Four”, which refers to the four fashion capitals receiving the most press coverage: Paris, Milan, London and New York Fashion Week. It is necessary to mention that the industry of luxury fashion is based on seasonal cycles, meaning that fashion brands release at least two collections per year: one during the Fall/Winter season, and another one for Spring/Summer. However, large fashion brands might even showcase up to ten shows per year, including collections such as Couture, Resort or Menswear.

Bertola and Teunissen (2018) state that “fashion, as a system, is about the new” (p. 9). Indeed, the industry is ruled by an intense calendar that pushes designers and fashion houses to create new collections throughout the whole year, which would ultimately allow them to grasp the attention of fashion media and consumers. This fast-paced functioning ultimately results into positive outcomes; indeed, previous research has found that with an 8.5% annual growth, luxury fashion is one of the fastest growing industries (Casale et al., 2020).

Research question

The luxury fashion industry has seen many changes over the past years, but never has it been disrupted as much as in 2020. As a matter of fact, the industry’s steady growth over the years was abruptly stopped by the Covid-19 outbreak, hitting all parts of luxury brands’ production chain, from creative teams to textile suppliers, production factories, marketing departments,... up until high-end stores. Fundamentally, luxury goods are not considered as necessary purchases, which is the reason why the whole industry is particularly put at risk in times of economic uncertainty – the last time occurring during the 2008 economic recession (Cabigiosu, 2020; Deeley, 2020; Kansara, 2020). Consequently, being in a pandemic landscape has driven luxury brands to rethink and adapt their entire branding processes, through which they have been able to cater for new consumers’ needs.

Going further, the 2020 pandemic has heavily impacted long-time traditions in the luxury fashion industry. As a matter of fact, Fashion Weeks are one of the most important events in the fashion sphere due to the exposure they bring to luxury brands. However, most of them were cancelled during the Fall/Winter 2020 season due to happen in March 2020, before brands started to shift to an entirely digital format for their following collections (Zonneveld, 2020). As of 2021, Fashion Weeks are still mostly happening online, but it seems that the industry has adapted to these unprecedented circumstances. Indeed, digitalization of luxury fashion has created many new branding opportunities for luxury brands through the use of technology and new media, hence facilitating their recovery after a severe economic downturn (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018; Cabigiosu, 2020; Harreis, 2020; Lee & Kim, 2001).

In light of the recent events, the purpose of this research is to explore new branding strategies of the most important luxury brands since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, hence the following research question: **How are major fashion houses shifting their existing branding strategies into fully digital activities in response to the 2020 pandemic?**

In order to answer this research question, the following sub-questions should be addressed:

- 1) What are consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on the luxury fashion industry?
- 2) How do fashion houses include digital means into their branding strategies?
- 3) How will digitalization impact the traditional Fashion Week format?

Relevance of the research

Scientific relevance

Prior existing research has already shed light on many aspects of luxury fashion branding, even though the majority was conducted from a consumer-based perspective (Cavender & Kincade, 2014a; Choi, 2014a; Kapferer et al., 2017). Similarly, the digitalization of luxury fashion is a subject that has been quite well researched by academics (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018; Cabigiosu, 2020; Lee & Kim, 2001). However, the topic of digitalization as part of luxury branding strategies remains unexplored; it is currently the most adequate time to investigate it more in depth. As a matter of fact, the Covid-19 outbreak happened in 2020 and has disrupted the whole industry, forcing luxury brands to greatly accelerate their digitalization processes and integrate them into their branding strategies. This results in a very new research gap, due

to two reasons. Firstly, the topic is still recent as the pandemic only started last year, meaning that academia has not investigated the changes in luxury fashion branding yet. Secondly, while existing studies have researched the topic of luxury brands during periods of economic recession (Andal-Ancion et al., 2010; Kapferer, 2012; Manlow and Nobbs, 2013; Reyneke et al., 2012; Tynan et al., 2010, as cited in Cavender & Kincade, 2014a, p. 233), this global context brought by Covid-19 is different from all the previous ones. Indeed, the luxury fashion industry has not only been dealing with financial difficulties, but with the urge to digitalize all operations and processes in order to stay afloat. Hence, by addressing an already researched topic under new circumstances – which is, luxury fashion in a pandemic landscape – this paper could offer insights for further research in the field of digitalization in the luxury fashion industry.

Societal relevance

This study could offer an understanding of the current industry to different audiences, whether they are academics or fashion marketers. By nature, the luxury fashion industry operates at an international level and exists around many similar codes and embedded traditions, whether the fashion house comes from France, the United States or Japan. Hence, by using two internationally important luxury brands – Louis Vuitton and Gucci – this study ensures that the findings could be adapted to other fashion houses around the world. Because of its main focus on marketing, social media and fashion shows, the results of this research would provide fashion marketers with ideas to efficiently manage their future branding strategies, more specifically in a more and more digitalized context. The newly researched topic of luxury fashion during Covid-19 would also be of interest for anyone who would like to gain a deeper understanding on the subject, such as luxury consumers and stakeholders.

Structure of the thesis

The next two chapters are dedicated to building a theoretical background for the empirical part. In the first chapter, the main characteristics of luxury fashion branding will be examined; how do fashion houses build a clear brand identity and what are the most important luxury communication strategies. In addition, the concept of brand signature and how it plays a role in luxury fashion branding will be explored. The second chapter will be focused on digitalization in luxury fashion and more precisely, the technologies that are shaping the industry and the impact of social media marketing. In short, the aim of these two theoretical

chapters is to obtain an overview of luxury fashion branding in a digitalized era, before moving to the empirical part of the research.

The purpose of this study can be described as exploratory, meaning that we seek to understand a phenomenon; indeed, the main goal is to investigate the luxury fashion industry from an insider perspective, following the 2020 pandemic. A research question formulated as “How [...]” often involves a qualitative analysis, meaning that findings of this study will not be quantified; instead, they will be described and interpreted by the researcher based on qualitative materials. By means of a case study approach, this research will compare two of the most important luxury brands in the world: Louis Vuitton and Gucci (Forbes, 2020a; Nash, 2020; Zonneveld, 2020). These two fashion houses were Prestigious fashion houses and designers have witnessed significant financial losses due to the pandemic, no matter how large and established they are. However, some brands such as Louis Vuitton have demonstrated a surprising ability to thrive and innovate in this new digital environment, while others are recovering at a much slower pace. Despite being a €18.7 billion brand with many resources, Gucci does not seem to rebound from the crisis yet (Forbes, 2020b; Williams, 2021). One might ask, what are digital branding strategies that work, and those that do not? Empirical data will be mainly consisting of articles from influential fashion newspapers and triangulated with public interviews in order to avoid any bias; the data collected will be analyzed by means of thematic analysis. By answering the first and second sub-questions, this study aims to present a comprehensive overview of luxury fashion branding as of today in the case of Louis Vuitton and Gucci.

The third sub-question is a way to further the research by investigating the future of Fashion Weeks, as digitalization and the impact of the pandemic have changed that key element of luxury fashion. By using qualitative content analysis, this study will explore how the most important fashion houses have been coping with the new struggles and opportunities coming with an entirely digital environment. In order to do so, newspapers articles will be analyzed through a thematic analysis approach. The aim is to study brands from LVMH and Kering – the two luxury conglomerates owning Louis Vuitton and Gucci – and how they have been adapting their fashion show format since the beginning of the pandemic. By continuing the research in that direction, it will allow us to obtain a broader picture of luxury fashion, and how its most influential brands react in face of digitalization and industry disruptions.

Chapter II. Luxury fashion branding

Luxury fashion is commonly believed to be one of the most appealing and profitable industries in the world (Choi, 2014). International luxury brands – from new designers to brands within the top three conglomerates LVMH, Richemont and Kering – all spend millions of dollars annually in order to offer the most efficient branding strategy (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2008, as cited in Theng So et al., 2013, p. 404). Fionda and Moore (2009) state that luxury fashion brand management is complex in general, but the two authors managed to develop a framework based on previous research ranging from 1998 to 2007; Figure 1 displays their model. In total, they identified nine interrelated key dimensions that are essential to the creation of a luxury fashion brand. It is beyond the scope of this study to present a complete overview of these attributes, as this research is focused on luxury fashion branding. Hence, the following dimensions will be addressed in this chapter: 1) clear brand identity; 2) luxury communications strategy; and 3) brand signature. Fionda and Moore's paper (2009) has been a reference in the academic field for luxury fashion; however, it might appear as outdated, as this complex and fast-paced industry has faced many changes during the past decade. Therefore, it will be necessary to revise this model with more recent papers in order to obtain a more accurate landscape of luxury fashion branding as of today. Exploring the relationship between these three dimensions will allow to build a clear understanding and industry background for the empirical part of this research.

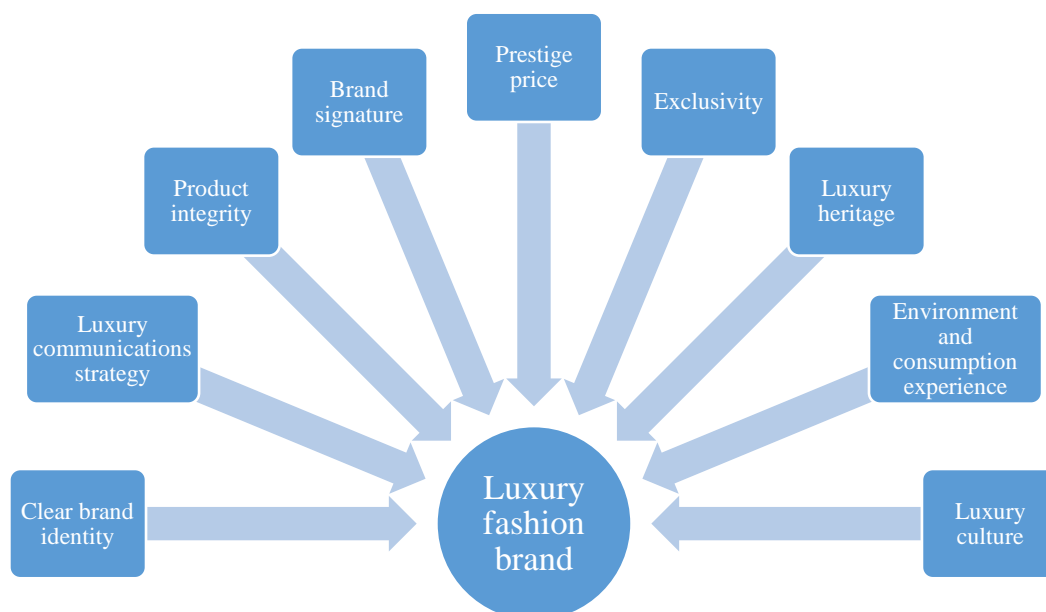


Figure 1 – Luxury fashion brand management model. Source: own illustration adapted from Fionda and Moore (2009).

Defining a clear brand identity

As a luxury fashion brand, one of the most important sources for gaining a competitive advantage is to establish a strong brand identity, which will allow to stand out among influential competitors (Cavender & Kincade, 2014a; Jelinek, 2018; Okonkwo, 2007). Indeed, Choi (2014) explains that a luxury brand's identity is used by consumers to communicate their own personal identity, as they often consciously make the decision to purchase from a particular brand. A perfectly accurate way of defining brand identity does not exist, as academic research has found different ways to describe it. For example, Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2008) state that brand identity is built through several elements such as: product craftsmanship, innovation, recognizable style, brand exclusivity and premium pricing (as cited in Theng So et al., 2013, p. 404). In this research, we will use the definition of brand identity as described by Cavender and Kincade (2014a), as their several studies on luxury fashion are close to the topic of this research. According to them, brand identity can be achieved through a clear brand image and brand personality, two concepts that are similar to each other but coming with their own particularities.

Brand image

Firstly, brand image can be defined as the “interpretation of a brand in the mind of the consumer based on the way the brand projects itself” (Okonkwo, 2007, as cited in Cavender & Kincade, 2014a, p. 237). It is hence essential to project a clear brand image in the eyes of the consumer. By identifying the relationships between a fashion house's brand image with the way it is perceived and understood by consumers, it becomes possible to better position a luxury brand with their target market (Choi, 2014). As a matter of fact, Khan (2010) affirms that “fashion goods are well-known vehicles of nonverbal communication for individuals about oneself” (as cited in Choi, 2014, p. 38). Once a fashion house's brand image is aligned with the consumer's expectations, it will better perform and increase consumer loyalty (Choi, 2014). Moreover, a concept known as trading-up might occur; it is defined by Cabigiosu (2020) as a purchasing behavior that is increasingly spreading among middle-class consumers, as they are willing to pay a greater price to acquire luxury goods with a higher level of quality and emotional content.

Going further, there are two main reasons why consumers buy luxury goods. The first one relates to external motivations, which refer to signals of wealth; for instance, when someone publicly displays their luxury goods in order to show their social status (Fionda & Moore, 2009). On the other hand, the second reason why consumers purchase luxury goods is

related to internal motivations. In other words, it occurs when luxury consumption is based on an individual's self-perception and hence, acquiring luxury goods would lead to a feeling of self-reward and subjective emotions (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999, as cited in Amatulli & Guido, 2011, p. 124). Going further, Amatulli and Guido (2011) have found two hidden motivators when consumers buy luxury goods: self-confidence and self-fulfillment, which can be described as "inner drives". In order to fulfill these needs, fashion houses need to continuously deliver superior functional and symbolical benefits, which would drive consumers to build stronger emotional attachments towards a brand and achieve brand loyalty.

It is noteworthy to say that existing literature has found a pattern of luxury purchase intentions between Western and Eastern countries. While Western consumers (e.g. from France, Italy) buy luxury goods on the basis of aesthetic pleasure and personal style, Eastern consumers (e.g. from China, Russia) are more likely to purchase luxury goods in order to display their social status (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). These findings are further supported by Amatulli and Guido (2011) who conducted research on luxury purchase intention among Italian consumers. As a matter of fact, they found a need between Italian consumers to "distinguish themselves". Contrarily to what one might think, this does not refer to feeling superior or showing off, but it relates more to a desire to own luxury goods reflecting their personalities and individual styles. Therefore, it is essential for luxury brands to develop a coherent brand image in order to target the right consumers.

Brand personality

While brand identity refers to the way a brand is perceived by its consumers, brand personality is defined by Choi (2014) as "the identity of the brand and the way consumers relate to the brand". The author goes further by explaining that brand personality is not the same as human personality, considering the fact that it is "more dynamic and fluid for fashion brands due to its constant need to refresh and reinvent its identity in today's marketplace." (p. 3). In other words, brand personality is how the brand is created to be, despite the way it is viewed by consumers; its "true self" as Okonkwo (2007) explains. Indeed, it has been found that consumers often do not perceive the brand's personality in the same way that the brand wanted them to (Malär et al., 2012, as cited in Choi, 2014, p. 42).

As mentioned in the brand image section, the purchase of luxury goods is characterized by their emotional value, and the self-confidence they give to consumers (Amatulli & Guido, 2011). Hence, it becomes crucial to effectively communicate a luxury brand's personality in

product advertising, on social media and other media outlets. Previous research have shown that when consumers perceive the similarity of a fashion house to their own selves, they will be more likely to purchase from the brand and develop loyalty towards it (Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982, as cited in Choi, 2014, p. 30). Indeed, according to Marconi (2000), a clear brand personality allow luxury brand marketers to “grab consumers’ attention, create market differentiation, build consumer affective attachment to brands, and foster brand loyalty. (Marconi, 2000, as cited in Choi, 2014, p. 3). One way to establish a clear brand personality among other prestigious brands is to develop a specific aesthetic, according to Gucci’s CEO Marco Bizzarri. By developing their own aesthetic at Gucci in creative but also in cultural terms, Bizzarri and his creative director Alessandro Michele aim to “speak to the emotional side of our consumers, through well-conceived narratives and storytelling, to be present in their lives not only with products, but also with content and values.” (Cabigiosu, 2020, p. 16). Therefore, by including consumers and their emotions into their branding processes, it will allow fashion houses to develop a coherent brand identity and hence, create longer relationships between the brand and its consumers. The next section will explain how a luxury brand can communicate its brand identity to the world and stand out amongst the others.

Luxury communication strategies and marketing

In the last decade, many studies have found that consumers are becoming less brand loyal, due to how fast the industry is changing – new fashion trends emerge every one or two seasons – and the diversity of offerings from luxury brands (Choo et al., 2012; Radon, 2012; Theng So et al., 2013). Even though designer names and logos are an important part of luxury brands’ identities, these fashion houses still have to leverage their intangible assets such as heritage and brand experience in order to gain a differentiating competitive advantage (Jelinek, 2018). Such high prices have to be justified, which would give consumers the desire to keep purchasing luxury fashion apparel and leather goods (Mendes & Rees-Roberts, 2015). Hence, it has become paramount for fashion houses to develop efficient communication and marketing strategies, especially in such a fast-moving and innovative industry.

According to Mendes and Rees-Roberts (2015), a modern understanding of the luxury fashion industry would be based on three criteria: 1) material value, which refers to the cost but also the quality of materials; 2) rarity, which is related to the exclusivity and limited number of luxury goods; and 3) immaterial value, which is the most difficult component to grasp and

leverage. As a matter of fact, the purpose of luxury brands is to generate consumer value and achieve a status of competitive advantage; this can be accomplished by creating superfluity, long-lasting value and great impressiveness (Jelinek, 2018). By adding such “unnecessary” but unique immaterial values, the goal in the long run would be to leverage them, hence justifying premium prices in the eyes of consumers (Schmitt, 1999, as cited in Jelinek, 2018, p. 296).

Communicating brand heritage

One of the most important branding factors that could increase a fashion house’s immaterial value would be brand heritage (Fionda & Moore, 2009; Jelinek, 2018); it is defined by Moore and Birtwistle (2005) as the history and culture behind a brand since its foundation. In other words, the added value of brand heritage is not perceived through the raw material of the luxury good. Mendes and Rees-Roberts (2015) state that luxury consumers attach importance to an object’s symbolic value, which is often achieved through “the artisanal techniques and craft involved in its production, and in the narrative manipulation of the object’s history, heritage and patrimony” (p. 58). Because of the intrinsic meaning of the word luxury, consumers expect that the luxury goods they purchase will have a higher emotional value and transmit an idea of opulence and scarcity (Cabigiosu, 2020).

As the history of a luxury brand conveys its value in the consumer’s mind, Fionda and Moore (2009) affirm that iconic products with a design signature is one of the most efficient ways to communicate its brand heritage. As a matter of fact, most fashion houses exist since the twentieth century – some of them are even from the century before – meaning that they have gathered a rich history through the years (Cabigiosu, 2020). For example, Dior has always relied on its iconic designs, selling them decades later along with newer products; indeed, structured midi dresses from the 1960s or the Dior’s Saddle bag released in 1999 are still iconic high selling products to this day. Luxury brands have the valuable advantage to own an important brand heritage; it is hence essential to communicate it with consumers in the best way possible.

The luxury experience

Another way to increase a luxury brand’s immaterial value is through the creation of a unique luxury experience. Indeed, considering the established fashion houses and the new emerging ones, the luxury fashion industry is filled with creatively innovative products. For example, the obsession with logos and monograms from the 2010s is slowly shifting to a desire for luxury

brands to become more subtle and sophisticated (Mendes & Rees-Roberts, 2015). Moreover, luxury consumers are nowadays looking for a closer relationship to their favorite brands, which would be achieved through a personalized customer experience (Radon, 2012).

Fundamentally, luxury brands can be considered as experiential brands, meaning that consumers put a lot of emphasis on intangible values such as their experience and feelings as luxury consumers (Amatulli & Guido, 2011; Cavender & Kincade, 2014a; Jelinek, 2018; Mendes & Rees-Roberts, 2015). Experiential marketing strategies have been developed to create more meaningful customer experience, whether it is entertaining (e.g. direct communications on social media) or more practical (e.g. time-saving features on the brand's website) (Atwal and Williams, 2009; Schmitt, 1999, as cited in Cavender & Kincade, 2014a, p. 232). As a luxury brand, it is crucial to create marketing strategies that would appeal to consumers in precise ways; for example, by triggering an emotional response that would differentiate that one luxury brand from another (Choi, 2014). However, such advertisements and marketing strategies should always be coherent in their globality, while reflecting the fashion house's essence and brand image. In the Gucci Group's annual report from 1999, the senior management explained their marketing success, as their communications strategy were "coordinated in a highly focused manner, ensuring a single, clear and effective brand message worldwide, in all areas of communication including: fashion shows and special events/ advertising/public relations, visual display and internet web sites" (Moore & Birtwistle, 2005).

As a matter of fact, fashion shows have always been one of the most efficient ways to create an unforgettable luxury brand experience, whether the consumer can physically attend it or digitally view it online. According to Kamitsis (2009) and Conlon (2016), fashion shows can be described as "a form of entertainment with the power to communicate commercial, artistic and political underlying messages and are opportunities for re-affirming a brand's DNA (as cited in Jelinek, 2018, p. 297). They are, without a doubt, a central part of a luxury brand's marketing strategy, as fashion shows can offer international media coverage to newer brands and reinforce the credibility of the most important fashion houses (Moore & Birtwistle, 2004). When some designers decide to create visual spectacles with a unique atmosphere, fashion shows can turn into an entire luxury experience, where the garments are put in the background (Teunissen, 2009, as cited in Jelinek, 2018, p. 297). These shows can be compared to theatrical performances as they might use dancers, actors and musicians; they reached a peak in the 1990s when designers such as Martin Margiela and Dries Van Noten subverted the industry (Jelinek, 2018). More recently, the result of these particular fashion shows illustrate an artistic mix

between the designer's edgy vision, with the more classic heritage of fashion houses (e.g. John Galliano for Dior, Demna Gvasalia for Balenciaga, as seen in Figure 2 below) (Jelinek, 2018; Cavender & Kincade, 2014b). Therefore, by efficiently communicating their brand heritage while conveying a unique consumer experience, luxury brands assure themselves a more loyal and engaged consumer base among other equally prestigious brands.



Figure 2 – Balenciaga's FW 2020 runway show. Source: SHOWstudio.

Fashion houses and brand signature

In recent years, a shift has occurred in luxury consumers' demand, where the once success of masstige products are confronted to a desire for more authentic and exclusive brand positioning. Mendes and Rees-Roberts (2015) define masstige as "an elitist form of luxury in the contemporary context in which the concept has been devalued through the paradoxical idea of affordable or mass luxury" (p. 65). In other words, some luxury brands have changed their brand positioning into a much more accessible one, hence losing their image of scarcity in the eyes of consumers. One of the most recurrent aspects of masstige products is that they heavily use logos and monograms into their offerings (Radon, 2012). For example, everyone would recognize a Louis Vuitton bag with its iconic monogram, or a Gucci belt with the double-G logo. While this has resulted in commercial success in the past, consumers nowadays want to purchase more than a signature logo products (Radon, 2012).

Starting from the 1950s, another reason that caused the rise of masstige products was, among other factors, the idea that designers could capitalize on their strong brand identities and maximize their profit even more (Cavender & Kincade, 2014b; Radon, 2012). These designers started engaging in licensing agreements, creating derivative products and even more product lines. Ultimately, these decisions were overextending these formerly prestigious fashion houses, diluting their brand image and hence, forcing them to dramatically reduce their offerings (Brannon, 2006, as cited in Cavender & Kincade, 2014b, p. 202). Nowadays, these leading fashion houses have been finding other ways to communicate and benefit from their brand signature, other than through the use of classic logos, monograms and excessively wide array of products (Mendes & Rees-Roberts, 2015). The past few years have shown that an efficient way to increase brand recognition is to work with an influential designer, and collaborate with well-known artists (Cavender & Kincade, 2014b; Mendes & Rees-Roberts, 2015; Radon, 2012).

The power of iconic creative directors

Brand signature can also be referred to as the brand's DNA; according to Cabigiosu (2020), brand signature is described as "the company spirit that enhances rarity, exclusivity, visibility and uniqueness and in which clients find a means to express themselves" (p. 19). When consumers purchase a luxury product, they expect to buy an image of perfection and eternity, which is why it is of the utmost importance that luxury brands share and sustain their brand signature in a coherent way (Cabigiosu, 2020).

Starting from the 1990s, the most prestigious fashion houses have uncovered the importance of having a strong designer culture, instead of simply being a luxury brand that exclusively relies on its brand name and heritage (Radon, 2012). When Marc Jacobs became creative director at Louis Vuitton in 1997, his name was almost always associated with the brand, up until his departure in 2014. In the same way, Tom Ford rejuvenized Gucci in such an innovative way during the 1990s that in the eyes of the public, the Italian fashion house was at that time known as "Tom Ford for Gucci". By the end of the 90s, consumers were confident in Tom Ford's creativity, viewing him as the very essence of Gucci (Jackson & Haid, 2002, as cited in Moore & Birtwistle, 2005, p. 263). This success had turned Ford into the brand's most important asset, meaning that fashion houses should not underestimate the power and influence of a great designer. Nonetheless, Gabriele and Rosa (2009) affirm that in order to succeed,

luxury brands should necessarily trust their creative directors' vision, and allow them to design collections without any artistic boundaries (as cited in Cavender & Kincade, 2014b, p. 208).

During the 2000s, luxury brands have started to hire up-and-coming designers as creative directors. This has played a significant role in shaping the leading fashion houses' DNA, in the same way that the public still knows them today. As a matter of fact, the impact of Hedi Slimane at Yves Saint Laurent (2012 – 2016), Kim Jones at Louis Vuitton (2011 – 2018) or Nicolas Ghesquière at Balenciaga (1997 – 2012) is not to be proven anymore. These designers have turned the luxury brand they worked for into fast-growing and critically acclaimed fashion houses (Radon, 2012). In sum, Cavender and Kincade (2014b) explain the power of iconic designers who shape a brand's signature as such: "When a creative and innovative designer with a clear understanding of the brand's personality, and responsiveness to the unpredictable nature of fashion is paired successfully with visionary management who respect creativity as a process, there are positive implications for the brand." (p. 199).

Art as a branding asset for fashion houses



Figure 3 – Yves Saint Laurent's Mondrian dresses (colorized). The Hague, 1966.
Source: Reddit.

Traditionally, luxury fashion has always been considered as a form of visual art, where the human body serves as its medium (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018). It is hence unsurprising to notice that luxury fashion and the art sector have been collaborating since the last century. As a matter of fact, Mendes and Rees-Roberts (2015) explain that these two categories are similarly interconnected, as “both are rare, expensive and difficult to make, and reliant on the work of artisans” (p. 60). For example, Yves Saint Laurent created a series of color-block dresses in the middle of the 60s, with the motifs based on Piet Mondrian’s *Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow* (Figure 3). Similarly, one of history’s most influential designers Elsa Schiaparelli was known to closely collaborate with Spanish painter Salvador Dalí during the 1930s and 40s (Mendes & Rees-Roberts, 2015).

Nowadays, recent studies have found that collaborations between the luxury fashion and art sectors are still frequently used as part of fashion houses’ brand strategies (Jelinek, 2018; Mendes & Rees-Roberts, 2015; Radon, 2012). Once again, it can be explained by the fact that luxury fashion is a fast-paced industry, meaning that prestigious brands are constantly competing among themselves and hence, have to find innovative ways to engage with consumers. According to Jelinek (2018), collaborating with artists is a different way for a fashion house to “express the brand’s vision, building stories, and can set a brand into a cultural relevant context” (p. 304).

A famous contemporary example of a collaboration between art and fashion would be the Murakami bags by Louis Vuitton (Radon, 2012). In 2003, former creative director Marc Jacobs teamed up with Japanese artist Takashi Murakami for one of Louis Vuitton’s most successful capsule collections ever. Together, they took the iconic brown monogram of Louis Vuitton from 1896, and turned it into new colorful patterns in the style of Murakami (Figure 4). The first collection immediately became an international success, resulting in a 300 million dollars profit in the first year only (Radon, 2012). Not only this collaboration created earnings from the Murakami bags, it also increased annual sales of the classic Louis Vuitton bags. Louis Vuitton and Murakami will continue their highly lucrative collaborations during thirteen successful years, until the end of Marc Jacob’s tenure at Louis Vuitton in 2015. This collection is the proof that such art and fashion collaborations have become an efficient way to maximize profits and increase brand recognition (Mendes & Rees-Roberts, 2015; Radon, 2012).



Prêt-à-Porter, Calzature, Pelletteria, Orologi, Gioielli. In vendita unicamente nei negozi esclusivi Louis Vuitton. Tel. 800 30 89 80 www.vuitton.com

LOUIS VUITTON

Figure 4 – The Louis Vuitton x Murakami campaign in 2003. Source: Vogue UK.

This chapter elaborated on luxury fashion branding elements, such as brand image, marketing communications and brand signature. In such a fast-changing industry, it is important that the fusion of these elements is always up-to-date, coherent and appealing to luxury consumers. By constantly adapting their branding strategies to the current market trends, fashion houses would provide unique brand experiences that will differentiate them from established competitors (Kapferer et al., 2017). In sum, the importance of luxury fashion branding is explained by Choi (2014) as such:

“By effective branding strategies, fashion brands can create equity, foster consumer brand loyalty, and enhance profitability. Essentially, consumers buying branded fashion products enjoy not only the functional needs of the products but also the excitement and other social needs (e.g., self-image projection, showing desirable lifestyle and social status etc). Proper branding strategies can enhance both dimensions and create a win-win situation in which consumers are more satisfied and the fashion brands make more profit.” (p. 3)

Chapter III. Digitalization in the luxury fashion industry

Digitalization in the fashion industry 4.0

Modern developments in the industrial world, referred to as the Fourth Industrial Revolution or Industry 4.0, have the purpose to overhaul the current industrial system through new modes of production by implementing digital technologies (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018). These new digital means are focused on creating smart manufacturing methods, hence aiming to gravitate towards a more sustainable, digitalized future. Defined by Lee and Kim in 2001, digitalization is “an active state, in which all kinds of information are processed, edited, accumulated and circulated in digital codes.” (p. 49). The authors further expand on three characteristics of digitalization: 1) media, that is, equipment and system environment represented by technology such as computers and the internet; 2), activities of information gathering and application using media, building database and operations using networks and 3) the influence of paradigms resulting from the previous factors. Therefore, in order for the Industry 4.0 to work with newly digitalized companies, there is an inherent need to create a stable, coherent and integrated environment where all stages of the production and organization are in a constant exchange of data; this would enable companies to be fully in control of their digitalized environment (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018).

While recent advancements in the field of digitalization made the topic increasingly important and understandable for firms, a lack of conceptual framework was evident. Plekhanov and Netland (2019) developed a model describing the four stages of digitalization: analogue, coordinated transition, digitally fragmented, and full-fledged digital enterprise. Coordinated transition is characterized by a high coordination inside the company coupled with a low intensity of use of digital technologies, which is happening because of a market pull; this description fits with the current luxury fashion industry as a whole (Plekhanov & Netland, 2019). As a matter of fact, the very nature of fashion brands – that is, involved in mass production, technological innovation and globalized communications – pushes them to adapt to this digitalized industry 4.0 by creating smart production and communication networks (Ustundag & Cevikcan, 2017, as cited in Bertola & Teunissen, 2018, p. 3). In short, industry 4.0 is described by Bertola and Teunissen (2018) as a mix of three interrelated concepts: smart factories, smart networks and smart products. Because this study is about luxury fashion branding, the concept relevant to this research is smart networks, which relates to the digital developments in retail and communication.

The development of technology and its effects on luxury fashion

In the context of luxury fashion, digitalization is viewed as the “reception of the digital environment by the industry” (Lee & Kim, 2001, p. 126). Because the technologies of digitalization are not created in the fashion environment but are simply adopted by them, the reception of what works and what fails is the basis for more digital developments in the industry. However, different aspects of luxury fashion are nowadays impacted by different digital means such as manufacturing process automation, computer systemization, information networking, e-business, and small batch production (Lee & Kim, 2001). Despite these technological advances starting from the twenty-first century, luxury brands have shown an overall trend of being reticent regarding an integration of digital opportunities in their daily practices (Okonkwo, 2009, as cited in Kapferer et al., 2017, p. 13). As a matter of fact, this delay in fully understanding and adopting these technologies have fragilized the business model of luxury brands, which has resulted in a necessity to effectively implement these new digital means over the past decade (Cabigiosu, 2020). By doing so, it has enabled important fashion houses to keep up with the times and observe “sales growth, differentiation and worldwide presence.” (Kapferer et al., 2017). In short, as explained by the “coordination transition” concept by Plekhanov and Netland (2019), this push towards digitalization has been motivated by a market imperative where there is a demand for new ways of communication and digital experience.

However, the evolution of digitalization in luxury fashion has not been exploited to its full potential yet, leaving much room for improvement to fashion houses and their designers (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018; Cabigiosu, 2020). As a matter of fact, there is still a trend of slow and anecdotal implementation of digital means within the luxury fashion industry, as these innovative technologies are only being showcased in runway shows or in ways that are just optimizing small parts of the current fashion production model (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018). Nonetheless, a small number of avant-garde designers have started to implement new technologies in their designs starting from the twenty-first century, hence finding new ways to experiment with fashion garments (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018). Figure 5 below shows the work of Dutch designer Iris van Herpen, known for combining highly precise craftsmanship with innovative technologies such as 3D printing. She has been showcasing her futuristic Haute Couture collections in the Paris Fashion Week since January 2011 (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018). As a pioneer in using digital means in luxury fashion, Iris van Herpen has undeniably inspired contemporary designers to use unconventional design techniques in their works.



Figure 5 – 3D printed dresses from Iris van Herpen’s SS 2020 Couture collection.
Source: Fashion Digital Marketing Agency.

In short, the full benefits of digitalization in luxury fashion have not reached their peak yet, despite being increasingly adopted by fashion houses and designers. A digitalized luxury fashion industry can only come from a total overhaul of luxury brands’ current business models, hence creating a fully integrated digitalized model (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018; Lee & Kim, 2001). This would replace current “old-fashioned” methods of production with fully digitalized models that can create faster and cheaper processes in the long run.

Social media marketing

Many studies have found that in this digital age, the use of efficient marketing communications is fundamental when building a clear brand identity (Fionda and Moore, 2009, as cited in Theng So et al., 2013, p. 406). Indeed, luxury brands with a strong online presence benefit from the support of online communities, a key resource when fashion houses want to assert their position among prestigious competitors (Kapferer et al., 2017). According to Kim and Ko (2010), social media marketing for luxury fashion brands has proved to enhance customer relationships and purchase intention, since online communities are often considered to be a bridge linking luxury brands and their consumers. Hence, the development of social media communication strategies needs to be well planned out and adapted to the luxury brand’s position in the industry. In other words, it has to keep in consideration the brand’s goals, consumer target and preferred methods

of communication. This tailored and targeted approach is the preferred method in order to gain a significant competitive advantage through the use of social media (Kim & Ko, 2010).

Going further, the flexibility of a tailored social media campaign can simultaneously lead to high online influence and promotion, as well as feedback collection and data about the clients' preferences. On the consumer side, it is an opportunity to gather information on luxury brands and their products (Bruhn and Schnebelen, 2017, as cited in Cabigiosu, 2020, p. 48). Therefore, the information gathered by consumers during these social media campaigns influence their perceived credibility of the brand, as well as the way they perceive the brand's target consumers (Gautam & Sharma, 2017). In other words, the importance of a complete, direct and honest communication relationship through social media is paramount (Cabigiosu, 2020; Gautam & Sharma, 2017). By doing so, fashion houses would facilitate the sharing of their brand stories, allowing them to develop a closer relationship with consumers (Kapferer et al., 2017). All of this explains why the importance of social media in luxury brands' communication budget has more than doubled from 2014 to 2017, going from 17% to 42% (Testoni, 2018, as cited in Cabigiosu, 2020, p. 47). This increase in budget for online communications is embedded in the growing importance of social media communities, who are nowadays acting as cultural mediators and tastemakers in the luxury fashion industry (Cabigiosu, 2020; Gautam & Sharma, 2017). Indeed, the use of social media leads to new opportunities, for example through the trend of participation by the consumer who becomes a user rather than a simple luxury client (Cabigiosu, 2020). Therefore, this growing importance results in a necessity from fashion houses to engage in these new methods of communication and ways of interaction (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018).

Burberry is an example of early successful adoption of the different strategies aforementioned (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018; Cabigiosu, 2020; Phan et al., 2011). Starting from the 2010s, the British luxury brand heavily invested in social media marketing but also in digitalized fashion shows mixing reality and hologram models; these shows were streamed live on YouTube and available right after the event. Moreover, Burberry also changed its old-fashioned purchasing process – where consumers had to buy what was in the store stock – into a real-life internet order. For consumers, this consists of ordering at the physical store, and then receiving their purchase directly from the warehouse to their home (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018; Cabigiosu, 2020; Phan et al., 2011). Without a doubt, fashion houses have been slowly but increasingly adopting these innovative technologies during the 2010; it is only during the Covid-19 pandemic that the industry has started to shift towards a fully digital environment.

Figure 6 displays a summarized framework of the important concepts related to luxury fashion branding and digitalization; these elements are used in the analysis part of this research, which will allow to operationalize the expected key findings. Hence, this framework is used as an insightful starting point that will help answering the research question: “How are major fashion houses shifting their existing branding strategies into fully digital activities in response to the 2020 pandemic?”.



Figure 6 – Luxury fashion branding framework. Source: own illustration based on literature review.

The continuation of this paper will be dedicated to exploring how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected fashion houses and how they have been implementing the use of digital means into their branding strategies. Hence, the following chapters will present the two case studies chosen for this research, as well as the methodology used for the empirical part of this paper.

Chapter IV. Introducing the case studies

Louis Vuitton – The world’s most valuable luxury brand

Established in 1854 in Paris, Louis Vuitton quickly rose to prominence as an expert in luggage goods for the growing elite of the late 19th century. Its innovative use of waterproof canvas trunks, allowing them to be flat and stackable, appealed to the demand of wealthy travelers (Figure 7). This appeal quickly brought more demand, leading the workshop to move to Asnières-sur-Seine, right outside of Paris (Holborow, 2012).



Figure 7 – Louis Vuitton monogram trunk from the 1920s. Source: Space Detroit.

Following his successful acquisition of Dior, businessman Bernard Arnault set his sight on acquiring the new conglomerate of Louis Vuitton and Moët Hennessy, a champagne and spirits company, which conducted to the creation of LVMH (Marchand, 2001). Under his leadership, the French fashion house grew internationally, with an emphasis on emerging luxury markets such as China where Louis Vuitton implemented its first store in Beijing in 1992 (Vuitton, 2015). This strategy of geographical expansion then transpired into an expansion of the product line, with the appointment of young talent Marc Jacobs as creative director in 1997 and hence, Louis Vuitton’s first ready-to-wear collection (Sowray, 2012).

Under his creative direction, Louis Vuitton grew as an international fashion company with profits that quadrupled over ten years (Sowray, 2012). Through innovative and inventive contemporary inspirations mixed with Louis Vuitton’s heritage and symbols, Marc Jacobs managed to design collections that became iconic and influential while also taking the Vuitton

name into the modern era. He also established a new Louis Vuitton tradition with artists collaborating on hit pieces and accessories (Johnson, 2020). Jacob's extravagant shows and effective star-studded marketing campaigns – who saw the likes of Mick Jagger or Angelina Jolie participating – propelled his tenure as a more than successful one (Frankel, 2012).

After Jacob's prosperous 17-year run, Louis Vuitton appointed Nicolas Ghesquière, former creative director of Balenciaga and responsible for its resurgence in the fashion scene, as the new creative director of the women's collection. The French man continued in the footsteps of Jacob's extravagant shows, and managed to bring his own vision to Louis Vuitton's aesthetic, based on his futuristic experience at Balenciaga mixing with the heritage and different eras that Louis Vuitton existed throughout (Middleton, 2020). Though these major shows and iconic new pieces such as the Petite Malle bag (a miniature Louis Vuitton trunk posing as a handbag), Ghesquière continued on the financial glory of his predecessor to further implement Louis Vuitton at the top of the luxury fashion industry (Middleton, 2020).

In 2018, Virgil Abloh was appointed as the new creative director for the brand's Menswear line. This nomination is a breakaway from the traditions of Louis Vuitton and the entire luxury fashion industry, as Abloh rose to fame as a streetwear designer through his brand Off-White, as well as his work as creative director for Kanye West (Friedman & Paton, 2018). Through this nomination, Louis Vuitton targets the future, younger potential buyers, the Millennials and Gen-Z and establishes the historic 19th century label as a serious and strong player in the contemporary, consumer-driven culture and industry (Figure 8).



Figure 8 – Louis Vuitton's FW 2017 in collaboration with streetwear brand Supreme. Source: Sharp Magazine.

Gucci – A success story

Originally founded as a small family business specialized in leather goods, Gucci was established in 1921 by Guccio Gucci in Florence. Gucci's first iconic bag, named Bamboo bag, was released in 1947 and strengthened the brand's desire to become more than a simple leather goods business (Figure 9). "Quality is remembered long after price is forgotten" quickly became their slogan. In the decades following the release of the Bamboo bag, the worldwide recognition of Gucci started to spread with the opening of stores in major fashion hubs such as London, Paris, or New York. Celebrities of the time were also seen wearing and endorsing the brand's logo, further cementing the brand as an influential fashion house (Gucci, 2016).



Figure 9 – Gucci's atelier in Florence and part of the Bamboo bag patent established in 1958. Source: Luxury Vintage.

Following this period of prosperity, internal struggles centered around family conflicts started to impact Gucci's financial health (Vuitton, 2015). The restructuring brought by new executive vice-president Dawn Mello revived the brand in 1989, where Tom Ford was appointed as creative director in 1994 in order to bring back Gucci's prestige. Ford's appointment made waves in the fashion community due to his *Porno Chic* aesthetic, both sensual and provocative, but also brought instant success to the former struggling brand (Tagliabue, 1995) (Figure 10). In an effort to compete with their leading rival LVMH, the French luxury conglomerate Kering bought Gucci in 1999 (Kapner, 2001). With the prestige and international influence of Gucci restored, along with several iconic designs, Tom Ford left the fashion house in 2004 (Horyn, 2003).



Figure 10 – Gucci’s FW 1996 collection featuring Tom Ford’s *Porno Chic* aesthetic. Source: AnOther Magazine.

However, after Ford's departure, a number of creative directors lead the firm into a decline in sales and relevance. The fashion house had a desire to overexpand and the creative and commercial decisions to follow this expansion led to inconsistencies in the brand image, hurting its sales. As a reaction to this problem, Marco Bizzarri was appointed as the new CEO of Gucci (Mesco, 2015). Bizzarri quickly appointed an in-house veteran, Alessandro Michele as the new creative director of fashion who worked with the firm since 2002 (Mead, 2016). Michele's clear vision and aesthetic, comparable with Ford's *Porno Chic*, lead to the *Renaissance* era of Gucci, characterized by a “sophisticated, intellectual and androgynous feel” (Mesco, 2015). This new creative era translated itself very well into a new economic era for the brand, as sales and prestige has been growing since Michele's appointment. As a matter of fact, Gucci was the fastest growing brand in Kering's 2018 financial report. This trend continued as the fashion house reported a net revenue of €9.6 billion, a major part of Kering's €15.8 billion net revenue in 2019 (Pauwels, 2020).

The importance of good decision making in the collaborators in such an ever changing and rapid industry is made evident when looking at Gucci's history. In the two economic downturns for the company, a recovery happened due to a change in leadership and creative direction, with an important level of trust between the two of them to bring success to the brand. Ford's and Michele's era are comparable in that it highlights the importance of decision making and surround a brand with the appropriate collaborators.

Chapter V. Research methodology

In order to address the research gap identified in the introduction, this study is divided in two parts. Because there is a lack of academic research on luxury fashion branding since the start of Covid-19, empirical information is exclusively collected through a mix of qualitative methodologies. Firstly, a case study research on Louis Vuitton and Gucci allows answering the first and second sub-questions, where the goal is to give a comprehensive overview of these fashion houses and their branding strategies in a (post-)pandemic landscape. Secondly, a qualitative content analysis serves as a way to investigate Fashion Weeks since the start of the pandemic; the purpose is to answer the third sub-question and hence, further the research on digitalization in luxury fashion. Using qualitative methodologies is the most suitable way to approach this study, as “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 43).

To recapitulate, the three research sub-questions of this study were:

- 1) What are consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on the luxury fashion industry?
- 2) How do fashion houses include digital means into their branding strategies?
- 3) How will digitalization impact the traditional Fashion Week format?

Research design

Part 1 – Case studies on Louis Vuitton and Gucci

The first and second sub-questions aim to explore how Louis Vuitton and Gucci are performing since the pandemic has started; such research questions call for an exploratory approach. According to Yin (2018), a case study method “investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident ” (p. 45). Rossman and Rallis (2003) go further by explaining that a case study “illustrates the complexities of a situation, depicts how the passage of time has shaped events, provides vivid material and presents differing perspectives or opinions” (as cited in Cavender & Kincade, 2014a, p. 234). In other words, using case studies for Louis Vuitton and Gucci is the most suitable method, as it would provide in-depth analyses of these brands rather than mere surface-level observations during a specific

period of time (Fionda & Moore, 2009). It is also relevant to emphasize that case studies have been proved to be efficient and insightful when investigating branding strategies of luxury brands, as seen in previous academic research (Cavender & Kincade, 2014b; Fionda & Moore, 2009; Moore & Birtwistle, 2004).

These two fashion houses were chosen because of several reasons. Firstly, Louis Vuitton and Gucci are the two most valuable luxury brands in the world, with brand values respectfully equal to €39 billion and €18.7 billion (Forbes, 2020a; Nash, 2020). Secondly, they have an important heritage and influence in the luxury fashion industry; indeed, Louis Vuitton and Gucci belong to LVMH and Kering, currently two of the largest luxury conglomerates. Respectively coming from France and Italy, these two fashion houses also represent two countries with the most important international impact on luxury fashion, as they have numerous heritage brands and iconic designers. Furthermore, Louis Vuitton and Gucci own many assets and resources necessary to be at the forefront of fashion innovation and change. Because of their financial success and position in the industry, we can say that Louis Vuitton and Gucci are luxury benchmarks in the eyes of both their established competitors and industry newcomers (Cavender & Kincade, 2014b). What these fashion houses brands decide to do in uncertain times will obviously be observed and imitated across the luxury sector. For all these reasons, it is hence relevant to explore Louis Vuitton and Gucci's new branding strategies in a fully digital environment.

Part 2 – Digitalization of Fashion Weeks

The third sub-question aims to explore how the pandemic has affected the way luxury brands create a fashion show, and how some of them have taken the opportunity to experiment with digital means. Indeed, with all fashion activities shifting online over the past year, the traditionally strict Fashion Week format has become surprisingly flexible; this could lead to think that it might never return to the way it was. Because the purpose of the third sub-question is to investigate new fashion show formats and their future implications, qualitative content analysis is the most suitable method. According to Schreier (2012), qualitative content retrieves both implicit and explicit meanings on a particular topic, through examining language intensely and classifying large amounts of text into an efficient number of categories.

Galloni (2009) explains that a powerful group such as LVMH represents “an archetypal luxury company” and succeeds at “leading edge management” (as cited in Cavender & Kincade, 2014b, p. 200). Investigating these two groups will allow a deeper understanding of

the industry, and in which direction the digitalization process in luxury fashion will go following the Covid-19 outbreak. Hence, this part of the research is focused on the brands owned by LVMH and Kering in general, in order to give the broader landscape in which Louis Vuitton and Gucci are evolving. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), it is always useful to conduct cross-brands analyses, as it allows to uncover similarities and differences across these leading fashion houses (as cited in Cavender & Kincade, 2014b, p. 204). Therefore, because the first part of this research is focusing on two case studies, it would be relevant to explore a broader number of brands, as well as how they have been experimenting with digital means in their fashion shows since March 2020.

Data collection

Part 1 – Case studies on Louis Vuitton and Gucci

In the first part of this research, the dataset consists of publication and magazine materials written in English covering Louis Vuitton and Gucci's branding strategies, with a focus on their digital runway shows and marketing decisions as defined in the literature review. March 2020 is used as a starting point for the sample collection, as this period coincides with the beginning of lockdowns around the world due to Covid-19. Between 25 and 30 articles were selected, in order to follow the methodological guidelines as well as reaching saturation in terms of findings. The main sources used are leading fashion magazines such as the Business of Fashion and Vogue, but also i-D, Dazed and Forbes, because these influential publications are known to regularly issue reliable information and analyses on the luxury fashion industry. Naturally, it is expected that there would be more relevant data coming from the Business of Fashion and Vogue, as these two magazines are exclusively focused on fashion content. The decision to exclude mainstream newspapers such as The New York Times is to limit the data collected to insiders and professionals from the industry only. Hence, the following keywords are used on the aforementioned websites: Louis Vuitton; Gucci; digital; pandemic; etc. First, I went through the titles and then, the articles were subjectively selected based on how closely related they are to the topic. With purposive sampling, the aim is to collect data based on the judgement of the researcher (Tongco, 2007). This is done in order to find more useful data that could answer the research question, rather than what could have been done with random sampling. Therefore, the articles are selected only if they address Louis Vuitton and Gucci's

digital branding strategies and marketing communications, while covering events of the whole period starting from March 2020 to this day (Appendix A).

Furthermore, these newspapers materials are reinforced by around ten public interviews and expert analyses available on YouTube, focusing on industry professionals such as Louis Vuitton’s creative director Nicolas Ghesquière or Gucci’s CEO Marco Bizzarri. This allows us to obtain a professional point of view and understand why some branding decisions have been made since the start of the pandemic, and how they have been perceived by an expert audience. For the reasons mentioned above, these videos were chosen through purposive sampling. Figure 11 provides more details about each public interview or analysis chosen by giving a presentation of the respondent and content of the video, as it is essential that the data collected from these YouTube videos comes from reliable sources. If the respondent is a YouTuber, the number of subscribers is given in order to assess their influence as a content creator.

Name	Function within the fashion field	Content of the video
Alessandro Michele	Gucci’s creative director	1) <i>Gucci Aria Behind the Scenes with Alessandro Michele</i> is a video produced by Gucci’s official YouTube channel covering their FW 2021 collection 2) <i>#TheNorthFacexGucci Documentary</i> is a video produced by Gucci covering their partnership with The North Face
Bliss Foster	Fashion critic exploring the stories behind designer clothes and runway shows on his YouTube channel Bliss Foster (+55,000 subscribers in May 2021)	3) <i>Understanding Virgil Abloh’s Best Runway Collection</i> is an analysis on Louis Vuitton’s FW 2021 Menswear collection 4) <i>What Actually Happened with Gucci and Balenciaga</i> is an analysis on Gucci’s FW 2021 collection
Loic Prigent	Fashion journalist producing documentaries of runway shows and behind-the-scenes	5) <i>Exclusive! Inside Louis Vuitton! Virgil Abloh’s Major Show!</i> is a behind-the-scenes documentary of Louis Vuitton’s FW 2021 Menswear collection

	(+365,000 subscribers in May 2021)	
Luke Meagher	Fashion critic reviewing runway shows on his YouTube channel HauteLeMode (+540,000 subscribers in May 2021)	6) <i>Reacting to Gucci x Balenciaga</i> is an analysis on Gucci's FW 2021 collection
Marco Bizzarri	Gucci's president and CEO	7) <i>Visionary Leaders, Live Interview with Marco Bizzarri</i> is an interview conducted by Global Fashion Agenda and tackling topics such as Covid-19 and what is next for Gucci
Nicolas Ghesquière	Louis Vuitton's creative director	8) <i>Inside Louis Vuitton's Futuristic 'Phygital' Fashion Show</i> is a video produced by Vogue covering Louis Vuitton's SS 2021 RTW collection
Odunayo Ojo	Fashion critic analyzing runway shows and fashion history on his YouTube channel The Fashion Archive (+65,000 subscribers in May 2021)	9) <i>Gucci X The North Face Collaboration</i> is an analysis on Gucci's partnership with a non-luxury brand launched during the pandemic 10) <i>Why Gucci Is Losing Money Fast</i> is an analysis on Gucci's drop in revenues since the start of the pandemic

Figure 11 – List of public interviews and expert analyses chosen.

Part 2 – Digitalization of Fashion Weeks

For the third sub-question, the aim is to obtain a broader overview of the luxury fashion industry since the start of Covid-19 lockdowns, by investigating how the traditions of Fashion Weeks have changed since then. Similarly to the first part of this study, empirical data is purposively collected through fashion newspapers and magazines such as The Business of Fashion, Vogue, i-D, Dazed, and Forbes; between 25 and 30 articles written after March 2020 were selected. These articles should have a focus on Fashion Weeks in general, as well as digital fashion shows from established brands owned by LVMH and Kering. The top five selling brands from LVMH are Louis Vuitton, Dior, Fendi, Céline and Givenchy, while Kering owns Gucci, Saint Laurent, Bottega Veneta, Balenciaga and Alexander McQueen. Hence, the

articles were chosen based on these fashion houses, and how they have been changing the format of their fashion shows (Appendix B). The articles could also express an opinion from the authors, as these magazines are often trusted by professionals from the luxury fashion industry to bring reliable insights. Therefore, this part of the research is fundamentally about the digitalization of fashion shows as well as making assumptions about the future of Fashion Weeks after the pandemic, all of this from an industry insider perspective.

Data triangulation

In the first part of the research covering Louis Vuitton and Gucci, the data collected is triangulated through the use of both newspapers articles and publicly available interviews. Indeed, when performing only two case studies, it is of greater importance to investigate findings based on multiple sources. As Yin (2018) explains, a case study research methodology encourages the researcher to collect information from diverse sources that will result into the same finding, hence offering results of higher quality. This is the principle of data triangulation, through which “a case study’s findings will be supported by more than a single source of evidence, which helps to strengthen the construct validity of the case study” (Yin, 2018, p. 173). Combining these sources allows us to obtain a broader and clearer overview of luxury fashion branding. By achieving data triangulation in this part of the research, it ensures that findings from fashion magazines avoid any bias, while being supported by further insights from influential people working within the management and creative departments of Louis Vuitton and Gucci.

By using secondary sources throughout the whole research, I also make sure that the data is analyzed through a professional point of view; for example, collecting data from runway show analyses written by an experienced journalist at the Business of Fashion would require less effort and expertise than doing a visual analysis of said runway shows, which can easily become overwhelming. Moreover, Yin (2018) explains that using secondary data in a case study is often insightful, as it provides a solid context and foundation for the analysis. The more publications are used to collect the data, the more valid results will be (Cavender & Kincade, 2014a). Therefore, these articles collected from different secondary sources would allow to understand the future of Fashion Weeks, and how Louis Vuitton and Gucci’s branding strategies during the pandemic are viewed in the perspective of different fashion journalists and experts.

Operationalization

The aim of both parts of this research is to elaborate further on concepts covered in the theoretical chapters; hence, operational definitions and themes will be obtained based on sections from the literature review, as seen in Cavender & Kincade's (2014a) study. Because this research is of qualitative nature, the instrument of analysis is the coding table, designed in order to reflect our three research sub questions (Appendix C and Appendix D). Therefore, the most important concepts that data analysis seeks to uncover are “luxury fashion branding”, “digitalization”, “Fashion Week” and “Covid-19 pandemic”. Going further, these concepts are further detailed by topics from the literature review such as “brand image”, “communication strategies”, “brand signature”, “digital means” and “social media marketing”. An overview of these concepts can be seen in Figure 6 (p. 27).

Data analysis

In order to process the data, a thematic analysis is performed for both parts of my research, as it would allow to identify and analyze particular themes within a dataset. A thematic analysis is especially useful when the scope of the research is broad, and it is often based on themes and academic insights that were already identified in the literature review (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Indeed, coding for thematic analysis requires the researcher to use their background knowledge in the area of investigation, hence the usefulness of the theoretical framework presented at the end of the literature review (Flick et al., 2004). In short, thematic analysis consists of breaking up the data in small parts, looking at every fragment in detail, before reassembling them in a meaningful way (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is paramount that the newspapers materials and public interviews are also compared with each other, in order to establish common themes between them. Hence, the purpose of this research is to find repeated patterns of branding strategies and use of technologies within the luxury fashion industry, in the context of Louis Vuitton and Gucci as well as for the future Fashion Weeks.

In order to identify and organize the themes, thematic analysis is achieved through rigorous coding and following a series of steps. The newspapers articles were carefully read and coded following Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) definition of a good code, which should “capture the qualitative richness of the phenomenon” (p. 83). Because this study involves a large amount of textual data, the coding process was conducted through the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti, making the analysis more convenient and organized.

After finding emerging themes, my role as a researcher was to connect these themes together, and interpret them through broader meanings and implications (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). In summary, thematic analysis is divided in three steps: open coding, axial coding and selective coding; a more detailed description of these steps is to be found in Figure 12 below. Nonetheless, it is necessary to mention that the thematic analysis' coding process should not be followed in a linear manner, but instead should be considered as guidelines for the analysis. Indeed, Strauss and Corbin (1990) state that it would be more insightful to carry out these three steps simultaneously, while making potential adjustments to the findings. The third column of Appendix C and Appendix D displays the final themes found during selective coding, which will serve as subsections for the next chapter aiming to present findings of this study.

Step	Description of the process
Open coding	Open coding consists in “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 2007, as cited in Boeije, 2010, p. 96). The articles and public interviews will be broken down in short textual passages and coded fragment by fragment until saturation. This will allow to reveal emerging categories without missing an important one. With the advancing of the process, smaller themes might start to appear similar to each other and belonging together to a larger category; this is the basis for the second step of the analysis.
Axial coding	Axial coding requires the researcher to “determine which elements in the research are the dominant ones and which are the less important ones” (Boeije, 2010, p. 109). In order words, this step is about looking at similarities and differences between the themes found in open coding, and connect them in a meaningful way.
Selective coding	Selective coding works on a more abstract level, as the final themes would emerge based on abstract and theoretical key concepts. For the researcher, the purpose is to reflect on the relationship between the themes found in axial coding and establish more hypothetical links between them. In the end of the process, clear categories should exist and serve as a basis for interpreting the data, which would help answer the research question at hand.

Figure 12 – Steps for thematic analysis based on Boeije (2010), Braun and Clarke (2006) and Flick et al. (2004).

Validity and reliability

According to Yin (2018), the quality of a research is based on four criteria: construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability. Because internal validity is used to establish a causal relationship in explanatory studies, this criterion is not relevant in our research, exploratory in nature. Hence, there are three criteria that this study has to meet in order to be considered academically valid and reliable. Firstly, construct validity refers to “identifying correct operational measures for the concepts being studied” (Yin, 2018, p. 78). By using five different fashion magazines and influential publications, the data collected was more likely to reflect the reality; namely, the future of Fashion Weeks following Covid-19 as well as how Louis Vuitton and Gucci’s branding strategies are perceived by luxury fashion experts. Moreover, the fact that these newspapers articles was triangulated with public interviews increases construct validity, as it allows to combine an expert perspective – that is, from fashion journalists – with an insider perspective coming from influential people working within the fashion houses of Louis Vuitton and Gucci.

Secondly, external validity aims to shows whether a case study’s findings can be generalized, and in which ways (Yin, 2018). The first part of this research is about Louis Vuitton and Gucci, which are two leaders in luxury fashion; Cavender and Kincade (2014a) describe them as archetypical luxury brands, meaning that their strategies and practices are often carefully observed and imitated by other players in the industry. The second part of this research covers digital fashion shows from LVMH and Kering, which are once again two of the most important luxury conglomerates. By investigating such big names in the luxury sector, this study can serve as a basis for further research that would examine a larger sample of luxury brands; this increases the external validity of the research.

Finally, reliability refers to “demonstrating that the operations of a study – such as its data collection procedures – can be repeated, with the same results” (Yin, 2018, p. 78). Because this study calls for an exploratory approach using thematic analysis, the findings might not be the same if the data were collected, coded and evaluated by another researcher. As Jelinek (2018) underlines in her study, statistical generalization would be impossible; as a researcher, it would be difficult to have a value-free point of view, although the principle of objectivity is paramount in academic research. Hence, the findings of this study might be unconsciously affected by personal judgment, which would slightly reduce its reliability.

Chapter VI. Findings

This chapter aims to present the findings resulting from the thematic analysis process, which coded and categorized a total of 60 newspapers articles and nine public interviews. It is important to mention that the coding process was conducted based on the theoretical framework, which was developed at the end of the literature review chapters (Figure 6). By doing so, this allowed us to have a starting point for the analysis but also room for reflecting and creating links between the emerging themes. As a reminder, the first part of this study aims to answer these two research sub-questions: “What are consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on the luxury fashion industry?” and “How do fashion houses include digital means into their branding strategies?”. On the other hand, the second part of this study aims to answer: “How will digitalization impact the traditional Fashion Week format?”.

Data, as collected and analyzed, revealed important patterns about Louis Vuitton and Gucci’s branding strategies, the consequences of Covid-19 on luxury fashion as well as implications resulting from the digitalization of Fashion Weeks and their potential future. In the first part of the research focusing on Louis Vuitton and Gucci, 57 open codes, 11 axial codes and 4 selective codes were found (Appendix C). Regarding the second part of this study addressing the digitalization of Fashion Weeks, there were 30 open codes, 10 axial codes and 4 selective codes in total (Appendix D). Hence, this chapter will be separated into two main sections; going further, the selective codes found during thematic analysis will serve as subsections for presenting the key results.

Louis Vuitton and Gucci – case studies

Gucci’s decline and renewal

In the beginning of 2020, even the most established brands around the world were financially impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, Louis Vuitton’s parent company LVMH saw its profits drop by 68% in the first half of 2020, before quickly rebounding in later months. Several articles explain this recovery with the reason that large and established fashion houses served as entry points to occasional or first-time luxury buyers, as these new consumers had to spend their money on something else than restaurants and vacations. However, Gucci did not recover at the same time than its competitors, as its sales had plunged by 22% at the end of

2020. After five years of commercial and critical success following the appointment of Alessandro Michele, both fashion specialists and Gucci's management team were expecting a slower growth for the Italian brand. Indeed, Michele's maximalist and eccentric vision for Gucci has been extended to its full potential, meaning that the brand would need some change to keep the public's interest in the future. By reducing its number of fashion shows from five to two per year, Michele demonstrates a desire to slow down and rethink Gucci's brand image.

“I was trying to create a rebirth again with this house because Gucci is a very complex container that includes so many things. Gucci has a cult power, and Tom [Ford] was maybe the first one to realize that Gucci has this sort of power. This brand has had multiple births thanks to its conversations with the outside world. I feel lucky to not feel the weight or burden of the history that some French brands have. Instead, I have a lab to experiment in.” (Alessandro Michele, Gucci's creative director, in article 22)

In that quote, Michele explains that he is aware of Gucci's strong brand heritage, but he does not feel constrained to follow the path of his predecessors. On a creative perspective, Gucci's management is known for giving Michele a “long leash” and always supporting his vision. This is coherent with Cavender and Kincade's research (2014b), as they stated that successful fashion houses do not put artistic boundaries to their creative directors, but support their innovative ideas instead. However, by revisiting classic handbags such as the Jackie 1961 in his own style (Figure 13), Alessandro Michele also shows that he wants to stay close to Gucci's brand heritage. Fionda and Moore (2009) explained that redesigning iconic products is one of the most efficient ways to increase sales, as their history and value are often attractive to luxury consumers.



Figure 13 – Redesigned Jackie 1961 handbags by Alessandro Michele for Gucci's Fall 2020 collection. Source: PurseBlog.

In the desire to bring a fresh look to Gucci, Alessandro Michele did not stop there. Indeed, when most fashion houses decided to present short videos to replace their physical runway shows, Gucci came with much more ambitious projects. In November 2020, GucciFest consisted in a seven-day long film festival, with one episode released per day showing the Italian brand's newest collection. The mini-series was produced by Michele in collaboration with film director Gus Van Sant, and featured trendy celebrities such as Harry Styles and Billie Eilish. With its innovative film festival replacing traditional fashion shows, Gucci received critical acclaim from fashion journalists.

“I'm sure there's a whole lot more texture I missed, but my point is that my filmic experience of Michele's new collection was a lot more layered and enthralling than ten minutes in a fashion show, and that was a gratifying insight, speaking as someone who thrilled to Gucci's last live performance in February.” (Tim Blanks, BoF's fashion editor, in article 3)

More recently, Gucci made an even bigger impact on the luxury fashion industry by releasing a collaborative collection with Balenciaga, a French fashion house also owned by Kering. For Gucci's 100th year anniversary, Alessandro Michele decided to combine his maximalist vision with Demna Gvasalia's streetwear aesthetic, resulting in a daring collection. “This might be the most commercially important collaboration of all time” (Bliss Foster, fashion YouTuber, in interview 4). Indeed, collaborations with other creative industries are common in luxury fashion (Jelinek, 2018; Mendes & Rees-Roberts, 2015; Radon, 2012), but never two fashion houses have teamed up together before. With his creativity and desire for innovation, Alessandro Michele succeeded in bringing Gucci at the top again. Tim Blanks states that the Italian fashion house now sits in the first position of the most recent Lyst Index, a ranking of fashion's hottest brands. “I have faith in creativity to solve everything.” (Alessandro Michele, in article 1).

Louis Vuitton, innovating and thriving in a digital environment

At Louis Vuitton, immediate changes were made when the consequences of Covid-19 started to hit the whole world. By fully integrating digital means into their daily practices, Louis Vuitton kept improving on what they have been doing for the past years in an exponential manner. “Six, seven years ago, we were attempting to use the digital world to maintain one-directional communication from the brand to the client. Now, these social platforms have been absolutely embraced by Vuitton.” (Michael Burke, Louis Vuitton's CEO, in article 5). This

goes in line with the digitalization framework by Plekhanov and Netland (2019). Indeed, the luxury fashion industry was considered to be at a “coordinated transition” phase; a high coordination inside the company, but with a low use of digital technologies. This coordinated transition phase also means that if the industry is pushed towards digitalization, as it has been since the start of the pandemic, it would indeed come from an external imperative.

In order to follow up with the full digitalization of the industry, Louis Vuitton also had to find creative ways to innovate on their digital runway shows. For the Spring 2021 collection, creative director Nicolas Ghesquière offered an unusually interactive experience to Louis Vuitton’s public. Indeed, the show was filmed with 360-degree cameras, and the green screen on the walls allowed the online audience to see some extra footage that the small-scale physical audience could not see (Figure 14). By doing so, Louis Vuitton opened the access to the traditionally restricted industry of luxury fashion, as it gives the opportunity to regular consumers and fashion enthusiasts to fully enjoy a runway show without being physically there.

“Some guests will be able to manipulate the cameras from their phones or their computers at home. They will be able to follow the girls, to feel the music, and hopefully to catch a certain emotion that is going on in the room. [...] Digital is fantastic. A lot of new windows and perspectives are opening. It’s another step toward globality, and I guess that’s absolutely necessary. We’ve sometimes made people feel excluded. So probably, it’s a way to include more people in what we do.” (Nicolas Ghesquière, Louis Vuitton’s creative director, in article 26 and 28)



Figure 14 – Louis Vuitton’s SS 2021 runway show. Source: The Business of Fashion.

Expanding consumer base during uncertain times

If the largest fashion houses have reached their current “megabrand” status, it is notably due to the fact that they always aim to target a broader consumer group. Compared to highly exclusive luxury brands such as Hermès, who prioritizes their middle-age upper class consumers, Louis Vuitton and Gucci have created powerful touchpoints with younger consumers in the past few years. Trendy collaborations, more affordable pieces and a strong social media presence have all contributed towards increasing the appeal of these fashion houses to a younger market.

“The eye-catching jolts of fashion across price points made for easy selling to a new cohort of young, social media-savvy shoppers who were happy to line up to buy pool slides, sneakers and mini bags during their travels. But the more mature and sophisticated clients that typically round out a luxury brand’s base may have been less convinced.” (Robert Williams, BoF’s fashion editor, in article 8)

In the quote above, it is noted that this strong emphasis on younger shoppers have resulted in weakening luxury purchases from loyal, older consumers. In the same desire to revitalize Gucci, executives from the Kering group announced that the fashion house will rebalance its consumer focus by “catering to wealthier clients with higher-end bags, watches, and jewellery, and attracting local clients to stores using hundreds of events to celebrate Gucci’s centennial year. [...] Devising more classic pieces for a more conservative clientele could be in step with the times.” (Robert Williams, in article 8).

More recently, an important topic discussed within the luxury fashion industry was related to inclusivity and transparency, due to consumers nowadays seeking authenticity from luxury brands. “The Black Lives Matter movement is equally a big wake-up challenge within the fashion industry globally. You have to look around and question yourself: Why don’t we have more diversity in general around us? [...] You know what’s interesting – the most diversity you’ll find in fashion houses is usually in the ateliers. We have to look at that. There’s a lot to be done.” (Nicolas Ghesquière, Louis Vuitton’s creative director, in article 26). With that quote, Nicolas Ghesquière expresses the importance of inclusivity in luxury fashion, a mainly white-dominated industry. At the head of Louis Vuitton Menswear, Virgil Abloh is only the second Black person to become creative director at a prestigious fashion house. He is aware of his influence, and uses his important position to make the industry more accessible.

“I represent a minority among designers, so it’s my responsibility to open those doors. [...] What minorities are asking for is representation. The fashion industry

has been called to action to represent a more diverse epicenter in image and practice. What does a collection look like when it embraces other cultures?” (Virgil Abloh, Louis Vuitton Menswear’s creative director, in article 6)

Abloh is known to regularly speak at universities and inviting students to traditionally elitist runway shows. “It results in sales, too; a colleague walking through a still-mostly-shutdown Manhattan said the only store in SoHo with a line out front was Louis Vuitton. That line is mostly young people, mostly young men, and mostly young Black men that support and consume Abloh’s work.” (Steff Yotka, Vogue’s fashion editor, in article 25). This goes in line with Choi (2014), who explained that when consumers feel that they can personally relate to a fashion house, they will be more likely to follow and purchase from the brand. According to the definition of brand personality by Choi (2014), Abloh’s vision has successfully grabbed younger consumers’ attention, creating a particular relationship between Louis Vuitton with them. In short, Virgil Abloh demonstrated his influence as a Louis Vuitton Menswear’s creative director, and added a new layer to the luxury brand’s DNA (Cabigiosu, 2020): inclusivity and the representation of minorities.

Lockdowns, reflection, and desire for change in luxury fashion

Most articles addressed the fact that luxury fashion is a fast-paced industry; too much, according to some fashion editors. While some of them emphasized on the financial damages of Covid-19, others expressed the idea that the industry needed that opportunity to slow down.

“Before Covid-19, we always thought that we needed to work at that speed. We needed to fly every day, go to the office every day, because that was part of the game. We were doing five shows a year because that was the rule. And everybody in fashion was saying that this model was old, but nobody was changing it. Covid-19 obliged us to rethink about the way in which we interact [...] and I think it is something positive. [...] Because how can you be really creative when you do five shows a year?” (Marco Bizzarri, Gucci’s president and CEO, in interview 7)

Hence, it was not surprising when Alessandro Michele announced that Gucci will not follow the seasonality of Fashion Weeks anymore, but will show two collections per year instead. “Something needed to change. I love working on a fashion show, and I don’t want to sacrifice that but glorify it by not repeating myself. [...] It would be nice to choose whether to meet physically or not. But if we don’t meet in person, the experience will be equally intense.” (Alessandro Michele, in article 1 and 19). This demonstrates that due to the Covid-19

pandemic, major fashion houses are changing their branding strategies into more digitalized and inclusive ones. In short, the luxury fashion industry currently stands at a crossroads, where both fashion insiders and journalists reflect on the post-pandemic future of the industry.

Digitalization of Fashion Weeks

Advantages of Fashion Weeks

It is not without reason that Fashion Weeks have always been, since their first edition in New York in 1943, one of the most exciting and anticipated events in the fashion sphere. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit the whole world, the entire industry had to change its traditional functioning based on strict conventions into a fully digitalized and more flexible one. Undoubtedly, this has led to strongly mixed opinions among the luxury fashion sphere. While advantages of digital shows will be presented in further sections, this one relates to fashion insiders and journalists who think that physical Fashion Weeks are essential to the well-functioning of the industry.

First of all, the social aspect was essential during physical Fashion Weeks, as they gathered influential people from the industry such as fashion editors, wealthy buyers, celebrities and influencers. “A large part of fashion week outside of the shows was the community getting together and feeding off of that creativity and so, with that lacking, it’s not the same,” (Rebecca Minkoff, fashion designer, in article 39). Without the social media exposure from these fashion insiders, most luxury brands did not succeed in attracting as much attention on their runway shows. Secondly, runway shows consisted in providing a unique luxury experience to their audience. Jelinek (2018) explained that these shows are a powerful tool to communicate a brand’s intangible values such as creativity and brand signature. Attending runway shows was a unique experience, that some fashion insiders could not fully appreciate through digital shows. “Not being able to experience the collections with all five senses makes for a lesser experience.” (Alex Badia, WWD style director, in article 46). In the same way, “The magic and inspiration provided by in-person fashion shows are very hard to replicate digitally. There is a huge value to feeling the energy and excitement in the room.” (Bruce Pask, luxury department store director, in article 46). Thirdly, there is the exclusivity aspect, another highly important factor when experiencing a luxury brand (Radon, 2012).

“Luxury brands traditionally reward their highest spending customers by inviting them to exclusive shows that are also attended by major press and celebrities. By spending large amounts of money on luxury goods, customers are not only getting a piece of clothing or an accessory for their wardrobe, but they are also becoming a part of the club. [...] Digital shows, on another hand, are about accessibility so everyone can see the newest collection at the same time from the comfort of their phone or computer.” (Elizabeth Solomeina, Forbes’ fashion editor, in article 47)

Fashion films, livestreams, and innovative formats

The challenge for luxury brands was to integrate the three essential aspects of Fashion Weeks mentioned above into a digital version of their runway shows. Without changing much, most fashion houses pre-recorded videos of a classic fashion show and livestreamed it on YouTube. While these shows were considered basic and did not innovate, other brands were more creative. For example, the Fall 2021 collection by Dior was a short film shot inside the Château de Versailles, and was accompanied by a dance performance. However, something that really struck the industry was the integration of new technologies that were never seen before in luxury fashion or at least, only in an experimental way. The first section mentioned Gucci’s seven-day film festival and Louis Vuitton’s interactive livestream as successful digital shows. However, the best example might be Balenciaga’s Fall 2021 collection titled “Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow”; the show consisted in a video game where viewers could progress in a virtual world and explore the collection at their own pace, making the experience of a fashion show more interactive and immersive than ever (Figure 15).

“I think Balenciaga’s just scratching the surface of what virtual fashion worlds and shows might become. [...] It starts to change the meaning of fashion itself. The idea of digital identity, virtual fashion, NFTs, companies such as Epic with Unreal Engine, are changing the rules around content creation. This means, in the future, people will be able to create their own story worlds at home, where you’d normally have relied on a big VFX team in Hollywood to produce. We’re moving away from an era of passive experiences into richer, more immersive content and ways in which you can engage with brands’ stories, where you have more agency as a user and where that content coexists in your physical space. [...] Fashion is great for creating conceptual story worlds. Now that they have the tools and emerging technologies at their disposal, they can begin experimenting with what that means

for us in the virtual space. The only limit creatively these days is our imagination.”

(Simon Windsor, executive producer of Balenciaga’s Afterworld, in article 42)

By doing so, Balenciaga’s creative director Demna Gvasalia is taking advantage of the trend where fashion houses team up with the gaming industry. Indeed, Louis Vuitton has released a League of Legends capsule, while Burberry streamed its Fall 2021 collection on Twitch. “It’s an odd fit, but a necessary one, as younger consumers spend more and more time in virtual worlds such as Fortnite. Games are fast becoming a place where culture is born” (Brian Baskin, BoF’s fashion editor, in article 36). This demonstrates that, slowly but surely, the luxury fashion industry is moving towards a more digitalized functioning, hence detaching itself from the “coordinated transition” status as defined by Plekhanov and Netland (2019).

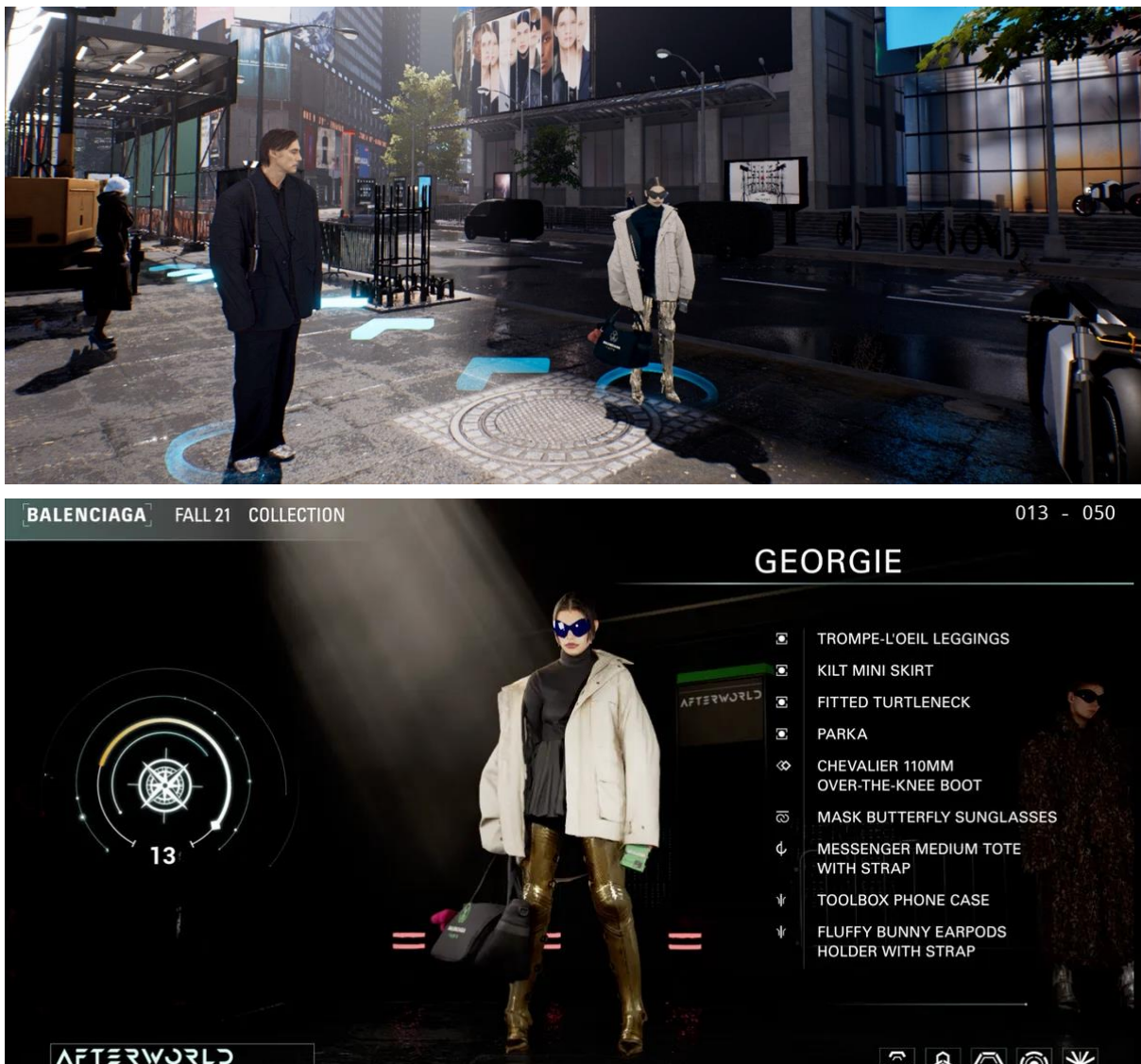


Figure 15 – Balenciaga’s FW 2021 digital show. Source: Paper Magazine.

Intense use of social media and ensuing challenges

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, traditional marketing channels such as fashion shows, special events and in-store experience had to be replaced with social media communications. Several articles emphasize on the importance of YouTube and Instagram when presenting digital fashion shows; indeed, these two platforms are a way to connect directly with consumers who are used to spend a lot of time on social media. This goes in line with Kim and Ko (2010), who stated that a tailored social media strategy would enhance consumer relationships and purchase intentions. However, in times where many platforms exist, fashion houses must diversify their online presence in order to succeed. “Everything to do with shows is inevitably moving towards social media [...] – the challenge is how to make yourself stand out visually and aesthetically from everything else. Instagram is very important. You also have to be on YouTube, you have to be on Facebook Live and [Chinese e-commerce company] Tmall and the international platforms.” (Jamie Pallot, BoF’s fashion editor, in article 33). Besides, it is also crucial that the experience of a digital runway show should run smoothly and efficiently.

“It needs to be edited and designed to fit well on a screen that fits in the palm of your hand and to fit within the technology that is available to the audience: the iPhone video and Instagram. The purpose of fashion shows, for me, is to help luxury brands communicate and to continue to make that brand’s audience dream. What that means [for the future] is that we need to continue to make people dream in a more efficient, shorter way, and in a way that the POV of the audience matters more than the one from the traditional media.” (Alexandre de Betak, fashion set designer, in article 52)

Nevertheless, it is relevant to note that despite all these efforts to increase their visibility on social media, most digital fashion shows generated less than one-third of the online engagement they obtained pre-pandemic. “You have these weird, soulless [digital] fashion shows with no one there... It really makes you wonder who is really engaging with these: is it customers or just people who want entertainment? Even collections that received critical acclaim struggled to make an impression with consumers online.” (James Scully, casting director, in article 34). It is crucial that luxury brands find a way to increase their online engagement, in the current landscape where almost everything must happen online. According to Cabigiosu (2020), complete and honest communications through social media was already the key to a successful relationship with consumers, but it has become even more important by now; indeed, external circumstances have turned social media into the main channel marketing in luxury fashion.

“It’s going to be a challenge to get people, both inside the industry and out, to pay attention without the structure and built-in-media that traditional, in-real-life runway shows afford. With their army of photographers, rows of Insta-celebrity guests and pre-planned mainstream media coverage, global fashion weeks were set up to succeed” (Chantal Fernandez, BoF’s fashion editor, in article 33)

Time for change in luxury fashion

Similar to the first part of this study, most articles addressed the fact that luxury fashion is at a point where definitive changes should be considered. However, fashion insiders are not talking about radical changes involving a total digitalization of the industry, but rather about the concept of digital amplification; in other words, this means that in the post-pandemic future, runway shows will ideally return to their physical version, but adapted to online viewers in a more efficient way. “I think the technology has increased in quality and in capacity so that you can have a better stream of a live experience. We have worked a lot on this, and we can do different access and [create different] content of a live experience. But it’s still a live creation that is being transmitted digitally.” (Alexandre de Betak, fashion set designer, in article 54). The digital changes and innovations that have arisen during lockdowns have changed luxury fashion into an industry where runway shows are not exclusively restricted to the fashion insiders and wealthy buyers anymore. “Whilst the physical experience will remain a major part of the industry, the true success will be found in how brands merge the two worlds to create impactful, share-worthy moments both on and offline. [...] The problem to solve today is not one of digitalization but amplification, as any brand activity is reliant on amplification to be successful, and digital transformation is key in this process.” (Michael Jais, Launchmetrics CEO, in article 34).

Regarding the future of Fashion Weeks, most fashion insiders shared their mixed feelings. “But what happens when the pandemic recedes? Will key brands like Gucci and Saint Laurent come back to fashion week? It’s too early to know and most are leaving their options open.” (Vikram Alexei Kansara, BoF’s fashion editor in article 41). The traditionally strict format of Fashion Weeks might also be left behind, and reformed into a more global event.

“It will be different than before. Some have suggested a global event instead of a month-long circuit that winds itself from New York to London to Milan and finally to Paris. The global event could be held in Paris, New York, Shanghai, Milan, Tokyo or London at different times of the year. [...] Physical shows are very

powerful marketing platforms, but by bundling them together they will become more effective and will attract a greater audience. We are living in a period of change. The Fashion Week is the industry's way to define fashion for the coming season. A new format would be exciting and rewarding to the individual fashion houses. (Walter Loeb, Forbes' fashion editor, in article 48)

In short, results show that the luxury fashion industry will probably keep its physical operations, while continuing on its innovative path towards a more digitalized industry. Indeed, an important part for the well-functioning of fashion houses consists of spectacular fashion events, gathering influential people from the luxury fashion sector around the world. However, the Covid-19 outbreak has played a crucial part in the current industry; more traditional fashion houses are nowadays keen to develop and integrate new technologies into their fashion shows, opening a whole new set of opportunities towards more innovation and creativity in luxury fashion.

Chapter VII. Discussion and Conclusion

General discussion

The exploratory nature of this research was aimed at providing a more comprehensive and contemporary understanding of digitalization in luxury fashion branding, especially in the 2020 pandemic landscape. Indeed, because this topic is very recent, it has not been extensively addressed in academic research yet. To recapitulate, the research question asked: “How are major fashion houses shifting their existing branding strategies into fully digital activities in response to the 2020 pandemic?”

The first and second research sub-questions aimed to investigate the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on the luxury fashion industry, as well as how fashion houses have integrated digital means into their branding strategies. Results have shown that despite their similar position in the industry, Louis Vuitton and Gucci experienced a different reality at the start of the pandemic. Indeed, even before Covid-19, Gucci’s growth was slowing down due to Alessandro Michele’s five year-long tenure at the Italian brand, hence facing the need to reinvigorate its brand image. While Louis Vuitton engaged in immediate digital changes, Gucci took some time to slow down, reduce its number of annual shows from five to two, and engage in new creative ideas. By presenting a mini-series instead of a fashion show and engaging in an ambitious collaboration with Balenciaga, Gucci rose to the top again.

Another consequence of the pandemic crisis is related to the digital shift in luxury fashion. Indeed, when almost all communications were conducted through social media, luxury brands unconsciously lost the attention of older consumers who would rather rely on traditional channels. Results have shown that fashion houses tried to tackle this challenge by releasing redesigned versions of classic heritage pieces. On the other hand, Millennials and Gen-Z were at the center of these heavily digitalized communications. However, their desires are different from the older consumer base. Indeed, findings of this research demonstrated that classic luxury elements (e.g. heritage, craftsmanship and quality) are still important; however, these younger consumers put a lot of emphasis on accessibility and inclusivity. As explained with the example of Virgil Abloh and his influence among the young Black community, Gen-Z consumers want to feel that the luxury fashion industry is not targeted to a White-dominated, wealthy consumer base anymore. Hence, fashion houses are changing their traditional codes into a more diversified brand image, where consumers can find classic, historically important pieces

alongside trendy, street-style collections. Consequences of the pandemic crisis have allowed luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton and Gucci to create closer relationships with their younger consumer base; a relationship that is most likely to become even more fruitful in the near future.

Finally, the third research sub-question aimed to discover how this digitalization in luxury fashion will impact the traditional Fashion Week format. Results have shown that simply recording a runway show and livestreaming it is not a good solution; instead, the most successful shows are the ones offering some kind of interaction to online viewers (e.g. Louis Vuitton's interactive livestream with 3D cameras, and Balenciaga's video game *Afterworld*). However, fashion experts present mixed opinions regarding the future of Fashion Weeks. Indeed, some of them defend the argument that physical runway shows are the most unique event that one can experience in fashion. Furthermore, even though the organization of a fashion show requires a lot of financial resources, results explained that the media exposure resulting from Fashion Weeks is more than valuable to luxury brands. On the other hand, some fashion insiders defend the fact that the pace imposed by Fashion Weeks is too strict, and does not give enough ground for creative directors to fully deploy their creativity. Moreover, digital runway shows present many advantages: they open the exclusive luxury fashion world to regular consumers and fashion enthusiasts, and allow fashion brands to explore new channels for designing and presenting a collection. In conclusion, a clear response cannot be found to this research sub-question; only time will tell.

Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, this research has portrayed a more comprehensive overview of a topic that has been widely researched – luxury fashion branding – with a topic that has been quite overlooked – that is, digitalization in the luxury fashion industry. The combination of these two topics was more than interesting to research in 2021, considering the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on almost every industry in the world. Hence, this study might serve as a starting point for future papers that will explore the implications of the pandemic crisis, as well as the ensuing digitalization process of the industry.

Besides its contemporary relevance, this paper also aimed to shed light on more modern developments in the fast-paced luxury industry. As mentioned in the literature review, academic research used to focus on one or two luxury brands, but more recent papers about digitalization in the industry focused on broader concepts such as social media marketing.

Moreover, this research is one of the first to compare the two most valuable fashion houses in the world, instead of doing a case study on either Louis Vuitton or Gucci, as it has been done a few times before. Comparing these two luxury brands allowed this research to obtain a more nuanced perspective on the topic of digitalization in luxury fashion and hence, could be used by academics for further research involving other fashion houses. Because of the international reach of Louis Vuitton and Gucci, future research might find an interest in this paper to investigate other luxury brands in a similar way.

Societal implications

From a societal perspective, the results of this paper might be considered as reliable and insightful, as the sample used was consisted of fashion experts from outside and within Louis Vuitton and Gucci; their expertise can be regarded as a major strength of this study. Hence, the implications of this research could serve as useful guidelines in providing experienced designers and fashion insiders, such as journalists and management teams, with ideas in order to successfully implement new technologies into a fashion house's branding strategies, or how they could effectively use social media to create a strong relationship with luxury consumers. Similarly, this study could also be of interest for people working in the tech industry, especially those in the fields of virtual reality and gaming; indeed, fashion houses have demonstrated a growing interest in these sectors during this past year, as an alternative to traditional fashion shows. Finally, this paper could be read by luxury consumers and stakeholders who wish to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the current luxury fashion industry, and how it is evolving following an economic downturn.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study was focused on the two largest fashion houses in terms of revenue: Louis Vuitton and Gucci. The reason behind that choice was related to the fact that because of their status and influence, these two brands are considered as luxury benchmarks in the eyes of other players in the industry, whether they are established fashion houses or industry newcomers. However, it is necessary to mention that even though their branding strategies and marketing decisions are highly regarded in luxury fashion, other brands might not follow in that direction, for example because of a lack of financial resources. Moreover, Louis Vuitton and Gucci are

owned by two of the largest luxury conglomerates in the world, meaning that their branding strategies might only be replicated to some extent by the other brands from LVMH and Kering. Hence, in order to obtain a comprehensive overview of the entire luxury fashion industry, future research can focus on a wider array of luxury brands, whether they are single players such as Hermès and Chanel, or new fashion houses such as French star designer Jacquemus.

Another limitation of this study was related to the qualitative nature of the analysis. As a matter of fact, thematic analysis requires the researcher to code in the most objective way as possible, but it would be impossible to obtain a totally value-free perspective. Hence, this research might be affected by a slight personal judgment, which could be cancelled in future research if the sample size is larger, and present more diverse and nuanced ideas.

The methodology used in this research mainly consisted in primary and secondary sources coming from fashion insiders and journalists. While some of them praised the innovation of digital strategies and creativity of online shows, the perspective of luxury consumers was overlooked. Future research can investigate the bigger impact of digitalization in luxury fashion and increased use of social media by interviewing or surveying luxury consumers. An important detail that should not be neglected is that nowadays, fashion houses are not only targeting older wealthy consumers; indeed, the purchasing power of Millennials and Gen Z consumers is growing every day, making them the next biggest consumer base in luxury fashion. Hence, further research might consider investigating the topic of digitalization in luxury fashion either from the young consumers point of view, or from the older and more conservative consumers' side. An important question that could be raised in the near future might be: "Can fashion houses succeed in equally targeting younger and older consumers?"

Finally, it is necessary to mention that up to this day, the Covid-19 pandemic is not totally over yet, as most countries have barely emerged from months of lockdowns. Hence, we do not know yet how far fashion houses will keep investing in new technologies and online communications; future research might want to explore the full consequences of the Covid-19 in luxury fashion when the industry will become more stabilized.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate how major fashion houses are digitalizing their branding strategies in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, in the perspective of Louis Vuitton and Gucci. The first theoretical chapter on luxury fashion branding has demonstrated that as of today, the

success of fashion houses is mainly based on immaterial value such as the brand identity, heritage and luxury experience that come with a brand. The second theoretical chapter has shown that in the past decade, fashion houses have been efficiently using social media and online platforms as part of their branding strategies, as they allow to reach a wider audience and develop a closer relationship with consumers. However, previous studies have shown that compared to other industries, luxury fashion was still behind in terms of technology use.

Through the use of two case studies based on Louis Vuitton and Gucci, as well as qualitative content analysis of newspapers material, this study allowed to find a potential response to our research question – potential, because luxury fashion is a fast-paced industry and is still going through its digitalization process. Results of this study have proved that, even though all changes resulting from the pandemic crisis have yet to be seen, the luxury fashion industry is currently at a crossroads. After a long period where luxury fashion goods were mainly targeted towards a wealthy and elite group of people, the Covid-19 pandemic put a stop to the industry's most exclusive and prestigious events. In order to tackle these unprecedented challenges, fashion houses improved their social media strategies and online communications in an innovative way, allowing regular consumers to attend digital fashion shows and feel closer to their favorite brands. In conclusion, the luxury fashion industry has never been more accessible and is nowadays balanced between traditions and modernity, speed and creativity, heritage and innovation, digital communications and IRL marketing,... which is slowly shaping luxury fashion into a more inclusive and digitalized industry.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Overview of the sample – Louis Vuitton & Gucci case studies

Publication	Date	Title of the article
The Business of Fashion	26.05.2020	1) Why Gucci’s Alessandro Michele Is Shaking Up the Fashion Calendar
	07.10.2020	2) At Louis Vuitton, Between Masculine and Feminine
	22.11.2020	3) Is There a New Gucci Brewing?
	30.11.2020	4) LVMH Shakes Up Digital Team, Plans Faster Move to Shared Tech
	08.12.2020	5) Louis Vuitton’s CEO on Navigating the Pandemic and the Future of Luxury
	22.01.2021	6) Virgil Abloh: ‘You Have to Choose Your Message Wisely’
	17.02.2021	7) Gucci’s Q4 2020 Sales Fall 10 Percent, Missing Analyst Expectations
	17.02.2021	8) The State of Gucci
	03.03.2021	9) Solving Kering’s Gucci Problem
	16.03.2021	10) Gucci Is Selling \$12 (Virtual) Sneakers
	13.04.2021	11) LVMH’s Fashion Sales Surge, Setting High Bar for Rivals
	15.04.2021	12) Alessandro Michele: ‘I Don’t Want to Be Bored by Myself’
	11.05.2021	13) Are Luxury Brands Pushing Too Many Collaborations?
	11.05.2021	14) What’s Next for LVMH’s Fashion Group
	21.05.2021	15) Why Gucci Recruited James Corden to Host a Key Comeback Campaign
Forbes	08.01.2021	16) Gucci Pins: The North Face x Gucci Outerwear Collection Is Taking Back Retail

	30.05.2020	17) Alessandro Michele's Gucci Announcement: A Leap Towards Sustainability Or A First Step?
	22.01.2021	18) Virgil Abloh's Louis Vuitton Concept Store Boosts Digital Only Men's Paris Fashion Week
i-D	26.10.2020	19) Gucci's Alessandro Michele in conversation with i-D's Alastair McKimm
	23.11.2020	20) Gucci SS21 is the ultimate costume for their cinematic debut
	22.12.2020	21) The North Face x Gucci invites you out into the great outdoors
	15.04.2021	22) Gucci and Balenciaga just broke every rule of luxury fashion
	20.04.2021	23) Watch an exclusive film exploring the BTS magic of the Gucci Aria show
Vogue	24.04.2020	24) Gucci's Alessandro Michele on What Comes Next: "We Will Go Back to Life. But, I Hope, to a Different Life"
	02.09.2020	25) In Louis Vuitton's Menswear Show, Virgil Abloh Blends Personal Histories With a Heritage Brand
	06.10.2020	26) "Today, There Is No Question—You Have to Do the Right Thing": Nicolas Ghesquière Shares His Hopes for the Future of Fashion
	06.10.2020	27) Louis Vuitton Spring 2021 Ready-to-Wear Collection
	09.10.2020	28) "The Conditions That We're Facing Are Making Us Think Very Differently"—Nicolas Ghesquière Talks Louis Vuitton on 'Good Morning Vogue'
	05.11.2020	29) Gucci's Next Collection Will Be Revealed in a 7-Part Miniseries Directed by Gus Van Sant and Alessandro Michele
	15.04.2021	30) Gucci's Aria Was a Chorus of Stars, Thanks to the Likes of Madonna and Miley Cyrus

Appendix B: Overview of the sample – Digitalization of Fashion Weeks

Publication	Date	Title of the article
The Business of Fashion	24.03.2020	31) The End of the (Fashion) World as We Know It
	24.05.2020	32) Gucci to Go Seasonless, Show Twice Per Year
	11.06.2020	33) Who Will Win the Digital Fashion Week Battle?
	27.07.2020	34) How Impactful Were the Digital Fashion Week Shows, Really?
	14.08.2020	35) Will Covid-19 Change Fashion Shows Forever?
	06.12.2020	36) Balenciaga Joins Fashion's Video Game Craze
	19.01.2021	37) Should Fashion Break Up With Big Tech?
	26.01.2021	38) Decoding LVMH's Mixed Results
	03.03.2021	39) Digital Shows Here To Stay as Fashion Week Gets a Makeover
	10.03.2021	40) Mind-Expanding Fashion Experiments
	12.03.2021	41) Why Big Brands Are Skipping Fashion Week
	10.05.2021	42) How I Became... Executive Producer of Balenciaga's Afterworld
	Dazed	03.08.2020
Forbes	29.04.2020	44) With Saint Laurent Out, Is This The End Of Fashion Week As We Know It?
	29.06.2020	45) Fashion Week Will Never Be The Same Again
	29.07.2020	46) Paris And Milan Summer Fashion Shows: Majority Go Digital While Others Show Live And Mask-Less
	13.08.2020	47) Why Digital Won't Replace The Traditional Format Of Fashion Weeks
	15.03.2021	48) Ten Big Luxury Brands Are Skipping Fashion Week

	29.03.2021	49) How Influencers Are Giving Fashion Week A Whole New Look
i-D	02.04.2020	50) How fashion's post-pandemic future could be digital
	19.08.2020	51) What will be the future of the fashion show?
Vogue	04.02.2020	52) What Is the Future of the Fashion Show?
	25.05.2020	53) Gucci's Alessandro Michele Will Reduce the Brand's Shows From 5 to 2, Will the Industry Follow?
	12.06.2020	54) Physical? Digital? Virtual? The Masterminds of Fashion Show Production Weigh In on Runway's Future
	29.06.2020	55) Digital Fashion Weeks and Virtual Shows: A Rundown of Fashion's New Rhythm
	20.07.2020	56) Were Digital Fashion Weeks a Success? Vogue's Critics React to the Season
	13.08.2020	57) Milan Fashion Week Is Going "Phygital" for Spring 2021 Menwear and Ready-to-Wear
	14.12.2020	58) I Unboxed Bottega Veneta's Spring 2021 'Show' and This Is What Was Inside
	05.01.2021	59) In an Increasingly Digital World, Bottega Veneta Signs Off From Social Media
	31.03.2021	60) Bottega Veneta Swapped Social Media for a Digital Journal—See the First Issue

Appendix C: Coding table – Louis Vuitton & Gucci case studies

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes
Covid-19 difficulties; physical stores struggling; large fashion houses performing better	Direct consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic	Gucci's decline and renewal
Gucci's rebranding; need to change brand image; moving away from former brand identity; GucciFest	Rebranding as a response to failure	
Importance of brand heritage; inspiration from previous creative directors; using archive pieces; reinventing a fashion house's codes; mixing fashion and art		
More creativity; films as fashion shows; storytelling	Embracing more creativity and change	
Independence as creative director; freedom from management; collaborations with other fashion brands		
Better position after Covid-19; need for change; innovation	Immediately making changes	Louis Vuitton, innovating and thriving in a digital environment
Digital transformation in luxury fashion; digital changes to rebound from Covid-19; integration of new technologies; blockchain technology	Finding ways to benefit from new digital environment	
Digital for a more authentic online experience; interactive livestreaming; social media to create relationships with consumers		
Marketing investments; use of celebrities; increasing media exposure	Improving online presence	

Shift in consumer base; new consumer target; grow local consumer base; keep young consumers	Keeping young consumers with trendy collections	Expanding consumer base during uncertain times
Following trends and changes in demand; use of monograms and logos; standardized luxury		
Catering to older consumer base	Targeting older consumers with more classic luxury goods	
Creating exclusivity; limited availability; premium prices		
Influence of creative directors; importance of diversity in luxury fashion	Creative directors using their voice to communicate in the luxury fashion industry	
Communicating through a luxury brand; fashion as a language; fashion to address political and societal topics		
Desire to reshape the luxury fashion industry; no desire for traditional Fashion Weeks	Covid-19 leading to a desire to slow down	Lockdowns, reflection and desire for change in luxury fashion
Adapting to changes; reflecting during lockdown; being connected with external world; thinking about future goals	Fashion houses being more than a luxury brand	
Sustainability; thinking about environmental issues; made-to-last luxury goods; made-to-order business		

Appendix D: Coding table – Digitalization of Fashion Weeks

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes
Gathering people in one place; sense of community	Social aspect	Advantages of Fashion Weeks
Maximizing impact; unique experience; cultural and emotional value	Experience aspect	
Rewarding best consumers; belonging to an exclusive club	Exclusivity aspect	
Change becoming a necessity; sustainability; consumers craving newness	Accelerated digitalization of the industry	Fashion films, livestreams, and innovative formats
Pre-recorded fashion films; livestreams	Existing digital formats for fashion shows	
Video games; 3D design; innovating with new tech; Institute of Digital Fashion	New digital formats for fashion shows	
Dominance of YouTube and Instagram; personalized experience	Increase use of social media due to Covid-19	Intense use of social media and ensuing challenges
Easier reach to younger consumers		
Less online engagement; unfair online algorithms; catching consumers attention; need to combine digital and physical	Difficulties coming with digital shows	
Kering’s brands skipping Fashion Weeks; other existing ways to market a luxury brand; concept of seasonality outdated; too expensive; creative constraints	Reasons to skip traditional Fashion Weeks	Time for change in luxury fashion
Digital cannot replace physical experience; combining digital and physical fashion shows	Digital amplification	