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Examinator: Agneta Moulettes

Luxury experience offline and online

A qualitative study of luxury experience from offline to online through
the paradox

MARCUS LÖFVENBERG & MATILDA MATTSSON

Lunds universitet
Institutionen för strategisk kommunikation
Examensarbete för kandidatexamen

Abstract

Luxury experience offline and online through the paradox

This study has aimed to problematize how luxury retail brands transfer luxury experience from offline to online and to contribute with knowledge on how they visually communicate in two different communication mediums. This study has been based on two research areas within luxury retail brands, visual merchandising and online visual merchandising. Further, as a result of the limited research on online visual merchandising the complementary web strategy, user experience design has been used to understand the digital environment. Furthermore, the empirical material has been gathered from Gucci's flagship store and e-commerce site. More specifically, through a video clip from an observation of the store and a documentation from the website. Based on the collected empirical material, a multimodal semiotic analysis has been used, and from the analysis of the offline and online channels showed that similar semiotic resources are used to create a luxury experience. Furthermore, the analysis showed that the store and the website had similar underlying messages that they communicated, however they did not always use the same means to communicate.

The result from the analysis shows that the sender uses semiotic resources to create a luxury experience in the store and on the website. The study provides practical implications for how semiotic resources can be used to create luxury experience in the store and on the website. This knowledge can also be useful for future strategic communicators who will operate a store and a website on the global market, but also for those who only run either a store or website.

Keyword: Luxury experience, visual merchandising, online visual merchandising, luxury retail

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1. Introduction

The following chapter is devoted to introduce the chosen topic of the study. We will begin by describing luxury brands and their use of in-store communication in the flagship store, and the importance of adapting to the digital revolution in relation to the modern day usage of e-commerce sites. Thereafter, we will define and elaborate on our problem definition, the objectives with this study, research questions, and followed by the delimitations of the study.

1.1 Background

A major challenge that luxury fashion brands face today, as a consequence of the digital era, is how they can bring the high-end experience in-store to the digital arena/ e-commerce site (Forbes, 2017).

Traditionally luxury has been associated with exclusivity, status and quality. Due to changes in contemporary consumer behaviour in western societies have led to the emergence of a new meaning and perception of luxury. “New luxury” has been defined as products and services that possess higher levels of quality, taste, and aspiration than other goods in the category (Atwal & Williams, 2009). Today as well as traditionally, a physical flagship store has had an important role in the marketing communications of the luxury fashion brand (Manlow & Nobbs, 2013). The physical flagship store is helpful to create an atmosphere, trigger emotions and create an experience for customers to communicate their brand (Hyeonsoo, Choi & Lee, 2015). According to Arrigo (2015) a physical flagship store creates an atmosphere that contributes to exceptional shopping experience, that significantly differentiates the brand from other brands targeting mass markets.

However, the challenge for luxury brands, is that there has been a shift in luxury consumer behavior that has shown an increase of online purchases and gathering information about different products. The shopping has become e-shopping, and the increase of the e-commerce is today a fact (Okonkwo, 2009; Guercini & Runfola 2015; Straker & Wrigley, 2016). However luxury retail brands have been slow to embrace the digital revolution and still make enormous investments in flagship stores because of their negative attitudes toward investing in online sales (Hyeonsoo et al., 2015; Park, Choi & Lee, 2016). This seems to be caused by the concern of losing the aura of exclusivity and prestige because of the easy availability of products and that the characteristics of luxury brands products, which require artistic and aesthetic appreciation, may not be fully expressed online (Okonkwo, 2009; Hyeonsoo, Choi & Lee, 2015). But according to Guercini & Runfola (2015), if luxury brands manage to effectively recreate the unique consumer experience via online channels, the internet can be an effective solution for increased luxury brand sales.

1.2 Problem definition

Having this said, many researchers have claimed that there are a lack of studies on how luxury retail brands should communicate to transfer the luxury experience from store to the e-commerce site (Okonkwo, 2009; Kluge Königsfeld, Fassnacht & Mitschke, 2013; Hyeonsoo et al., 2015). Further, there is a lack of research to analyze how empirically the aesthetic atmosphere can be transferred to the online environment (Okonkwo, 2009). Based on this Kluge et. al., (2013) has tried to contribute in this area by examining the differences between luxury brand websites and non-luxury brand websites.

The internet is assumed to make luxury brands seem to be easily accessible, which goes against what luxury brands want to be perceived as, which is out of reach (Park et al., 2016). Based on this, we consider that there is lack of research on how luxury brands transfer the luxury experience from the physical store to the website without losing the luxury experience. Further, we understand that there is a greater need to gain a better understanding of the luxury paradox. Based on

the complexity, there is an existing paradox within luxury brands where they want to be out of reach for the public mass, appear to be scarce, but at the same time increase sales and profit (Radón, 2010). In line with this, Okonkwo (2009) means that the internet is an inappropriate communications medium for luxury brands, as it seems to be the opposite of luxury characteristics. This creates an internet paradox for luxury brands and now has more difficulty of creating and maintaining “desire and exclusivity” through the luxury products (Okonkwo, 2009; Kapferer & Bastien, 2012).

Visual merchandising is a marketing communication tool that attempts to enhance experience of a store through appearance, whereas online visual merchandising attempts to create the same store experience online (Gallayanee Yaoyuneyong, Jamye K. Foster, Leisa R. Flynn, 2014; Yaoyuneyong, Foster, & Flynn, 2014; Nobbs, Foong & Baker, 2015). However, there is lack of academic research on translating the visual merchandising (VM) to online visual merchandising (OVM), which is surprising considering due to the growth of the sector and its increasing professionalism (Ha, Kwon & Lennon, 2007; Nobbs et al., 2015). Further the study is highly relevant in strategic communication, within the retail industry, as in-store, and e-commerce site are present to create experience in the turbulent and developed digital channel landscape (Nobbs et al., 2015).

This study can contribute with new findings on how visual communications through visual merchandising can be applied in offline and online luxury retail stores to transfer the luxury experience. This seems to be an unexplored way of looking at the phenomenon, where previous studies seem to examine one channel either visual merchandising in store (eg., Nobbs, Moore, Sheridan, 2012; Nobbs, Foong, Baker, 2015) or online merchandising on the e-commerce store (Yaoyuneyong et al., 2014; Ha et al., 2010).

1.3 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to contribute with research within the discipline of strategic communication on how luxury retail brands use visual communication through visual merchandising strategies to create luxury experience offline and online. More specifically we aim to analyse and problematize how luxury retail brands translate the luxury experience from offline to online, and how it reflects to the luxury paradox. In order to meet the objective with this study we have formulated the following research questions:

- 1. How do luxury retail brands use VM strategies to create luxury experience offline?*
- 2. How do luxury retail brands use VM strategies to create luxury experience online?*
- 3. How do luxury retail brands translate the luxury experience offline to online through the luxury paradox?*

The research questions will be answered by using a multimodal social semiotic analysis based on empirical material for the luxury retail brand Gucci, as presented in Section 3. This by examining Gucci Flagship store as well as the e-commerce uses semiotics resources to visually communicate the luxury experience.

1.4 Limitations

This bachelor's thesis is conducted within the field of strategic communications. Therefore, we will limit to understand our chosen topic from a communication perspective. Further, we have limited our research to investigating our problem formulation from a sender perspective. The reason for this is that the majority of the literature examines the receiver of the message, we therefore see this as a gap in the research and find this to be highly relevant in strategic communication to study our topic from this perspective. Another limitation in our study is that, we aim to gain a more in depth of knowledge on the topic of visual communications

through visual merchandising strategies that contributes to the luxury experience, as opposed to the non-visual elements that are used both offline and online. As for the empirical material it is limited to the specific luxury retail brand Gucci, that we further be presented in the section 3.2.3.

2. Theoretical framework and previous research

The following sections discuss the theoretical framework that forms the basis for the thesis and presents the previous research that this thesis builds on. Referring to previous research serves the purpose of giving a further explanation to our identified research gap presented in our problem definition. Based on the research questions described above, the following theoretical framework have been developed. The framework includes: visual merchandising and online visual merchandising; and the complementary web strategy, user experience design and luxury brand characteristics of creating luxury experience. The theories will be understood from previous research and further elaborated on below.

2.1 Visual merchandising

Visual merchandising through visual stimulation and communication has been important aspects of traditional retailing (Khakimdjanova & Park, 2005), and is an important technique in order to improve the experience of the store (Nordfält, 2007). In visual merchandising has been shown through previous research, that there are shared understandings of the concept of visual merchandising, and is defined as being the ability to visually communicate the products and the brand by appealing customers behaviour and sensorial experience (Nordfält 2007; Hernant & Boström, 2011; Hefer & Cant, 2013; Gudonavičienė & Alijošienė, 2015). Visual merchandising in-store serves the purpose of communicating information in relation to the store and merchandise, in contrast online visual merchandising aims to create an experience online that resembles the in-store experience (Khakimdjanova & Park, 2005; Ha et al. 2007). By creating a resembling experience, through online visual merchandising, the purpose is to decrease the perceived risk that can be present without having physical contact with the store and merchandi-

se (Khakimdjanova & Park, 2005; Ha et al. 2007). However, even today, existing research within the online visual merchandising is limited (Yaoyuneyong et al., 2014; Rodríguez, 2018). According to Ha et al. (2007), e-commerce sites can be used in the same way that visual merchandising is used in the store. It can therefore be suggested that the strategies within traditional visual merchandising, which will be specified below, can be used on the online environment to enhance experience. However, since there are differences between the physical environment and digital environment (Isabel & Sergio, 2014; Herhausen, Binder, Schoegel & Herrmann, 2015; Li, Lu & Talebian, 2015), using only visual merchandising communication strategies that are created for a physical store would be limiting. It is therefore relevant to use the complementary web strategy, user experience design to study the visual communication through VM online. Therefore, user experience design is included in the theoretical framework, and will be presented further down in this chapter.

Further from previous research it has shown that there are shared views on visual merchandising as concepts, this study will focus on visual merchandising which is referred as visual merchandising communication process (Hefer & Cant, 2013). This is a large part of the communication between the retailer and the consumer which takes place through the use of visual merchandising (Hefer & Cant, 2013). The sender - the retailer communicates with the consumer through the store, the interior design, layout, atmosphere and window display (Hefer & Cant, 2013). This communication perspective relates to what Falkheimer and Heide (2014), means that it indicates a transmission view, where the communication process is perceived as a process by which a sender transmits a message via a communication channel to a recipient. The process is seen as successful when the recipient has received the message without the content being changed during the transfer (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). A challenge in visual merchandising is to communicate visually correctly, that is, to get the customer to interpret it the way it wants, so that it eventually leads to buying (Gudonavičienė & Alijošienė, 2015). Based on previous research in visual merchandising communication, it is about exposing everything within the store to attract customers and create an image for

the brand, and influencing its perceived image (Nordfält 2007; Law, Wong & Yip, 2012; Gudonavičienė & Alijošienė, 2015 ; Park, Jeon & Sullivan, 2015; Park et al., 2016), as well as creating experience (Nordfält, 2007; Law, Wong & Yip, 2012), which can lead to a visitor becoming a customer and thus leading to a buy (Balgaonkar, Pabalkar & Yelikar 2014). In line with that, Law Wong & Yip (2012) argues that there is an increased communication difficulty, and with consumers, however, is influenced by the cultural differences towards the symbolic messages created through visual merchandising. Furthermore, Law et al., (2012) and Park et al., (2015) believe that if visual communication is correct, it can achieve competitive advantages for the store.

But unlike previous research which focuses on visual merchandising communication to increase the consumer behaviour (Law et al., 2012; Gudonavičienė & Alijošienė, 2015; Rizzi & Volpi, 2018), while this study problematizes luxury experience representation by examining the semiotic resources in depth in VM from a transmitter perspective. In line with that to create experience there are two main approaches; firstly is to examine how a company can create and "design" experiences; and second is about trying to understand what happens during the customer's consumption and how the customer interacts with the company's offer (Mossberg, 2015). In this study we will examine at the first approach, how a luxury retail brand uses VM to create luxury experience offline and online. More specifically according to Wiedmann & Hennings (2013) the aesthetics i.e. the design and colours, and the social factor i.e in the store are important for creating luxury atmosphere. In line with this Park et al., (2016) consider that the visual expressions within the luxury store atmosphere contribute to exceptional luxury experience. Further Park et al., (2016) mean it is necessary to examine and analyse colors and other design attributes, and reflecting certain meanings in the luxury retail atmosphere, which should be explored. Based on this it is relevant within the visual merchandising communication in order to examine how the luxury experience is represented in the flagship store through by the use of semiotic resources. In section 4 we will analyze the semiotic resources within VMC and how they are used to communicate and represent luxury experience in the store.

Further within visual merchandising from previous research, there are mentioned different elements as strategies, that have the greatest impact on customers' behavior and experiences in the store. These elements are presented in order below as; 1) *window display*, 2) *store atmosphere*, 3) *Store design and layout* och 4) *social factors* (Nordfält, 2007; Hernant & Boström, 2011; Hefer & Cant, 2013; Gudonavičienė & Alijošienė, 2015).

2.1.1 The window display

The window display is the first sight of a store that the customer is responding to, which will convey the store, the brand and the products (Hefer & Cant, 2013). Based on previous research, it is advantageous to communicate through the design factors in the display windows to attract customers and create interest in the products and the brand (Nordfält, 2007). Further (Nordfält, 2007) mean that the design factors have the same impact in the store as in the display window, while Opris & Bratucu (2013) consider the colors and the light are the most important tools in the display window design. A customized and creative design along with the design factors in the window display, are those who capture the customer's attention fastest (Opris & Bratucu, 2013).

2.1.2 The visual atmosphere as an experience arena

The design of a retail environment is related to the store atmosphere. The store atmosphere is defined by Kotler in 1973, which (Nordfält, 2007; Hernant & Boström, 2011; Law et al., 2012; Park et al., 2016) refers to as a highly relevant marketing tool for retailers to create an experience for the customers, instead of promoting the products in the center. Kotler's shares in its research the three main key points for achieving a store atmosphere; architecture, the design in the store, and the window display (Nordfält, 2007; Hernant & Boström, 2011; Law, Wong & Yip, 2012). Based on this there are multiple studies on the store atmosphere and according to the authors Hefer & Cant (2013), Gudonavičienė & Alijošienė (2015), and Cho & Lee (2016), they mean that the visual in the store environment is the most important thing to influence the customers. Further in order for experi-

ence to be created in the store atmosphere, stores must communicate through visible design factors as well as nonverbal communication (Hernant & Boström, 2011; Mossberg, 2015). In line with this, the experience room in other words, the atmosphere is about what the room, physical environment, does in which the experience is created and consumed, and it is unique, personal, non-ordinary and memorable to the customer (Mossberg, 2015). Furthermore, Mossberg (2015) describe that the general perception of an environment also helps customers and employees to place the company mentally in a particular category. In line with this the researchers agree if the store environment matches the customer expectations, the customers don't have to enter as much information as if something unexpected happens (Nordfält, 2007).

In line with the previous research about the store atmosphere, Nordfält (2007) made a detailed review showing that the characteristics of the store's atmosphere fall into two main categories: design factors and social factors (Hernant & Boström, 2011). It will be divided into additional categories and are central parts of our study, and thus they will be treated individually.

2.1.3 Store design and layout

The sight is the one that can capture the greatest amount of information from our surroundings and it's common that we take sight for granted and do not think much of what we are seeing (Nordfält, 2007). The *design* and *layout* is what is visible in the store and it's related to the store atmosphere creation (Nordfält, 2007; Eskilsson & Fredriksson, 2010; Hernant & Boström, 2011), and these influence the experience in store (Mossberg, 2015). Since all retail environments are filled with noise, the store's design and layout are crucial for the impact of brand building and the experience in the room (Nordfält, 2007; Eskilsson & Fredriksson, 2010; Mossberg, 2015). In the atmosphere, it refers to how different objects, such as symbols and artefacts communicate symbolic meaning and create an overall aesthetic expression and experience in the experience room, e.g. furniture is arranged, their shape and size and how they are placed in the store (Mossberg, 2015). The artefact of mannequins are seen to be important elements to display products, and

offer the customer to visualise the merchandises' fit and look on a physical body (Lindström, Berg, Nordfält, Roggeveen & Grewal, 2016; Fister, Ti & Burns, 2010; Law et al., 2012). Various aesthetic factors in the atmosphere and especially color is a fundamental visual attribute in the store layout and design (Das, 2014). Further, according to Spence, Puccinelli, Grewal, & Roggeveen (2014) the aesthetic factors of the atmosphere from a consumer perspective can be the most powerful in forming store image due to their visual prevalence.

2.1.4 Colors and light

In the store there are other stimuli such as color and light that affect the experience in the store (Mossberg, 2015). There is much research on color within the marketing and how it affects and can help to create attention and experience in different ways (Nordfält, 2007; Mossberg, 2015). In the retail atmosphere among various aesthetic factors are fundamental visual attributes of store layout and design (Das, 2014; Park et al., 2016). Colors send out messages and create feelings that can either increase or decrease our propensity to buy something (Nordfält, 2007), and according to (Spence et al., 2014) colors are believed to convey meaning that influences an individual's cognition and behavior. But different colors have different effects and it has shown from previous research that warm colors affect the brain's activity more, while cold colors, like blue, have a positive, comfortable and calm effect (Nordfält, 2007; Mossberg, 2015; Park et al., 2016). Since colors have different effects they also have different cultural interpretations, and it is important to choose strategically correct colors that match the store, brand and products (Opris & Bratucu, 2013).

While light affects the experience based on it affects the degree of excitement a customer experiences and it affects what the customers focus on by, for instance, making products more visible (Nordfält, 2007). In the store environment Law et al., (2012) refers to Babin et al. (2003) that colors and lights together as combination plays crucial role to influencing consumers behaviour and their purchase intention, and it can affect the customer's perception of a store and its envi-

ronment, which can lead to customers remembers the experience (Nordfält, 2007; Mossberg, 2015).

2.1.5 Social factors

The social factors are factors that concern personal meetings, especially between sales staff and customers, ie a service meeting (Nordfält, 2007), and its central to the customer's experience (Mossberg, 2015). The behavior is affected by the situation and is determined by the staff's own behavior and customers feedback. People's actions in the service meeting are influenced by how the mood, tone and emotion are, and has a further effect on how the atmosphere is perceived (Nordfält, 2007; Mossberg, 2015). Based on previous research, Mossberg (2015) refers to Goffman (1967) and argues that people are symbol users and the world is seen as a scene where people interact with others based on interpretations determined by various characteristics in the environment. Humans as "symbol users" is expressed through gestures, facial expressions, clothes and so on (Mossberg, 2015). This is an example of non-verbal communication used in a service meeting (Mossberg, 2015). Non-verbal communication reveals how we say it, while in verbal terms it is what is said. Research has shown that the non-verbal is at least as important as the verbal (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014; Mossberg, 2015).

2.2 User experience design

As previously mentioned earlier in this chapter, there is limited research on online visual merchandising (Yaoyuneyong et al., 2014). In order to make sense of the online store of luxury brands and how they transfer the luxury experience from the online to the offline, it is relevant to use the complementary web strategy, namely user experience design. By understanding the complementary web strategy, we are able to conduct a more accurate study on the translation of communication from the physical to the digital environment. This because the physical and the digital environment varies to such a large extent (Isabel & Sergio, 2014; Herhausen, Binder, Schoegel & Herrmann, 2015; Li et al., 2015). It can therefore be viewed as necessary. Before defining user experience design it is first relevant to

understand what user experience is. When it comes to user experience, it is not uncommon to confuse users with customers. In many cases the users and customers are not the same. However, in the case of selling customer products, the customers are usually the same as users. The customers of the products are the individuals that purchases the products (Cooper, 2014). When it comes to the quality of the user experience, the design elements are crucial for the success of a website (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016; Kuniavsky, 2003). *User experience design* (UXD) is an umbrella term for a combination of different design and usability. It is built up on three aspects that overlap; the first aspect is the *form*, involving the designing of the graphical aspects of a site, including the layout and structure of the site; the second is the *content* which includes the information architecture, sounds, text and videos and the third being the behavior, meaning the *interaction design* of the site (Cooper, 2014; Walton & Evans, 2018). The three aspects within user experience design are useful for this study, as previously mentioned, to make sense of the digital environment in comparison to the physical environment. Thus, we will elaborate on the three overlapping elements starting with designing the layout and structure of a website.

2.2.1 Designing the layout and structure

As a part of user experience design, and as a complement to online visual merchandising, here we understand the designing elements of the layout and structure of a website. When designing a site it is important to consider what *the first impression* is similarly to the window display of the physical store, the initial page should be inviting and simply designed. Further, it should be memorable, and at the same time give the user an overview of what the site is offering. However, since the user may find the site through a search engine they may come directly to a subpage (Kraft, 2012). Thus, by considering the *design and layout of each of the individual subpages* it can help to improve the first impression and the user experience (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016; Kraft, 2012). When it comes to the *sites overall design and structure*, it largely depends on the audience of the page and what the purpose of the site is. There are a number of general communication

factors which help improve the effectiveness of the e-commerce site. Three ways to make a site more effective is by: 1) creating a coherent design - a design that is simple, easily read, uses categories that make it easy to find products or topics, lack of information overload, suitable font sizes and a spacious presentation (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016). Additionally, to create a coherent and simple design, it can be beneficial to think in terms of *avoiding visual noise*, whereas this means to avoid crowded elements on the site; using too many colors; and intense colors and contrasts (Cooper, 2014). 2) *Simplicity* - meaning that the site is simplified using multiple categories of text. 3) *Readability* - this can be improved by having a sitemap, in other words, using a “mini home page” on all of the pages of the website, it should look the same on each page (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016). In addition to the layout and structure of the website it is important to have good content design (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016), which will be elaborated on below.

2.2.2 Content design

Similarly to the design of the layout and structure of the website the content design, which is also under the user experience design “umbrella”, the strategy approach serves as a complement to online visual merchandising. Thus, we understand the content design strategies within user experience design. Good *content design* is the key to attract customers to a website and retaining their interest or achieving repeated visits. Content design is how the text, as well as, the graphic content is designed that forms each web page (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016). In order to create positive surprises or “wow factors” on a site, it will largely depend on the expectations of a the users. If the users have high expectations the material on a site must exceed the users expectations (Kraft, 2012). By using audio, videos and animations as a form of content, has the ability to create an immediate attention and potentially make the users feel engaged and interested, which can lead to an improved user experience (Thomas, Johann, Kurt, Daniel & Johann, 2011; Kraft, 2012). Further within content design to create experience on a website, it becomes highly relevant to think in terms of the website’s color, ima-

ges and typography. The colors, images and the text have the ability to set a mood or tone for a website (Barnes, 2011; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016). Additionally, using different shapes and sizes in the visual composition contribute to the experience (Cooper, 2014). All of the individual visual elements on a website relate to each other and contribute to how a website is experienced. For instance, when two objects on an interface have the same color, they are assumed by the user to have connections with one another or that they have similar qualities (Cooper, 2014). Visual aesthetics have clear effects on how a user perceives and experiences a system or product (Kuniavsky, 2003; Ho, 2017). The visual aspects shall all contribute to how the products or how the brand is positioned on the market (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016). When it comes to color, it is useful to understand it in terms of being very precise and aware of the goal of the interface. Any decisions made in relation to the color should consider the user's goals, the content, and the brand itself (Cooper, 2014). In addition to creating good content design to create experience, the last overlapping aspect within user experience design is behavior, or the interaction design of the website (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016; Walton & Evans, 2018), will be elaborated on underneath.

2.2.3 Interaction design

Similarly to the design of the layout and structure and the content design of the website, the interaction design is an equally important element within user experience design (Cooper, 2014), and also serves as a complement to the study of online visual merchandising. As previously mentioned behavior of a site, in other words *interaction design of a site*, is one of the three overlapping aspects within user design together with the form and content (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016; Walton & Evans, 2018). It is essential to create a well working interactive system in order to have a satisfying customer experience of a brand. Before creating an interface design it is important to understand what a specific brand is promising his or her customer (Cooper, 2014). Having a clear navigation is an aspect which can easily be neglected, however is very important part of an interface design (Thomas et al., 2011). When designing an interface it is relevant to understand

that the user often is unconscious of how he or she experiences a website. Users tend to try to identify the most important aspects of the website and after attempt to understand the different elements on a website in relation to each other. The conclusions drawn from this is that by using certain design principles to communicate, it can influence the user's navigation and subsequently their experience. The most important elements which draw attention are the elements on a page which are the largest, have greater hue contrast; value and/ or saturation (Cooper, 2014).

2.3 Luxury brand characteristics of creating luxury experience

What is really luxury? Luxury is a concept or a lifestyle, in other words it isn't a product, an object or a service, instead it is a philosophy and a culture (Okonkwo, 2009). There are many disperse definitions of luxury brands, and it can therefore be problematic to define the concept of luxury. Further Kapferer and Bastien (2012) mean that the concept of luxury is not a social neutral; on the contrary, it is society that defines what luxury is, and has been discussed far back in history. Because luxury as a phenomenon has several definitions, we will assume how luxury brands are defined (Wiedmann & Hennings, 2013). This is relevant to our research purpose, see section 1.3, to investigate how the characteristics of luxury brands create a luxury experience.

In line with the concept of luxury it has changed drastically and new demands on luxury brands are apparent (Hoffmann & Coste-Manière, 2012; Korstanje, 2016). Further, when it comes to the marketing communication of luxury brands it has become increasingly complex, not only to be associated with conveying an image of quality, performance and authenticity, but they also want to sell an experience of luxury by contributing to a consumers lifestyle (Atwal & Williams, 2009). Consumers of luxury have gone from mainly being preoccupied with social status and prestige, to being more concerned with the whole luxury experience (Hoffmann & Coste-Manière, 2012). Innovative design, consistent quality, and providing superior service over time are important concerns for a luxury retail

company when wanting to establish a luxury experience (Hoffmann & Coste-Manière, 2012). More specifically in the store - the flagship store provides a strategic value for the luxury brands which is expressed through elements of their form and function and personnel to engage the customers through the creation of meaningful experiences (Manlow & Nobbs, 2013). In contrast to the one-way marketing communication it is possible to communicate the key values of a luxury brand online by using visual tools like image, videos, or 3D product presentation vice versa (Hennigs, Weidmann & Klarmann, 2012). In line with this Kluge et. al (2013) mean that if a website through high media content and design, i.e. color, fonts et cetera is perceived visually and aesthetically more interesting than a conventional website. Consequently, it has become increasingly important within the various forms of marketing communications for luxury companies to design and stage memorable experiences to increase the perceived brand value in the eyes of the customer (Ko, Seo & Han, 2017). It should include a balanced approach to other web design dimensions such as usability and functionality, content and relevance, design and aesthetics to create a luxurious web atmosphere (Okonkwo, 2009; Hennigs, Wiedmann & Klarmann, 2012). A functional web design for luxury brands is essential to the customer experience on the website through graphic elements and layouts (Okonkwo, 2009). Furthermore, Hennings et al., (2012) mean that websites can not communicate the senses of touch and smell, there are other visual techniques for communicating the luxury brand's characteristics online to create usability, quality and uniqueness.

Based on previous research, we do not find a clear definition of luxury brands. Therefore, we consider that there are some common denominators, as explained above, for how it has defined luxury brands based on key characteristics, namely; exclusivity, quality, high price, rarity, usability, desirability, uniqueness, prestige, which we will limit ourselves to. Furthermore, Okonkwo, 2009 and Kapferer & Bastien (2012) mean that the luxury brand characteristics can be presented in the store, but there are major challenges on the Internet through the websites. Previous research that has been done problematize and analyzes consumer behavior and the desire for emotions, and the aesthetic experiences within the luxury

brands (Okonkwo, 2009; Kapferer & Bastien, 2012; Wiedmann & Hennings, 2013).

3. Method

The following section will describe the qualitative methodology approach of this study by introducing the scientific approach, the data collection methods offline and online, the analysis methods and with reflections on the method where we aim to secure it's quality.

3.1 Scientific approach and choice of method

This bachelor thesis is written within the framework for strategic communication and is based on a qualitative method, and according to Bryman (2016) it is useful to the study because it aims to answer the questions of how. According to Bryman (2016), the qualitative research is suitable for our study since it seeks to clarify the phenomenon meaning or significance. This is relevant according to Heide & Simonsson (2014) for qualitative studies to aim close knowledge of complex issues and phenomena, which is central to strategic communication. We have used an abductive approach, where we repeat between empirical material and theory (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994). To begin with, we have searched for theories in the literature, where our empirical material has been conducted in parallel with the writing of the theoretical framework. This has been done to ensure that we are open and flexible when we match our empirical material with the most relevant theories (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994). By this, our ontological approach assumes that reality should be regarded as social constructed. A social constructivist perspective implies that reality is subjective and occurs through human interactions and experiences, and knowledge of reality is achieved by the researcher interpreting these interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). In line with that, Rose (2012) refers to Berger (1972) and explain, what we look at and interpret visually is culturally constructed. Therefore this constitutes the foundation of our social

constructionist viewpoint on luxury retail brands is applied because it sees the reality of society as socially constructed.

The ontological approach is a result of a choice of use a multimodal social semiotic method, which focus on semiotic resources that are regarded as socially constructed (Jewitt, 2014). The analysis method will further be discussed in section 3.3.1 Further, this study's purpose is not to answer Gucci specifically, instead how they use semiotic resources to create a luxury experience. Based on this, Heide & Simonsson (2014) claims that researchers are required to contribute knowledge to field research, which they mention as analytical generalization. Therefore, we are looking to answer the study purpose as mentioned in section 1.3, where we aim to problematize and analyze *how* luxury retail brands translate the luxury experience from offline to online, and how it reflects to the paradox.

3.2 Data collection methods

In the following section, the data collection methods for both the flagship store and the e-commerce site will be presented followed by a description of the selection and limitations of our empirical material.

3.2.1 Participant observation in the flagship store

A participant observation is a qualitative method of data collection where the researcher takes place in a social environment and tries to get a picture of how individuals in this environment and what meaning they attribute (Patton, 2002). In addition, in the participant observation, we chose to use a covert approach to prevent it from affecting the situation and behavior of individuals (Bryman, 2011). Another aspect of the choice of hidden approach is to possibly study the closed environments, but it has its ethical problems (Bryman, 2011), as explained in section 3.4. The social environment where behaviors occurs are part of our study, but the primary is to study the VM strategies in the store environment. According to Patton (2002), an observation is useful for participating in an environment and observing explicit aspects such as artefacts and nonverbal communication. This is

relevant to our study, which focuses on visual communication through visual merchandising strategies.

By observing and then seek out environments, people and situations is something Patton (2002) advocates to seek deeper understanding of the phenomenon. This is one of the reasons why we chose to conduct a qualitative observation study. We therefore found the stores interesting because it aims to visually communicate the brand, products and their store environment. It also created the opportunity to converse with the staff from the luxury store. Before we started the observations in the luxury store, we compiled an observation schedule. To gain insight into the observation scheme, completed several test observations in several different clothing stores, such as Massimo Dutti, Hennes & Mauritz, Chanel, Louis Vuitton, J. Lindeberg etcetera. This led us to supplement some questions in the observation schedule (see appendix 1, in section 7.1), to avoid overlapping questions (Bryman, 2016). This is in line with Patton (2002) criteria in observations to become skilled observers. In connection with the observations in the stores, the data collection lasted for 15 minutes and began by photographing outside the store, and filming with a iPhone in the store based on our covert approach, as explained above which Rose (2012) calls for a discreet note. A discreet noting according to Patton (2002) is useful in observations, without affecting what is observed. However, there are ethical problems with it, which is explained in section 3.4. Furthermore, Rose (2012) explains that film recording is a common technical tool for generating data and is useful to examine and observe in detail and in depth how meaning is designed. Based on this, the video recording was then transcribed in accordance with our observation scheme (see appendix 1, in section 7.1), and thus can be a support of the analysis.

Furthermore by using only images in the store, does not contribute to us an extended understanding of the semiotic resources - only understanding of the visual expressions. Thereby, we have chosen to use photography and film recording as tools in the shop observations to gain an increased understanding of the semiotic resources that have the potential to create meaning (Rose, 2012; Jewitt, 2014).

3.2.2 Documentation of the empirical material from the e-commerce site

As opposed to the participant observation in store, in order to gather empirical material from the e-commerce site we have used images, or in other words screenshots. This as a means of documentation where images produced by the research constitutes the empirical material that will be analysed in the study (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). Further, this is used to examine the visual communication through visual merchandising strategies on the e-commerce site. Furthermore the empirical material from the e-commerce site has been chosen according to our observation scheme (see appendix 1, in section 7.2), and thus can be a support of the analysis. Thereafter, we have transcribe the screenshots according to the observation scheme - that we before used as a tool to collect the material. We transcribe the material individually, to enable us to get different points of view and to possibility identify eventually gaps in our interpretations. Unlike the observations in the stores, screenshots are used as a part of empirical material on the website and thus be a support to the analysis (Rose, 2012).

3.2.3 Selection and limitation

In this section we explain the selection of our empirical material gathered from the flagship store and the e-commerce site. The empirical material has been limited to include one store observations in Gucci's flagship store in Stockholm, Sweden and from Gucci's e-commerce site the data collection is based on screenshots that were taken once a week during the time of this thesis. We have in this study, limited ourselves to examine one luxury retail brand, due to the limited time to gain a deeper understand of the phenomenon and to answer the research questions. The empirical material from the observations was chosen according to what meant our subject and which we found representative based on our observation scheme (see appendix 1, in section 7.1). All material from the stores and websites is collected in April and May in 2017. In summary, the empirical material consists one video, which were recorded in the flagship store and on the e-commerce site, multiple screenshots have been taken.

In this study, we are not looking to examine the amount, but instead looking to gain a deeper understanding how luxury retail brands visually communicate through visual merchandising strategies to create luxury experience offline and online. In order to fulfill the purpose of our study, we have chosen one luxury retail brand, namely Gucci. The choice of the luxury retail brand is based on the following three criteria; 1) the luxury retail brand must have a flagship store in Sweden, 2) having an e-commerce site, 3) use visually communication through visual merchandising strategies to create luxury experience offline and online. Based on this, our empirical material is based on selection criteria, which is according to Patton (2002) based on the research purpose. By using criteria for our collaborative empirical material, our selection is more quality-oriented, rather than quantity oriented. In line with what Bryman (2016) mean in qualitative research, our empirical material, based on the criteria, leads to a deeper understanding of our phenomenon. The criteria for the luxury retail brand is that it use visually communication through visual merchandising strategies to create luxury experience offline and online.

To further elaborate on the chosen study object Gucci, is a global luxury retail brand with expressions of eclectic, contemporary, romantic-Gucci products, representing the pinnacle of Italian craftsmanship and is unmatched for their quality and attention to detail (Gucci, 2018). Gucci has surpassed top luxury brands when it comes to their successful usage of digital strategies, and have gained an increased attention for its leading integration of their digital channels and the in-store experience (Danziger, 2017). Since Gucci has successfully integrated the in-store experience to the digital channels, this is a highly relevant to use the luxury retail brand, Gucci based on our criteria for this study. Based on Gucci's (2018) description of themselves and Danziger (2017) statement, we have made the assumption that their expressions in the store and on the website are intended to create a luxury experience. This assumption is the basis for our analysis, which is presented in section 4, for this study.

3.3 Analysis method

In the following section, the analysis methods of the multimodal semiotic analysis, abductive approach and hermeneutic circle will be presented followed by a description of how they are applied in the study.

3.3.1 Multimodal semiotic analysis

In this section, we will explain how the multimodal semiotic analysis is used as analysis method. In line with the strategic communication discipline, a multimodal analysis can identify and analyse patterns which can be of use when understanding a company's communication (Rasmussen, 2014). A multimodal semiotic analysis is a further development of the traditional semiotic approach, and is commonly labelled *social semiotics*. The main difference between traditional semiotics and social semiotics is based on their different views of signs. In traditional semiotics, the underlying meaning of signs are seen as arbitrary, which is based upon agreed conventions, whereas practitioners within social semiotics view signs as never being arbitrary (Rasmussen, 2014). Kress and Van Leeuwen's approach to social semiotics focuses on understanding how signs create meaning based on the *communication context* and how the *sign-maker* construct their meaning (Jewitt 2014; Jewitt, Bezemer & O'Halloran, 2016). The concept sign-maker is used to refer to both the *producer* and the *interpreter* of a sign. Both the producer and the interpreter of signs construct meaning based on their social, cultural, political and technological environment (Jewitt et al., 2016) In this study, signs are understood as previously stated, and we will therefore do not see it relevant to further discuss the traditional semiotics perspective. A multimodal analysis focuses on understanding how different forms of communication interact, are created and how messages are constructed within society (Rasmussen, 2014). Further, a multimodal semiotic analysis can make sense of different communication forms including images, writing, layout, music, material, artefacts, speech, gaze and posture. These communication forms are also referred to as *semiotic resources*, also being a form of sign with a meaning (Jewitt, 2014). Semiotic resources more specifically the actions, materials and the artefacts that are used with the end pur-

pose of communicating (Jewitt et al, 2016). Approaches within multimodal analysis understand the importance of making sense of semiotic resources on their own, in relation to each other and together (Jewitt, 2014). Since multimodality can help understand a full range of communication elements in both physical environment as well as in a digital environment (Jewitt, 2014), using a multimodal analysis both in the flagship store and on the e-commerce site becomes an appropriate analysis method for this study. Multimodality is commonly used on the web by simultaneously using graphics, text, sound, video and interactivity in a single product to create “rich media content” (Rasmussen, 2014).

In this bachelor's thesis, the multimodal social semiotic analysis serves the purpose of providing the initial stages of the analysis to identify how semiotic resources are used within visual merchandising both offline and online by luxury retail brands. The findings from the multimodal analysis allow for a basis that further is analysed the translation of the luxury experience through the luxury paradox.

3.3.2 Coding of the empirical material

In our methods we have used an abductive approach (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009), which has characterized the coding and thematization of the empirical material from the observation schemes offline and online. The two observation schemes offline and online have been constructed from the elements in visual merchandising theory, which is presented in section 2.1. By shifting to the questions in the observation schemes how and what is used to create a complete picture of the material as possible (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 1994). This has been implemented in our study to create a deeper and more detailed understanding and a broader basis for our analysis. By sorting the empirical material in themes is a recurring part of the analysis and each time the empirical material is sorted, the coding becomes more stable (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). This method keeps our analysis in line with the purpose and research questions in this study and helps us as researchers navigate in the empirical material. Based on the observations schemes we did not proceed only from how, e.g., how it looked in the shop or on

the website, but we also shifted to new questions such as what in the observation scheme (see appendix 1, in section 7). Questions such as e.g., What clothing does the staff in the store wear. This change between what analyzes the empirical material is what Gubrium and Holstein (1997) refer to as analytical bracketing. Thereafter once we had gathered and transcribed the empirical material from both channels, we then identified the themes we coded. These themes have been used as the framework for our analyse, this in order to be able to fulfill the purpose with this study. Based on themes, we use multimodal semiotic analysis to investigate the themes more in depth, which is presented below.

The practical applications of the using the multimodal social semiotic analysis in this study has been limited to focusing on the semiotic resources of composition, artefacts and body language, within visual communications through VM. The semiotic resource *composition* includes how everything is positioned such as the layout, placement of elements, the lighting and colors. When it comes to the semiotic resource *artefacts*, it can be understood as symbolic representations that people can categorise, make sense of and comment on. Artefacts is a broadly used term (Jewitt, 2014), and in this study we have limited its usage to making sense of the mannequins used in the flagship store and the “mannequins” on the e-commerce site, in this case the model images. Another semiotic resources that we will discuss and analyse further is *body language*, in this study we understand body language in terms of gestures, posture and gaze. Using multiple semiotic resources as a means to an analysis allows one to make sense of a range of communication forms (Jewitt, 2014).

3.3.3 Hermeneutic circle

The key to credible qualitative analysis is the use of an established analytical method - a systematic way in which the empirical material and the theory are handled in relation to each other to generate insightful and reliable material (Bertilsson, 2014). The analysis method will also be used to analyze the material in the store and on the website, see section 4. According Alvesson & Sköldberg (1994) hermeneutical circle means an interactive reading between the overall material

until an overall understanding has been achieved. A main theme of hermeneutics has from the beginning been *the sense of a part can only be understood if it is connected to the whole* (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 1994). Thus, in the analysis of this study, section 4, it leads to the fact that we switch between analyzing the videoclips and the screenshots in the stores as "parts" and analyzing the store as a whole. On the website, similar analysis process will be conducted where we switch between analyzing the screenshots and the notes, as "parts", and analyzing the website as a whole. The shift between the "parts" and the "whole" is useful to deepen the understanding of how the luxury retail brand use visual communication through visual merchandising through luxury experience offline versus online. Through the shift, it also helps us in the study to avoid immediate, superficial and naive interpretations of the empirical material. Thus, we identify each semiotic resource as "parts" and then together as a "whole" to understand the message from the visual communication through visual merchandising to create luxury experience offline and online. According to Bertilsson (2014), this is suitable to capture the depths, nuances, complexities and paradoxes of a phenomenon, which is relevant to answer our research questions.

3.4 Method reflection

Based on the choice of methodology we have chosen in this study to try to complete Lincoln och Guba (1985) two criteria; *credibility and transferability* to ensure the quality of the study. Furthermore, in the reflections on the methodological choices we will explain the follow-up of the qualities of our methodological choices.

To begin with, we have strategically chosen these methods to weigh up the disadvantage of one method for another. This means that we have been able to investigate and create a deeper understanding of our phenomenon from a transmitter perspective. Further, by several methods with a greater variation width and contributes to a more holistic understanding (Eksell & Thelander 2014; Merriam 1994). This has been done to obtain the credibility criterions by collecting from a

rich empirical material (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As mentioned in section 3.2, we therefore consider that a covert approach to conducting the observations in the stores would be more appropriate for obtaining more detailed empirical material for this study, but it has its ethical problems (Bryman, 2011), which can be argued from an ethical point of view that it is questionable to be covert observers. We were fully aware of this and why we contacted the CEO at Gucci in Sweden to get an approval to complete the study. Unfortunately, we received no response, but since the stores are public environments, we believe we did not interfere with their privacy, which justifies our choice to be covert, as explained in section 3.2. It was also very important for us not to influence the behavior of the employees in the stores, which further argues for our choice to keep us covert. While on the websites, we use a documentation which suited us to gain access to extended, in-depth and detailed empirical material from the e-commerce site. Furthermore, we use documentation through screenshots on the e-commerce site, which enable us to gain access to extended, in-depth and detailed empirical material. Through this we consider there is no ethical problem by this since the e-commerce site is for the public mass. Further, we do not intrude any informants private sphere on the website, as we do not study any comment fields or network community. As for the transferability of this study we have further, tried to complete quality through Lincoln & Guba (1985) third criterion, transferability, by being as transparent as possible. This has been done by describing the research process in section 4, describing the chosen theories along with the empirical material. Also, all empirical material is linked to attachments to create transparency, through the screenshots along with the observation schemes.

The multimodal semiotic analysis has received critiqued for a number of reason. One of the reasons for being critiqued is based on the flexibility in meaning making process which limits the ability to draw sound conclusions (Jewitt, 2014). Since semiotic resources have multiple potential meanings, we as researchers have adapted a western society perspective, both by using literature that adapts the western society perspective, but also since we as authors use are own interpretational framework which adapts to the western society perspective. This, to limit

our interpretations and to be able to go against the critic against the method, as previously mentioned. This because depending on cultures within society semiotic resources can vary largely (Jewitt, 2014). A further critique that is aimed at the multimodal analysis is that since this analysis approach aims to gain in depth knowledge analysis, of often a few amount of semiotic resources, important elements may be neglected (Jewitt, 2014). Thus, as a complement to the multimodal semiotic analysis we use the theoretical framework to gain a more wider perspective of the communication strategy used by our selected object of study.

Finally, we consider that our qualitative implementation of the study, due to the limited time and extent of the bachelor thesis, is relevant and sufficient to answer the study research questions and to achieve the purpose. In order to further contribute to the quality of the study, a supervisor, along with other students in the strategic communication program, has continuously contributed with reflections and constructive criticisms of the work.

4. Analysis

The analysis below is divided into three different steps in order to answer the research questions and fulfill the purpose of this study. The first step uses a multimodal semiotic analysis to examine visual communication through VM strategies offline and answers the first research question. The second step uses a multimodal semiotic analysis to examine visual communication through VM strategies online and answers the second research question. The third step answers the third research question

According to Alvesson och Sköldbberg (2008) the hermeneutic circles is based on understanding the meaning of the “parts” and then to understand the “whole”. By this we have understood the meaning of each semiotic resource within each theme, and then within concluding analysis to understand the message from the visual communication through VM to create luxury experience offline.

4.1 Luxury experience offline

In the following section we use the selected themes to further analyse how 4.1 luxury retail brands visually communicate through visual merchandising to create luxury experience offline. The themes that we use as a framework: The composition in the window display, the presentation of products and the body language; within each theme we analyse the semiotic resources of composition, artefacts and body language. Further, this initial stage of the analysis serves the purpose of identify how the semiotic resources are used within VM offline the luxury retail brand. This section together with section 4.2, will be used to help answer the third research question.

4.1.1 The composition in the window display

According to Rasmussen (2014) the way elements are used within semiotic space are resources, i.e. the composition which is communicated to the viewer. The composition is; the colours, layout, lighting and placement of the elements in the window display and than in the store, which communicate different luxury characteristics.

The window display 1, 2 and 3 at the store a red background is presented, i.e. the wall and the floor. In window display 1 there are two blue mannequins next to each other, wearing clothes in colors which are dark, blue, white, red and black. The colors of the clothes and the mannequins are in contrast with the red darker and saturated background. Similar to the two mannequins in window 1, there are instead two blue green pallets in the window display and in two red pallets in the window display 3. On the pallets in the windows display there are bags in black, dark blue and light blue which is vibrant colours and is in contrast with the red, less saturated background. Common in the windows displays 1, 2 and 3 the red background and the floor, and the elements, i.e. the mannequins, the pallets and the products colors are in contrast to the red background. This highlight and emphasizes the products in focus, which Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) mean that the contrasts in the colors may help the viewer to interpret the clothes more clearly. Further to Jewitt (2014) the saturated colors rather than diluted are associated with emotional intensity and excitement. The semiotic resource of colour can be used to communicate in window display through the contrast in the composition, which contribute the luxury characteristics through the products to represent exclusivity.

How the elements are placed is an important resource within the window display to visually communicate to the viewer. In the windows 1, 2 and 3 the products, the mannequins and the clothes are located on the left and right sides. According to Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006), elements that are placed in a horizontal axis mean that element on the left side can be interpreted as “Given” and on the right “New”. Further Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) mean the element on the left is something that the viewer is familiar with, and on the right side they can be interpreted as something new that the viewer should pay particular attention to.

From this there is no common interpretation of the window displays placement of element, for example in the window display two, the bag on the left is one of their special editions - "Gucci Courier", and therefore should be placed to right. In window display 1, 2 and 3 the products are placed in the middle of the rooms, which Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) mean is strong framing and contribute individuality, and makes it more visible for the viewer to interpret. By this the composition in the window displays 1, 2 and 3 contribute to the luxury characteristics of desirability to the viewer through the products.



Window display 1

Window display 2

Window display 3

Further within the observation we discovered differences in the window displays. In window displays 4 and 5, they differ from the display windows as explained above. In these two display windows, 4 and 5 a white background is present, which is shaped towards the center to create 3D effect. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), the 3D effect means that one element is more noticeable due to its shape and size. In the center of the white 3D dimensional background, a rectangular box is formed with a turquoise background. According to Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) is a visual composition using the center and margin. The white background is margin and is in contrast with the turquoise background. Through the contrasts, as explained above, and the 3D shape of the white background, it creates a depth in the display windows and allows the viewer to focus the eyes on the center. Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) mean the products at the center is under-

stood as the core of information, and the other elements, the margins are understood as subordinates. Further Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) mean that through size, shape and colour create visual “weight” of an element in the composition, which create the greater salience. Based on this the product in the center have greater salience which draws the viewer's attention to the products. By this the hand-bags individually placement contributes desirability to the viewer.



Window display 4 Window display 5 Window display 6

To summarise the windows displays 1, 2 and 3, left of the main entrance of the store, the red color is more vibrant and the mannequin and clothes are less saturated colors, where the products are placed left and right in the composition. Further it thus can be interpreted that elements are placed in the middle of the room of the window displays 1, 2, 3. While in the windows displays 4 and 5, right of the main entrance, the contrasts of the colors are less saturated, where the visual composition through the elements is center, which creates more salient to products. Based on this Gucci may use the semiotic resource in the composition in all the five window displays to communicate in the middle of the window displays. By this it may contribute to the luxury characteristics of desirability and rarity to the viewer.

4.1.2 The presentation of products

Further in the store four rooms are highlighted, where the first two rooms are "Women" products placed, and "Men" the products in the other two rooms. In the

store, they do not communicate through text to categorize the rooms by sex, instead, they use the products to present the sex of the products. This relates to what Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) means that the placement of the elements according to cultural factors contributes to visual "weight", which results in the element getting greater salience. The semiotic resource of placing the products can be used to present the products by gender. Further in the rooms the walls and ceiling are light gray, and the floor is wine-red carpeted floors. This contrasts with the white walled walls, where the glass shelves are placed, to the white wardrobes, and to the white glass boxes on the floor, where the products are placed. The white color as semiotic resource can thus be used as "background color" to create more contrasts for the products. As previously explained above, this highlights and emphasizes the white elements where the product is placed, which Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) mean that the contrasts in the colors may help the viewer to interpret the products more clearly. Based on this, the white elements get the rooms where the products are placed larger visual "weight" in the composition through the contrasts of the colors and thus have greater salience, which adds attention to the products. How the products are placed is an important resource within the store to visually communicate to the viewer. In the shop in all rooms the products are placed by category, on glass shelves and white shelves in the wardrobes in the vertical direction. According to Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006), the vertical position, i.e. "top" and "bottom", indicates that the top of the image is presented as Ideal, and what is presented at the bottom is presented as Real. Ideal means that the general information is presented, i.e. the most prominent, while Real is in contrast, which means that more specific information is presented by (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Specifically, the woman handbags and the man bags are by color, category and size of the glass shelves and the white shelves. On the shelves are the largest bags at the top and then the smaller ones are placed under the order of the same color and category. Consequently, the largest bags are placed on top of the shelves, and in the wardrobes are featured as the Ideal and the products placed under the name of the Real. The bags at the top are usually single and the smaller bags below are usually placed two and two. Furthermore, Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006)

argues that the largest bags due to size, and that they are placed at the top, as well as individually, are shown clearly and have greater salience. Based on this, the semiotic resources, color, size and category can be used by Gucci to communicate and to present the bags in order, and contribute to presenting the luxury characteristics through the bags, such as rarity, desirability and exclusivity. In the glass boxes, the wallets are arranged according to color, category and vertical position as the bags on the walls, where the largest wallets are placed at the top and then the smaller ones.

4.1.3 Mannequins

The semiotic resource of mannequins can be viewed as a central artefact in Gucci's flagship. Mannequins have traditionally been used by dressmakers to construct clothing and later on to display the clothing (Schneider, 1997). In Gucci's flagship store there were not any mannequins with full bodies. However, there were hand mannequins, head mannequins and body mannequins but without legs. All of the mannequins in store have products placed on them similarly to how they are worn or used by an actual person. A possible interpretation of Gucci's usage of the of mannequins in store is that Gucci uses them to display the product in relation to its function. This way of displaying the products can strengthen the products associations with its usage. For instance, a handbag itself has the function of being held, whereas the hand mannequin further signalises its function. Thus, the handbag mannequins strengthens the social constructed sign that the bag is meant to be worn on the arm. The way that this can influence the experience is that the sign-maker him or herself receives two messages through the two different artefacts, the bag and the mannequin; which goes in line with the reasoning that semiotic resources construct meaning on their own but also together (Jewitt et al, 2016). Even though this may appear to be obvious, the implications that can be made is that by using two artefacts that have the same potential meaning, they can communicate a more definite meaning. Here the producer of the sign and the interpreter of the sign can be more sure to have the same interpretations or meaning making process. This goes in line with that the social semiotic approach that vi-

ews it to be important for the producer of the signs to communicate the messages in a maximally understandable way in a given context (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). The mannequins on their own may not be central to contributing the experience of luxury in Gucci's flagship store. However, according to Radón (2010) the characteristics of luxury products themselves largely contribute to the perceived luxury experience; the fact that the mannequins can make the luxury products "speak louder" through double messaging, this in turn enhances the luxury experience.

4.1.4 The body language

Body language including posture, gesture and gaze are semiotic resources that are a part of the way that people communicate and represent themselves in a given environment (Jewitt, 2014). In Gucci's flagship store we have analysed the body language of the guard and the five sales advisors.

When it comes to the gestures, Jewitt (2014) understand them as actions used by individuals to communicate. The guard and sales advisors use different types of gestures that visually communicate to the viewer. Firstly, before we had walked inside the store we had come in contact with a man, or what we assumed was a guard, who had opened the door to Gucci's flagship store. The gesture of *opening of the door* can be viewed to have contributed to an experience of *quality service, exclusivity and prestige* which are key features of luxury brands. More specifically, when the guard opened the door he stood behind it which separated us as viewers from him having been near us. In line with Kress (2010) view, he has understood that the social distance between people can signify a form of social power relation. Thus, as a result of the guard having stood behind the door this can potentially be viewed as a way that he signalled his *power*. In contrast the sales advisors did not make any significant gestures, during the observation, apart from having gestured where something was in the flagship store by using the *pointing gesture*, this goes in line with Jewitt (2014) that states that gestures makes it possible to guide someone's attention in a specific direction (Jewitt, 2014). It is further relevant to note that both the guard and the sales advisors were dressed in

black pants, a black blazer and a discrete white shirt underneath which could potentially signalise authority. This goes in line with Jewitt (2014), who states that being dressing in black clothing symbolically represents *power*; or in other words *status*.

When it comes to gaze, it can be used to signalise what and who someone is giving attention to through eye contact. Both the Gucci's guards and sales advisors appear to use similar but also different gazes as one another. The guard when entering the store did not initiate any eye contact but looked straight forward, in line with Bezemer and Kress (2016) who understand that by avoiding eye contact this can make an individual appear to be unavailable, this can be interpreted as a form of *power social relation*. Similarly to the gaze of the guard, the sales advisors appeared to be avoiding eye contact, but when they received questions and were approached they made eye contact.

Another further interpretation of the guards body language of both the gesture and the gaze is that there appears to be contradictory visual communications. Thus, argued as the gesture of *opening the door*, and the gaze of not making eye contact can be seen to have given the contradictory impressions of being both unavailable (power) and also welcoming (politeness) at the same time. Similarly to the sales advisors, they appeared to be unavailable (power) through eye contact and helpful (politeness) when asked a question. According to Kress (2010) if an individual communicates that he or she has power through other signs, gestures used that communicate "politeness" does not decrease the perception of an individual's power. Thus, in the guards and the sales advisors case they signalised power through other signs. These signs include their clothing, the gaze, the distance they had from us, as viewers, and also the context of them being in Gucci's flagship store. Consequently, both the guard and the sales advisor communicate a position of *power, authority and status* which made it possible for them to be polite through gestures without losing their perception of power, authority and status.

When it comes to the postures, both the guard and the sales advisors had the similar posture of having held a straight posture. Further, for the majority of the time, the personnel held their arms straight down with their hands closed either

behind their back or in the front. An interpretation of the posture is that it visually communicates to the viewer that the staff in the store are authority figures. Another interesting aspect was the position of where the sales advisors stood in the different rooms. Here the common pattern was that they stood in the corners of the rooms. This can be understood interpreted through Kress's (2010) understanding that the social distance between individuals in a given environment can be a signifier of power. Thus, it is possible to suggest that Gucci's positions their sales advisors in the in the corners of the room, because they want to hold a distance between them and the the viewers in store. The distance that the sales advisors created in the store can be interpreted as contributing to their perceived *power*, and further through their black clothing and the context itself.

To summarise, the semiotic resources of body language used in Gucci's flagship store is mainly communicates through *power*, *authority* and *status*. However, the luxury characteristics of *providing quality service*, *exclusivity* and *prestige* appear also to be present. Further, it can be understood that through the different forms of body language, Gucci as a producer of signs and a sign-maker, at the same time lures the viewer in but also creates a distance between the viewer. This, can be conclude to contribute to the luxury experience in store. The body language in turn contributes to the luxury experience created in Gucci's flagship store.

4.1.5 Concluding analysis

Gucci strategically uses the semiotic resources of composition, artefacts and body language to communicate the luxury characteristics in the store. In the window displays and in the store, the semiotic resources work to highlight the products in center to expose the luxury characteristics and to communicate the luxury experience to meet the viewers expectations. The semiotic resources within VM where the design factors is used to attract customers and create interest in the products and the brand (Nordfält, 2007), which is used to create experience in the store atmosphere (Hernant & Boström, 2011; Mossberg, 2015). Artefacts including the mannequins and the composition as semiotic resources within the design factors of VM in the window display and in the store are used to emphasize and place the

products in focus to communicate the luxury characteristics. In addition, the store uses the VM social semiotic resources of body language as a part of the social factors, to communicate luxury characteristics through non-verbal communication to navigate the viewer in the store. From this, the luxury characteristics are communicated in the store through design factors and through social factors to create a luxury atmosphere in the store. This shows in the analysis that several semiotic resources interact with each other in the store and have the opportunity to create a luxurious atmosphere depending on how they are used. If semiotic resources within the design factors and social factors do not interact with each other, the viewer can perceive the store as being cheap (Nordfält, 2007; Cho & Lee, 2016). This connects to what Wiedmann and Hennings (2013) that mean that the design factors, and the social factors in the store are important for creating luxury atmosphere. Based on this, it may be problematic to represent the luxury characteristics because the sender may not be aware of the differences of the underlying meaning of the semiotic resources that represent luxury, which can lead to different interpretations for the viewer. In addition, we will discuss the consequences to understand how the different semiotic resources communicate a message.

4.2 Luxury experience online

In the following section we use the selected themes to further analyse how luxury retail brands visually communicate through visual merchandising to create luxury experience online. The themes that we use as a framework: The composition on the first page, the presentation of products and the body language; within each theme we analyse the semiotic resources of composition, artefacts and body language. Further, this initial stage of the analysis serves the purpose of identify how the semiotic resources are used within VM offline the luxury retail brand. This section together with section 4.1, will be used to help answer the third research question.

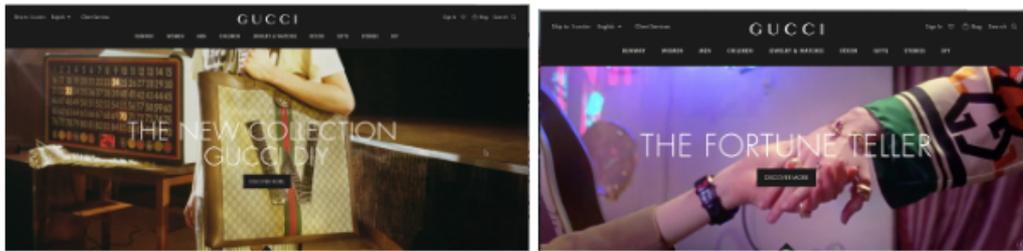
4.2.1 The composition on the first page

In this section, we analyze the first page and then the main sub categories, and subcategories on the e-commerce site and how it uses the elements in the semiotic room as resources that communicate to the viewer. The composition of the semiotic resources is the same as in the above section, i.e. color, light, layout, and placement of elements.

The first page online where visual attributes are important for attracting and communicating a message to the viewer. Based on this the way elements are used and placed within semiotic space are resources that communicate to the viewer. Further on the first page it uses a vertical placement of elements, i.e. “top” and “bottom”, as explained above, because the viewer can only scroll downwards. Furthermore, it is shown by the first page composition, where the top section menu bar, on the website is always black and firm, where the general information is presented as Real (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). The menu bar is firmly mounted so that the menu bar stays in the same place when the viewer scrolls down on the page. In the menu bar, colors are used by contrast, the background is black and in the middle is highlighted a white Gucci logo located in the middle. Furthermore, the Gucci logo is also larger than the menu bar below, where the text is light gray, which contrasts with the white logo, and the black background. In addition, in the menu bar, three colors are used, where the Gucci logo is white and placed in the middle, and the menu bar is light gray, and the top text is dark gray. Based on this, the logo is emphasized mainly because of the white color because it is more vibrant, which is more in contrast to the other text because they are less saturated to the black background. According to Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006), they mean by size and contrasts in an element, it is important to emphasize, that is, the greater the salient, and it further causes the viewer to pay more attention to it. Because the white logo is placed in the middle and contrasts with other text in the menu bar, Kress Van Leeuwen (2006) means that the central element is understood as the information core, i.e. the logo and the other elements, ie the text in the menu bar and the text at the top of the menu bar as submissive. Based on that,

the semiotic resources of color, location and size are used in the composition in the menu bar to represent an element before anything else.

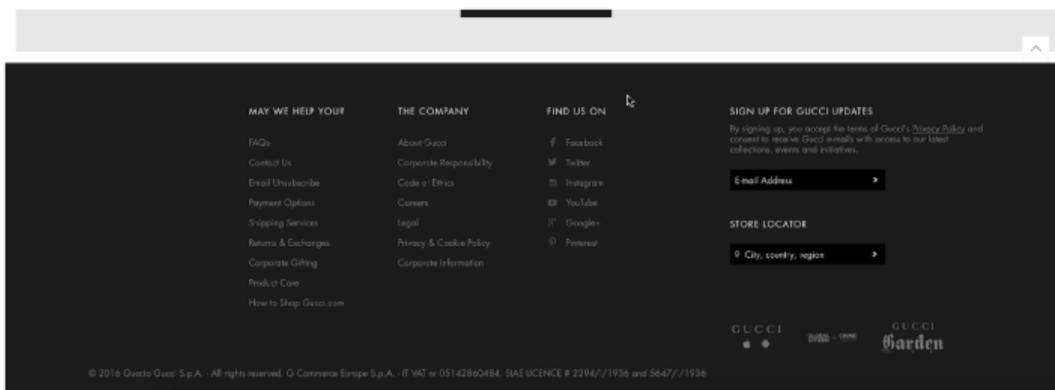
Below the black menu bar on the first page, which is in contrast through colors to the video clip or the image. Depending on the Special Collections it differs the use of a video clip or an image to present the products. The color in the video clip and the image is more vibrant than the less saturated black menu bar, which are used as a tool to highlight and emphasize the products where models carrying different products depending of which special collection is present. Interestingly, from the observation on the first page is that the lower part where the video clip or image are used changes every week after their Special Collections, for example “The New Collection Gucci DIY”, “The Fortune Teller” etcetera.



Further down, below the the video clip or the image a white border is present, which is in contrast to the light gray color in the middle, which create the light grey color in foreground. In the grey color the special collections are present which match the content in the video clip or image, and are more salient due to its more vibrant colors than the less saturated light grey color. The light grey colour as background is in contrasts with the products, models, texts and icons, which Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) suggests the contrast can be a tool for helping the viewer to interpret the image. Also Gucci uses the semiotic resources of size in the composition, when it comes to the products and text to make it more salient to the viewer.



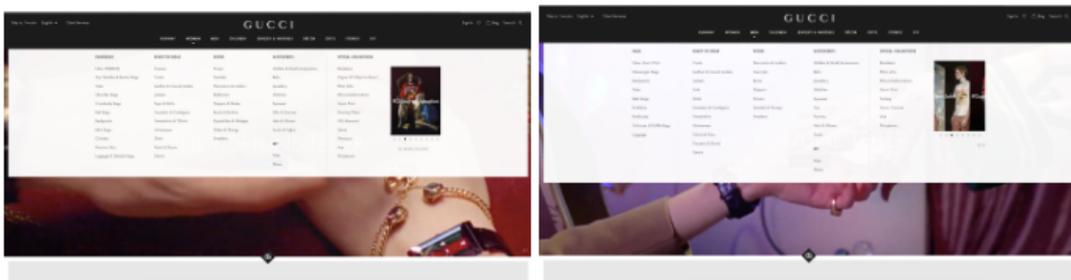
Further down, below the light gray background, the lowest part of the e-commerce site a similar menu bar is used as the menu bar in the top. The use of semi-otic resource in the composition of the lower menu bar is similar to the top menu bar, but instead the information of text and icons differs. The lower menu bar newer changes and is present on every page of the e-commerce site, to present more specific and practical information to the viewer, which follows Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) vertical composition, i.e. top and bottom.



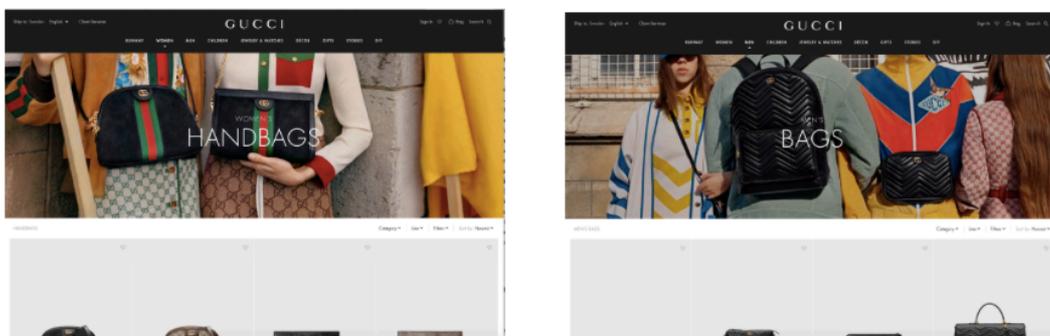
4.2.2 The presentation of products

On the website they have categorized the products according to “Women” and “Men”, which is presented in the menu bar. Under “Women” and “Men” in the menu bar, products are presented in main subcategories, such as “Handbag”, “Ready-To-Wear”, “Shoes”, “Accessories” and “Special Collections”. It is slightly different for men in the main subcategories, where there are “Bags” instead of “Handbags”, but the other main subcategories are the same. Further under the main subcategories, products are presented in subcategories. The text in the main subcategories is black, which resembles the black color in the background in the menu bar, and the text in subcategories is black but in a lighter tone. The background is light gray, which resembles it under the video or picture on the first page. The black text in the main subcategory is highlighted mainly because of the contrasts as well as the size, and then the black bright color of subcategories is highlighted to the light gray background. How the text is placed is an important resource on the website. According to Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006), they mean that through the contrasts in the text and size, the main subcategory has a greater

saliency, thus increasing the attention of the viewer. Main subcategories are placed in horizontal line, as menu bar in menu bar, and subcategories are placed in vertical position. The semiotic resources of color and placement in the first page composition can be used by Gucci to emphasize the products in focus, and through text and icons for clarifying information to the viewer. According to Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006), the image and the text as a resource are used to express meaning. This can help to make it easy for viewers to look at the products and find information.

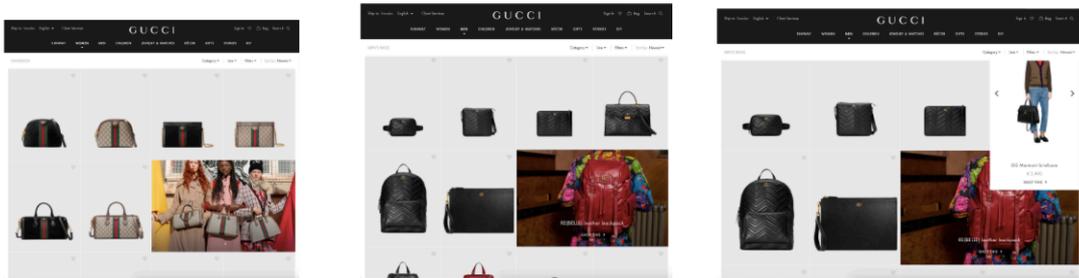


Further when the viewer clicks on any of the main categories, the products are presented with first one image and then text on it. The image is cropped and the product is presented in the center by main category. Furthermore, the product and the text are centered in the composition of the image, which Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) mean that from the viewers point of view is understood as the core of information. Based on this, Gucci can use the color and size of the text, as well as the image's colors to get the product in the foreground, which creates greater saliency.



Further when the viewer scrolls underneath the image, a white frame is highlighted, and in the frame the products are presented to a light gray back-

ground, as on the first page of the website. This causes the products to end up in the foreground. When the viewer drags the cursor over a product, a new image of the product is highlighted with a white background, where a model holds the product. The white background of the image contrasts with the light gray background, which makes the product end up in focus and thus has greater salience. Further under the main subcategory, all products are presented by category, color and size. They also present single images by category to the products presented under the main subcategory. This to visualize the product in use for the viewer.



In subcategories, the products are presented by vertical placement in text where the viewer can specifically choose the type of product category they are looking for. Further after a specific product category, the products are placed with a light gray background, and when the viewer drags the cursor over a product, the background becomes white in the image, as explained above. The product within a specific category is then placed by "line" and color. This use of resources under the main subcategories and subcategories may be resources Gucci uses to present the products in focus and communicate the luxury characteristics.

In summary of the semiotic resources in the composition on the website, Gucci uses few colors like black, white and light gray to create contrast between elements and to highlight what dominates. Based on this, it is easier for the viewer to navigate the website, to find information and to visualize the product in use for the viewer. This can communicate luxury characteristics, desirability, rarity and exclusivity by presenting the products in the foreground through the contrasts of the colors. As previously explained, the vertical positioning of the elements can communicate ideas about "top and bottom". This can further communicate the

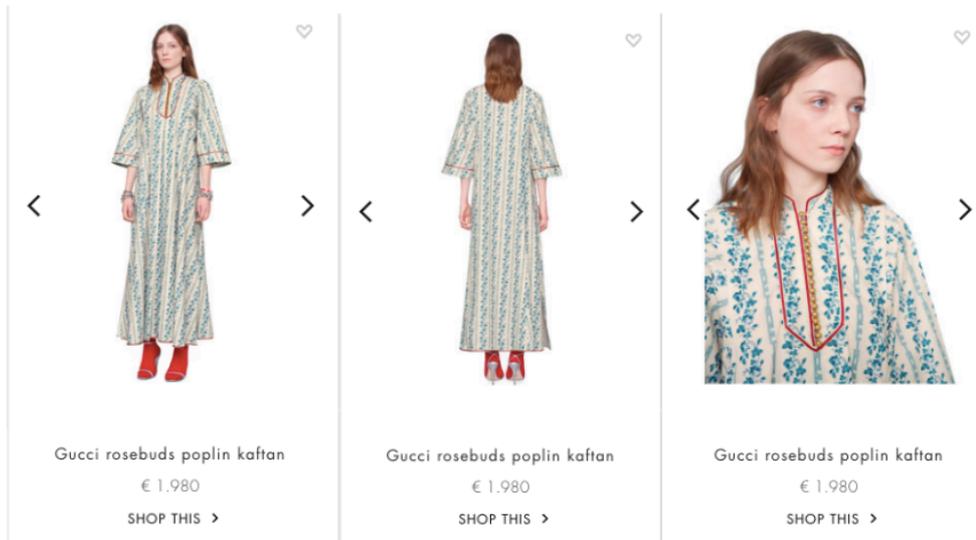
luxury characteristics by placing the logo in the middle, for example, in the menu bar to highlight the Gucci brand for the viewer.

4.2.3 Mannequins online

On Gucci's e-commerce site there aren't any mannequins displayed, however instead they use images of models, "mannequins online", to display the products. Thus, the semiotic resource of artefact is here interpreted as the images of models. Images of models is a central artefact on Gucci's e-commerce site to display products. Below we understand two common ways that Gucci displays products through the images of models online.

On Gucci's e-commerce site there is a common pattern where they on the product category pages for both men and women, more specifically the clothing and the bags subpages. Here they use a sequence of images of models to display a model wearing a specific product. This will further be explained through images: "*Mannequin 1*", "*Mannequin 2*" and "*Mannequin 3*". The three images exemplifying how individual products are displayed on the subcategory page of "Dresses" under the "Woman" heading in the main menu bar. The three images serve the purpose of representing three of the four images that were displayed of a specific model wearing a dress. An additional image in the sequence of pictures was of the product itself - the dress. The sequence of images is somewhat like a gallery where the viewer, or user, is able to click on the arrows on both the right and on left side. The model in the images can be described as being slender, her skin tone is pale, she appears to be tall and she is wearing heels which gives her extra length. The model in three images: "*Mannequin 1*", "*Mannequin 2*", and the fourth one which is not included, displays an image of the dress on the model's whole body. The model in image "*Mannequin 3*", is a close up of her face and her chest where the details of the dress in the picture can more clearly be seen by the viewer. The viewer is able to see five different images of the model and can further zoom in on the visual. Thus, the viewer of the products on Gucci's e-commerce site have the ability to be able to examine the quality of the clothing easier through this function. The quality of products is an important characteristic of luxury brands (At-

wal & Williams, 2009). The fact that Gucci allows the viewer to be able to zoom, and view the sequence of model images wearing the clothing, this could potentially give the viewer more perceived authenticity and exclusivity, which are further characteristics that luxury brands strive for to have (Atwal & Williams, 2009).



Mannequin 1

Mannequin 2

Mannequin 3

Image “*handbag mannequin 1*” below is from the main subpages of “Handbags” under the main menu bar on Gucci’s e-commerce site. It serves to demonstrate how the cropped model images, that are used on Gucci’s site, display the products. The image can be interpreted as a female holding a handbag, with the bag in focus whereas her legs and face are cropped out. It is possible to interpret the cropped mannequin online as a way that Gucci aims to display the bag in relation to its function. This way of displaying the products can strengthen the products associations with its usage; whereas, a handbag itself has the function of being held and the cropped model further signalizes its function. This is a frequently recurring online to emphasizes the luxury products, to strengthen their message of luxury. This way of communicating the mannequin online, resembles the example of the hand mannequin mentioned in section 4.1.3 These kind of mannequins are frequently used, on Gucci’s e-commerce site, on the main product subpages where a larger image with the specific product and a cropped mannequin wearing the product in relation to its function.



New: RE(BELLE)

Category ▾ | Line ▾ | Filters ▾ | Sort by: Newest ▾

Handbag mannequin 1

To conclude, the semiotic resource of the *mannequins online*, in other words the images of the models, that are used online appear to be used to visually communicate the luxury characteristics of *exclusivity* and *authenticity*, and further communicate luxury by placing the luxury product in focus. Gucci appears through the visual communications of the images of models, together with the product enhance the message of the luxury products themselves. More specifically, the models in the images appear to strengthen the social constructed sign and in turn enhances the communication of the luxury product.

4.2.4 Body language online

Similarly to in the flagship store, on Gucci's e-commerce site we have understood the semiotic resource of body language as the gesture, postures and gaze. On the e-commerce site we have analysed the body language of the models in the images and videos.

On the e-commerce site there were no apparent gestures in the images on the site, however it was possible to view gestures in the video clips on the website. In one of the main videos displayed on the site there were a number of different gestures made. To exemplify, the screenshot of the video below the image "*body language 1*", is a single sequence image which demonstrates gestures used. To begin describing the image itself, it is black and white. The image is of a room

filled with approximately eighty younger adults, where the majority of them are sitting on the floor. These individuals have their gaze on a female young adult sitting on a table who appears to be speaking into a microphone. The female on the table is positioned at a higher height than the others in the room, and she is positioned with a clear distance away from the others in the room. The higher height she has is due to the table she is sitting on, whereas the majority of the younger adults, in contrast, are on the floor.



Body language 1

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) an *actor* in an image is he or she who is directing a specific *action or gesture*, towards a specific person or people with a *goal* in mind. In relation to the individuals that the gesture is directed towards, this process becomes “reactional” when the individuals have their gaze on the specific gesture. In this scenario the younger adults on the floor become the “reactional” individuals and the female on the table doing the “hand in the air” gesture becomes the actor. Since the goal and reactions themselves are interpreted by the viewer of the image and it is up to their interpretations to make sense of the image (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006), we offer an interpretation of the female on the table’s objective and the reactional younger adults. The female in the image “*body language 1*”, above appears to through her gesture of having her “arm in the air” and at the same time speaking into a microphone, be signaling that she has something important to say. The gaze of the young adults, being on the female on the table in focus, appear to be signaling that they admire her and what she

could potentially be saying. Thus, it can be understood that the gesture appears to symbolize that she possesses a position of power and has a strong voice. This is further strengthened by the fact the young adults on the floor replicate the gesture of the female on the table by also having a hand in the air. According to Kress (2010) social power can be expressed through keeping a distance, thus *the female on the table* can symbolize that she has a powerful position in relation to the author *young adults* in the room. The female further strengthens her perceived social power since she is sitting on the table that gives her height in comparison to the others are sitting on the floor. This goes in line with Kress (2010), that acknowledges power relations in relation to how high and low elements are in a given environment, whereas higher elements are viewed as being more powerful than the lower elements as less powerful.

To further explain semiotic resource of body language, we understand more specifically the postures and gaze of the images of models used on Gucci's e-commerce site. On the e-commerce site there are recurring postures and gazes, one main posture and three main gazes, images: "*model 1*", "*model 2*", "*model 3*" and "*model 4*" below are meant to demonstrate this. In images: "*model 1*", "*model 2*", and "*model 3*", above, the models all have a posture with a straight back and with their arms positioned straight down. In images: "*model 1*" and "*model 2*" the models do not make any eye contact with the camera, which appears to be the most common recurring gaze on the website. Bezemer and Kress (2016) offer an interpretation of this gaze, where they state that this makes an individual appear to be unavailable. Further according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) they characterize the gaze of a person as either a "demand" of or an "offer" to the viewer. The "demand" refers to the gaze looking directly at the viewer and demands something, whereas the "offer" is when the look is not present. In both of the images the gaze appears to be characterised by an "offer" in other words, the viewer's role in this image is to be an invisible outlooker. In the image "*model 3*", the model is looking into the camera with a confident, almost disapproving gaze, being the second most recurring gaze on the website. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) this type of gaze, looking into the camera with a cold

disdain can be viewed as a “demand” since the model is not looking directly into the camera - at the viewer. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) further states that this form of stare “demands” the viewer to relate to them in the same way an inferior relates to a superior. In the image “*model 4*” the model has a indirect blank stare, this is the third most recurring gaze. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) understand an indirect gaze in an image as forming unfamiliarity rather than creating an intimacy between the participant and the viewer. Gaze number two, image “*model 3*” and gaze three, image “*model 4*”, appear to be equally as recurring gazes on the e-commerce site.



Model 1

Model 2

Model 3

Model 4

To summarise, the semiotic resource of body language, including the gestures, gaze and posture, that is used on Gucci’s e-commerce site to visually communicate the luxury characteristic of *power*, in other words *status* to the viewer. The gestures on the e-commerce site are limited to the video clips on the website. There appears to be three main types of gazes used in the images of the models on the website. The majority of the gazes are “offer” which according to Kress Van Leeuwen (2006) means the individual in the image does not look into the camera and thus not at the viewer. The rest of the gazes are “demand” which according to Kress Van Leeuwen (2006) mean is that the image is “demanding” something from the viewer.

4.2.5 Concluding analysis

In the section 4.1 analysis, it was found that in Gucci's offline store use the semiotic resources within VM to visually communicate the luxury characteristics. Thus, the semiotic resources can be used to communicate the luxury characteristics. To get a deeper understanding of how luxury brands communicate luxury characteristics on the e-commerce site through semiotic resources. As mentioned in section 2.1, the VM can be used to understand how an e-commerce site can create experience (Khakimdjanova & Park, 2005; Ha et al., 2007). The analysis can thus be based on the same semiotic resources offline as online when using the VM as a framework. To further understand how Gucci communicates the luxury characteristics on the e-commerce site, can be used to understand how luxury characteristics emphasize the luxury experience online. The analysis showed that on the Gucci's website, Gucci strategically uses semiotic resources through composition, artefacts and body language to visually communicate the luxury characteristics by paying attention to the viewer, to present what the viewer expects online. More specifically, the composition is used as a semiotic resource online through the design factors in VM to emphasize and highlights the products in focus to communicate their luxury characteristics to the viewer. In addition, the social factors online are used in communicating to the viewer, to emphasize the luxury characteristics, but no background factors are highlighted. In addition, the online semiotic resources of body language are used in the social factors of visual merchandising to communicate the luxury characteristic of status through nonverbal communication to the viewer. Further, the online semiotic resource artefact of mannequins online, the images of models online, are used to as a part of visual merchandising to visually communicate the luxury characteristic of exclusivity, status, authenticity and prestige. From this, the luxury characteristics are created and communicated on the e-commerce site through semiotic resources within VM factors i.e. design, social factors and through usage of mannequins online to create a luxury experience online. This shows in the analysis that several semiotic resources interact with each other online and have the opportunity to create a luxury experience online depending on how they are used. If semiotic resources interact with each ot-

her, the viewer can perceive the e-commerce site as easily navigated and luxurious. Furthermore, how luxury retail brand translate the luxury experience from offline and online, and how it reflects to the paradox is further discussed in next section 4.3.

4.3 Translating the luxury experience through the paradox

In section 4.1 and 4.2, we identified the luxury characteristics which can contribute to create luxury experience offline and online through the multimodal semiotic analysis. Further, in this section we analyse how luxury retail brand translate the luxury experience from offline to online, and how it reflects to the luxury paradox.

It shows that Gucci uses visual communication through VM strategies to communicate the luxury characteristics to create luxury experience offline and online. However, the luxury experience can be difficult to create when viewed from the perspective of the existing paradox. The first impression in the window displays offline and on the first page online it shows how they use creative VM design factors to visually communicate the products in focus to attract and create interest to the viewer. More specifically, the window display offline uses 3D designs, records, colors, etcetera, and online on the first page instead uses UXD through video clips or images, text and colors to visualize the products in focus to the viewer. This detached relationship of VM design factors offline and online to communicate the products in focus can be used to create the luxury experience and to attract the viewer offline and online. On the first page online the UXD is complementary to the VM design factors from offline and can be used to visually communicate the luxury brands characteristics. This can contribute to the paradox of not being scarce but wanting to be perceived as being rare by the viewer offline and online through the VM design factors, and UXD online. Further on the first page online, images and video clips are used, which changes weekly as previously explained in section 4.2.1, which Gucci can use to make the viewer feel committed and interested. It can be used to attract the viewer and then help the first page experience unique, which can be linked to the creation of luxury experience.

However, how the luxury experience is transferred and communicated from offline to online differs. Offline the flagship store located next to several other flagships stores on one of Stockholm's most attractive shopping streets, so-called agglomeration (Eskilsson & Fredriksson, 2010), which can contribute to the creation of the luxury experience. While online is not placed on a specific address, instead it is on a public space. This can be linked to the paradox of luxury brands where they want to be out of reach of the public mass, seem to be scarce, which goes against the luxury experience from offline to online. Further offline, "Women" and "Men" products are placed in different rooms, which mimics the horizontal menu bar on the website to categorize the products by gender. This makes it easier for the viewer to navigate offline and online. More specifically online, a sitemap is used in the menu bar with text, which contributes to readability (Cooper, 2014) and can simplify the viewer navigating the page. The light gray color of the walls offline is similarly used online as a background where the products are placed. When the products are not selected, the background is gray, but when the viewer drags the cursor over a product, the background becomes white online. This simulates how the products are placed with a white background offline. Consequently, Gucci uses offline and online by translating the colors to highlight and emphasize the products through contrasts. Further, the colors used offline and online are similar to few colors in the composition. Offline is light gray, wine red and white color, and online is used black, white and light gray, where the cold colors dominate. It can furthermore be used by Gucci in a similar way offline and online to translate the cold colors to create a positive, comfortable and calm effect (Nordfelt, 2007; Mossberg, 2015; Cho & Lee, 2016) to the viewer. Further online, few colors can help avoid visual noise (Cooper, 2014) for the viewer. This can cause Gucci to use colors through contrasts of elements to make it more easy-navigated for viewers to watch the products offline and online. This can contribute to the creation of "desire and exclusivity" to counteract the online internet paradox. Because the viewer can touch and try the clothes offline, Gucci uses visual techniques to visualize further for the viewer about the products. When the viewer clicks on the product, several images are presented, where the products are pre-

sented from several angles. Within specific products, they use models in the images as opposed to the mannequin offline, to visualize how the products can look like on the viewer. Furthermore, the viewer can visualize the products in more detail through a zoom function. Also, the viewer can read about a product in detail after a detailed product description. Based on this, the visual through color contrasts, multiple images, models of models, zoom function and detailed product description can help visualize the products more in detail, which can contribute to the online luxury experience. Thus, Gucci can use UXD factors to communicate luxury experience online by making it more user friendly and functional for viewer visualizing the products, which can have a positive impact on desire and exclusivity from offline to online.

How the products are placed after categorization is similar to offline and online, for example, offline, the shoes are placed on their own wall, the clothes in the wardrobes, the bags on the shelves and glass box accessories, which mimics the horizontal main subcategory line online. It may be the world championship design factor and UX design faculties, offline and online Gucci uses to communicate by categorizing the products more clearly for the viewer, which can help create luxury experience from offline to online.

More specifically, for the "Women" and "Men" products, it is located by category in vertical direction, as well as color and size, as explained in sections 4.1.2 and 4.2.3, which resembles from offline to online. This can cause Gucci to use categorization for vertical placement of products offline to online subcategories to create usability for viewer. Further online there are additional UX design factors Gucci uses to make it more user friendly for the viewer, where they can categorize the products themselves. This by selecting a specific main category and then clicking on which "line" they are looking for, i.e. which model, and the viewer can use filters to search for a specific product, e.g. by color, material and size. These UX design factors online can be used by Gucci to create a luxury online experience by making it easy-navigated after categorizing the viewer and finding specific product, which can help communicate luxury experience online.

As a part of the VM social factors the body language has an important role in how luxury retail brand visual communicate in store. The way that body language is expressed in offline and online contributes to the luxury experience through subtle non-verbal visual communication practices. Gucci may transfer the body language online not only by using the same gazes and postures per say, but also by transferring the underlying creation of the luxury characteristic of status. More specifically, the body language is expressed in video clips and images of models. Similarly to the gaze of the guard and the sales advisors offline where they avoid eye contact, many of the visuals of the models online are not looking at the viewer (through the lense of the camera), and by not making eye contact individuals appear to be “unavailable”. In line with the luxury paradox, since Gucci’s e-commerce site is “accessible”, by the public mass population, and the fact that through body language Gucci send out the message of “unavailability” this can be seen as technique to counter the paradox. Further, online the underlying message of “unavailability” appears to be more frequently used through the images of the models online, in comparison to offline. Having said this, luxury retail brands can potentially translate the luxury experience by using VM social factors online. This, by using images and video clips with models that communicate “unavailability”, as mentioned above, they can counter the luxury paradox.

However, when translating the VM social factors of body language online, there are certain limitations due to the lack of being able to have physically present personnel online. For instance, the gesture of the guard opening the door this experience can not be reconstructed online. The gestures that are used in store are used as a means of interacting with the viewer, in contrast on the e-commerce site the viewer is only observing the gestures, the gestures being limited to being seen in video clips. The interactions with the viewer in store can be used as a way to navigate the viewer, if she or she doesn’t know where a product is and used as a way to provide quality service. This further limits luxury brands from being able to have the same kind of high quality service through the personnel in the store. Thus, for luxury retail brands it can be suggested that it is of high importance to

provide an easy navigation, through search functions, and a simple design interface to compensate for the lack of personnel.

When it comes VM strategy of using mannequins in store they can be viewed to have been transferred to the e-commerce site. Gucci does this by reconstructing the concept of mannequins in store by using the images of the physical models. This because both the mannequins in store and the images of the models online, allow the viewer to visualize the product on themselves. Gucci uses mannequins offline and online strategically to maximize the desired message of wanting to communicate the luxury characteristics. The luxury characteristics which the product itself contribute with, by creating two visual messages through two different artefacts, a product and the mannequins, a unified enhanced message can be created. However, there are clear differences when it comes to the mannequins used in the store and when it comes to the “online mannequins”, in other words the images of the models online. Even though the mannequins in store can be viewed as being reconstructed online by using images of models, there are clear differences. Whereas, the mannequins in store are objects that have been historically constructed to be used to represent a physical body, the images of the models online is a still sequence of an actual human body. Another difference is that the amount of mannequins in the physical store are fewer, in comparison to the images of the models on the online store.

The result for the luxury experience translates offline to online through the paradox. This means that Gucci try to use different VM design factor and social factors from offline to online to translate the luxury experience. It also shows that different UX design factors are used online to compensate that offline can not communicate to create a luxury experience. It further indicates that Gucci communicate high modalities through colors, placements and lights, both offline and online. Based on this, Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) mean that it can contribute the viewer to view the information as a true reflection of reality. Since Gucci communicate through the VM design factors and social factors offline and online. It can thus be interpreted that Gucci transfers the luxury experience from offline

to online, and through UXD factors to compensate what the offline channel can not communicate to create a luxury experience.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this section we will draw conclusions from what we have found in the analysis and then discuss it. This will explain the practical consequences of strategic communication based on the purpose of the study. Finally, we will provide further research on the subject luxury experience translation offline to online.

The purpose of this study is to problematize how luxury retail brands use visual merchandising strategies to translate the luxury experience offline and online, and how it reflects to the paradox. The results of the analysis show how luxury experience can be created offline and online in different ways through VM strategies to visual communicate. The conclusion show how the strategic communicator can use VM strategies to create luxury experience offline and online. However, since there are differences between the offline luxury atmosphere and online luxury atmosphere the strategic communicator can use UXD online to complement the VM strategies online to visually communicate the luxury experience online.

One way to contribute to the luxury experience offline to online is that it can be done by using semiotic resources in the VM strategies. By using semiotics as tools, it can identify whether it represents the luxury characteristics for creating a luxury experience offline. In order to further understand translate through the representations of luxury characteristics online, based on the semiotic resources offline. After using semiotic resources in the VM strategies can contribute to a more profound understanding how luxury characteristics are used offline. It can then be used online to further identify for what is then missing to represent the luxury characteristics online to transfer the luxury experience. However, the representations of luxury characteristics offline and online can be distinguished for how the semiotic resources can be interpreted by the viewer and thus be problematic.

Further, in the conclusion how luxury characteristics can be transferred from offline to online is furthermore problematic based on the paradox that exist in luxury retail brands. Since luxury retail brands offline want to be perceived as, which is out of reach and online do not have similar possibilities, the luxury experience can be interpreted differently for the viewer. To prevent the luxury experience from being properly interpreted offline as online, strategic communicators have the task of identifying luxury characteristics on both offline and online. Since the strategic communicator can never be really sure if the luxury experience translates from offline to online it can identify for the missing luxury characteristics. Furthermore, strategic communicators can use similar luxury characteristics from offline to online to create luxury experience on both channels. A further step is through UXD, by using additional design features online to compensate for luxury characteristics that can not be transferred from offline to online. The use of UXD can hopefully be another step to compensate luxury characteristics offline can not create, which can be done through various factors UX design online. It can be hopefully used online to counter the existing internet paradox and negative attitudes online. This is more important now due to the development of e-commerce in luxury retail brands.

This study has given us a further understanding of how in practice strategic communication professionals within the luxury retail sector that are working with both offline and online visual merchandising can use visual communications. The luxury paradox can create challenges for strategic communication professionals for they must be able to reflect on how the luxury paradox affects the communication practices. The importance for luxury retail brands to translate the luxury experience from offline to online will continue to progress, therefore this study which contributes to understanding on this topic, is insightful. The results of this study contributes largely to the research field within visual communications through visual merchandising. The analysis of translating the luxury experience from offline to online, develops the lack of research on this specific topic (Okonkwo, 2009; Kluge et al., 2013; Hyeonsoo, Choi & Lee, 2015), further we problematize this through the paradox within luxury brands. This study is not only rele-

vant for practitioners within the field of strategic communications but is even relevant for individuals whom have a desire to understand the complexities within luxury retail brands and how this can be understood within visual communications through visual merchandising. The reader gains knowledge on luxury representations of luxury characteristics, both offline and online, that contribute to luxury experience and thereby given an approach to identify them.

To conclude, the findings of our study shall not be seen as a given truth, but be seen to provide the reader with interpretations and insights of the gathered empirical material. When using visual communications through visual merchandising strategies it is of importance to understand the multiple possible interpretations as a communication professional, this because language is more than what initially is seen, it is a constitution of representatives that are shaped by society.

5.1 Suggestions for further research

Throughout the writing process of this thesis, we have even reflected on other potential research methods which could have been used to reach different interpretations of the empirical material. A possible suggestion could have been to conduct interviews from the sender's perspective, which could have contributed to a deeper understanding of the underlying communication strategies that contribute to the luxury experience online and offline. In contrast to the transmitter perspective, a recipient perspective had helped to understand how the recipient perceives the online and offline experiences. Further researchers can also analyze different luxury brands and how it translates luxury experience offline to online. This was not investigated in this study because there was not enough time and resources to investigate more luxury brands. The results of this study show that luxury retail brands can visually communicate to translate the luxury experience offline to online. We therefore consider that other researchers can research on the basis of results.

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7. Appendix 1

7.1 Observation scheme - The flagship store

Window display key aspects - first side:

Aesthetic/visual resources

What multimodal resources are used on the window display to create experience?

What colours and colour settings are used?

How is lightning/brightness?

Are there any mannequins?

What props are there?

What typography is used?

What is the theme?

Store atmosphere

How is the design in store?

How is the layout in store?

Is it hard to find the products?

How is the store experienced inside?

Showroom

Visual resources

How are the products presented in store?

Are there any other visual presentations in the store?

Checkout

What products are presented in the checkout?

How does it look like?

Overall

Staff members - Social factors

What style is prominent among the staff, eg., clothing, hair, accessories?

What body language and facial expression can be seen?

What verbal language is used, i.e. are they polite?

Gesture in relation to speech?

Size, shapes and material?

Are there many people in store?

How can this affect the visibility in the store?

7.2 Observation scheme - E-commerce site

Window display key aspects first page:

Aesthetic/visual resources to create experience

What colours and colour settings are used?

How is lighting/brightness?

Are there any mannequins?

What is the theme?

Store atmosphere/E-commerce atmosphere

How is the design?

How is the layout?

How is it to navigate?

Is it hard to find specific products?

How are the products presented?

How is the e-commerce site experienced?

Showroom

Visual resources

How are the products presented?

From which angles are they presented?

Are there any zoom in functions? How does it work?

Are there any video presentation of products?

How is it presented?

Are there any other visual presentations on the e-commerce site?

Checkout/Shopping bag

How is the products presented?

Are there any additional sales?

How does it look like?

Overall

Social factors

What social functions are used?

Is there any connection to social media?

Is there any service information