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HAS GUCCI GONE TOO PREMIUM MEDIOCRE?

An analytical discussion about the Florentine fashion
house's seemingly bottomless consumer range

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Abstract

This thesis sets out to give an insight in why Gucci's entry level products are doing increasingly well nowadays and clarifies how it is connected to Gucci's global presence in the digital world. It also stresses that millennials feel entitled to luxury, and therefore shop more of what they believe to be luxurious and fashionable products than what previous generations have done. Additionally, the thesis analyzes the concept of *premium mediocre* and discusses whether the phenomenon, and the fact that Gucci has become less exclusive than earlier because of it, might be a blessing or a curse for the brand. Furthermore, the thesis categorizes Gucci as a historical brand, and looks at the importance of the brands heritage in Florence, Italy. With the help of interviews conducted in Florence with premium mediocre shoppers at Gucci, the thesis also explains that people purchasing affordable luxury at Gucci do so believing that the items articulate high fashion simply because the items are from Gucci.

Keywords: Gucci, Premium Mediocre, Affordable Luxury, Florence, Millennials, Digital era

Table of content

1. Introduction	4
1.2 Purpose and question framing	5
1.3 Methodology & material	6
<i>1.3.1 Interviews</i>	6
<i>1.3.2 Qualitative content analysis</i>	7
1.5 Earlier research overview	8
1.6 Theoretical framing	10
1.7 Limitations	12
<i>1.7.1 Place of study</i>	12
<i>1.7.2 Brand of choice</i>	13
1.8 Definitions	13
1.9 Deposition	14
2. Analysis	15
2.1 Why buy?	15
<i>2.1.1 Trickle-down and trickle-across</i>	15
<i>2.1.2 Identity and self-presentation</i>	18
<i>2.1.3 Gucci, Florence and brand heritage</i>	22
<i>2.1.4 Millennials and the 'treat yourself' culture</i>	24
2.2 Why sell?	27
<i>2.2.1 The era we live in</i>	27
<i>2.2.2 What premium mediocre does to Gucci</i>	30
3. Conclusion	33
3.1 To conclude	33
3.2 Reflection	34
Appendix 1.0	36
4. Bibliography	37

1. Introduction

Having recently moved to Florence, Tuscany, I walk by Piazza della Signoria on my close-to-daily route to the local Conad grocery shop. Although most tourists at the square are busy photographing the huge replica of Michelangelo's David sculpture, it is hard not to notice the grand bubblegum pink banner dangling from one of the 14th century historical buildings covering the square. The banner marks the entrance to fairly new opened Gucci Garden. Having visited the combined exhibition hall, osteria, boutique and souvenir shop, it is clear that such a place screams exclusivity, without actually excluding anyone.

Gucci was founded by Guccio Gucci in Florence 1921 and is one of the oldest Italian fashion houses still in operation to this day. It began as a luxury leather luggage manufacturer and saddle maker meant for affluent ladies and gentlemen in the upper strata of society.¹ Nonetheless, the brand has naturally evolved during the past, close to 100, years. Today, Gucci has surged the top of the fashion pyramid and offers ready-to-wear for both men and women, as well as shoes, jewelries, fragrances and décor. Gucci are also selling shoes and accessories for babies and children up to the age of 12.² Furthermore, it is possible to purchase Gucci branded souvenirs such as luggage tags, note books and phone covers at the souvenir shop at Gucci Garden in Florence.

During the months I have lived in Florence, I have come to understand that the city and Gucci shares a special bond. Gucci Garden is just one proof of the importance the brand feels towards preserving its heritage. Although most tourists likely visit Florence because of other reasons than Gucci, there is a feasible chance that the fashion interested ones will, planned or unplanned, step into one of the boutiques during their stay in the city. One of those fashion addicts is my friend, let us call her Annabelle. When Annabelle came to visit me in Florence over a weekend we went to Gucci Garden, an activity that had been planned long beforehand. After having spent 40-something euros each on tap water and pasta with nothing but an odor of truffle at Gucci Osteria, Annabelle decided that she wanted to purchase something. We started to look around in the boutique but slowly moved towards the souvenir shop. In the end, Annabelle decided for an €18 pink notepad covered in the double G. Most importantly, she said was the Gucci logo covered paper shopping bag

¹ Cartner-Morley, J. (2011). *The Story of Gucci*. The Guardian. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2011/sep/26/story-of-gucci> (3/5/2019)

² Gucci. (n/a). *Gucci*. Gucci. Retrieved from: <https://www.gucci.com/it/en/> (27/4/2019)

she got with the notepad. Annabelle used the shopping bag as her handbag for the rest of her stay in Florence.

Aldo Gucci once said: “Quality is remembered long after the price is forgotten.”³ Yet, my experiences in Florence has told me quite the opposite. In a blogpost written in 2017 by Indian-American author Venkatesh Rao, he discusses a phenomenon that he has chosen to call premium mediocre.⁴ The term, which evidently is an oxymoron, is closely linked to the term affordably luxury. Premium mediocre is simply explained as items or services that are mediocre, but somehow manage get a status of being premium or luxurious. [closer explanation can be found under *definitions*, p. 13]. In the blogpost, Rao brings up several examples of things that he would rank as premium mediocre. He does not look at fashion and clothing in particular, but instead talks about the phenomenon occurring everywhere in his everyday life. This thesis will focus on premium mediocre within the fashion industry and will put emphasize on Gucci. Florence is relevant because the city is important in the preservation of the brand, and the preservation is important for the reputation and status of he brand.

1.2 Purpose and question framing

The purpose of conducting this thesis is to examine why a renowned high end luxury fashion brand such as Gucci nowadays are offering premium mediocre products. The thesis will also explore the fine line Gucci balances on when trying to maximize their profit by selling affordable luxury without losing their reputation and good name. More importantly, the thesis will investigate if there are any underlying reasons why so many shoppers are eager to consume premium mediocre products at Gucci, and why an increasing amount of millennials are consuming products they believe to be luxury. Furthermore, the thesis will look at Florence and why the city is important in preserving Guccis heritage and identity, and if it matters at all to the consumers where they acquire their products.

The purpose have been orchestrated in the explicit question framing below. Thus, the questions that follows are what this thesis intends to investigate.

³ Mower, S & Douglas, L. (2006). *Gucci by Gucci: 85 years of Gucci*. (p. 0) Thames & Hudson.

⁴ Rao, V. (2017). *The Premium Mediocre Life of Maya Millennial*. Ribbonfarm: Constructions in magical thinking. Retrieved from: <https://www.ribbonfarm.com/2017/08/17/the-premium-mediocre-life-of-maya-millennial/> (12/4/2019)

- Is there a specific type of consumers that are highly eager to consume affordable luxury at Gucci, and if so, why do they feel the urge to consume such products?
- What reason do Gucci have for offering premium mediocre products?

1.3 Methodology & material

In the book *Att skriva en bra uppsats*, authors Lotte Rienecker and Peter Stray Jørgensen write that that the methods used to conduct a thesis need to reflect the question framing.⁵ The initial stage of working with this thesis was finding Rao's blogpost regarding premium mediocre. After having read the post, a brief observation was made in and around Gucci stores in Florence to see if the phenomenon at all occurred at Gucci. It was with the help of the observation that the question framing took shape. The observation alone will not be presented as a method since it done briefly and did not seek out to collect qualitative data. Instead, 2 methods were used to collect data needed to answer the questions. The data collected was analyzed with the help of various theories that will be presented in the chapter called 'theoretical framing. Additional theories will be presented throughout the analysis part of this thesis. The methods used to answer the questions thus lie in the data collected and analysis of it with the help of theories. The 2 methods will be presented below.

1.3.1 Interviews

After the initial observation, a qualitative research method was made: standardized, open-ended interviews with Gucci consumers. Qualitative research is often used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions and motivations.⁶ The interview type is described as "the same open-ended questions are asked to all interviewees: this approach facilitates faster interviews that can be more easily analyzed and compared."⁷ The interviews conducted took place right after consumers had carried out their purchases. Since this thesis intends to examine the premium mediocre products bough at Gucci, only consumers buying such products were relevant for interviews. 11 people were interviewed. All between 19 and 32 years of age, and all visiting Florence as tourists. Important to mention is that interviewees with a specific origin or age was *not* sought out, but selected due to what they had acquired at Gucci. All the interviewees just happened to be young adults and tourists.

⁵ Rienecker, L. & Stray Jørgensen, P. (2014). *Att Skriva en bra uppsats*. 3rd edition. (pp. 205-229). Liber

⁶ Chapman, S., McNeill, P., & McNeill, P. (2005). *Research Methods*. (p. 5). Routledge.

⁷ Valenzuela, D. & Shrivastava, P. (n/a). *Interview as a Method for Qualitative Research*. Arizona State University. Retrieved from: <https://www.public.asu.edu/~kroel/www500/Interview%20Fri.pdf> (29-04-2019)

All the interviewees were asked the same question. The opening question was *what* they had bought. This to see if they were suitable for the interview, that is, if they had purchased premium mediocre products. If so, the interview followed by asking them of their first name, age and the country they were visiting from. Segments of the interviews will be presented in the analysis part of this thesis. In the end there will also be an appendix where the full transcript of the interview questions and the interviewees will be presented (appendix 1, p. 36). Important to mention is also that the 11 interviews conducted do not represent the opinions or thoughts of the public. It is simply a selection of consumers that has purchased premium mediocre products at Gucci in order to get an idea of their thoughts.

With the permission from the interviewees, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed. After that, the process of coding the interviews started with the help of thematization. According to Monica Dalen, author of the book *Intervju som metod*, thematization is about finding themes in order to get an idea of where the main points of the interviews lies.⁸ As mentioned, parts of the interviews will be presented in the analysis, as well as some of the most prominent themes discovered.

1.3.2 Qualitative content analysis

The second method used to collect data was made with a qualitative content analysis. In the book *Content Analysis*, James Drisko and Tina Maschi write that qualitative content analysis is a “set of techniques for the systematic analysis of texts of many kinds, addressing not only manifest content but also the themes and core ideas found in the text as primary content”.⁹ The method intends to answer the second question presented in the question framing. 8 articles from either fashion magazines or newspapers are analyzed. The articles discuss topics such as Gucci’s marketing strategies, millennials, fashion & accessibility and the digitalization of fashion. The articles has been treated in a similar way to the interviews. They have been read and coded in order to find repetitive themes. The articles have been extracted from newspapers such as Business Insider, Washington Post and South China Morning Post. Further articles have been extracted from fashion online magazines such as StyleZeitgeist, Digiday and Business of Fashion. One article was also retrieved from Harvard Business School, and one from WGSN. Although the articles are secondary sources and come from various types of sources, from various countries, with various agendas, I believe them to be helpful in getting an insight in how business insiders see certain matters

⁸ Dalen, M. (2011). *Intervju som metod*. (p. 86). Gleerups

⁹ Drisko, J. & Maschi, T. (2015). *Content Analysis*. (p. 82). Oxford University Press

regarding topics linked to the topic of this thesis. The themes will be presented and used in the second chapter of the analysis called ‘Why buy?’

1.5 Earlier research overview

This chapter will present earlier research made that is relevant for the topic this thesis aims to investigate. The studies problematizes areas related to class, the importance of owning material possessions as well as the democratization of the fashion industry. However, the studies will not be used in the analysis part of this thesis. They are only used to get an overview of how fairly similar phenomenons has been discussed earlier.

The concept of prole drift was coined by Paul Fussell in the book *Class: a Guide Through the American Status System* (1983). In the book, Fussell discusses the social classes existing in the United States and argues that not 3, but 9 classes exist. He also states that the class system goes beyond race, politics, religion and in some extent even money. Instead, class has to do with taste. He says that 2 people who live next to each other in identical houses can belong to different classes. He brings up the top classes, the middles, and the ones in the bottom of the strata which he calls ‘the Proles’. ‘Prole drift’ has to do with people from higher classes wanting to adapt to the characteristics of the classes beneath them.¹⁰ He also discusses clothes and how garments distinguish the classes. He mentions the middle classes are likely to wear clothes with logos. They are a bit showy and like to wear clothes that look expensive. The upper class who are secure in their class, wear less logos. Fussell also says that the upper class and ‘high proles’ share more in common than might be expected, both are free from the social consciousness and the sycophantic behavior that defines the middle classes.¹¹

Chav is a British slang that emerged in the 1990’s.¹² In the article *Chav-spotting in Britain: the presentation of social class as a private choice*, author Joe Bennett brings up chav and its role in the British society. Bennett writes that the Oxford British Dictionary defines has as “a young person of a type characterized by brash and loutish behavior and the wearing of designer-style clothes.... usually with connotations of a low social status.” Bennett argues that there are inequalities in

¹⁰ Tsing Loh, S. (2009). *Class Dismissed*. The Atlantic. Retrieved from: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/03/class-dismissed/307274/> (03-05-2019)

¹¹ Garner, D. (2017). *On the Touchy Subject of Class in America*. The New York Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/27/books/paul-fussell-class-in-america.html> (07-05-2019)

¹² Oxford Dictionary. (n/a). *Chav*. Oxford Dictionary. Retrieved from: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/chav> (08-05-2019)

Britain, and that class-based inequalities is a material problem.¹³ Bennett describes chavs as a group of low-income people that are obsessed with brand names (preferably Burberry) and soccer.¹⁴

In the book *Överklass: en bok om klass och identitet*, author Susanna Popova examines the upper class by interviewing people within the Swedish upper class. By conducting the interviews, Popova discovers that the upper class is all about assurance, confidence, education, family history and financial independence. People can join the upper class, but it usually takes a few generations and a stable income. Furthermore, Popova stresses that people within the top strata seldom talk about money since they do not need to show others where they belong. For them, it is considered tacky and it is important not to brag.¹⁵

In *The complexity of value in the luxury industry*, Nadine Hennings, Klaus-Peter Wiedmann, Christiane Klarmann and Stefan Behrens discuss the different factors that affect how people see the value of luxury products. They claim that there is a financial value to luxury products that is about exclusivity and the rareness. They also discuss how the functional value is about the quality of the product and the functional benefit of consuming products with high functional value. Furthermore, they discuss the social value that lies in a product. The social value is about what the product, or the brand of the product, is representing and the status the buyer hopes to achieve by purchasing a specific product. The 3 values above affects what they call the individual value which is about emotional needs such as enjoyment and indulging.¹⁶

The American economist Harvey Leibenstein talks about what he calls the snob effect and bandwagon effect in *Bandwagon, snob, and Veblen effects in the theory of consumers' demand*. According to Leibenstein, the bandwagon effect implicates that the more people within a specific social group that buys a specific item, the more desirable the item becomes. This means that people buy a specific product in order to feel closeness to other people that have the same product. The

¹³ Bennett, J. (2013). *Chav-spotting in Britain: the representation o social class as a private choice*. Routledge. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2012.708158> (08-05-2019)

¹⁴ Bennett, J. (2013)

¹⁵ Popova, S. (2007). *Överklass: en bok om klass och identitet*. (p. 49). Lind & Co.

¹⁶ Hennings, N., Wiedmann, K-P., Klarmann, C., & Behrens, S. (2015). *The complexity of value in the luxury industry*. (p. 925-926). Emerald Insight. Retrieved from: <https://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/IJRDM-07-2014-0087> (05-06-2019).

snob effect, on the other hand, is the opposite. It means that how desirable a specific product is decreases when more people consume the product.¹⁷

1.6 Theoretical framing

A handfull of various theories will be applied and used as a framework in the analytic part of this thesis, and will help interpreting the data collected as empirical material. A few of the theories will be presented below and they consist of interdisciplinary perspectives.

Status and clothing

The main focus of this thesis is to understand why people spend money purchasing fashion products that they believe, or wish to be, premium, but in fact is mediocre. How clothing is used as a way of showing status and identity has been examined by many theoreticians throughout time. One of the pre-eminent theories regarding the matter is called trickle-down, and were first coined by Georg Simmel in 1904. According to Simmel, the trickle-down theory helps explaining where trends emerge and why they become mainstream. Spencer means that trends derives from people in the upper class wanting to differentiate themselves from the middle class. Spencer further means that people within the middle class has a desire to belong to the upper class and so they copy the trends people within the upper class wears.¹⁸ The trickle-down theory is over 100 years old and therefore seem somewhat outdated. However, it are still relevant in some aspects. Trickle-down will be used in the analysis, but not without mentioning the problems with it. Another, more modern theoretician, Catherine Appleford, argues that fashion does not solely trickle-down, but it can also trickle-up and trickle across. Spencer and Appleford will be discussed with help of the methods used to collect data.

Identity and the two stages

Erving Goffman wrote a book called *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* in 1959. The book analyzes the dramaturgical aspect of expressive conduct, and Goffman brings up the concept of front and back regions. The idea is that life is made up of performances. The performances, or actions, that are presented in public is done on the front region, or from stage. An example of this is when we walk down a busy road, or visit a crowded mall. The actions that occur on the back region,

¹⁷ Leibenstein, H. (1950). *Bandwagon, snob, and Veblen effects in the theory of consumers' demand*. (pp. 283-207) Quarterly Journal of Economics.

¹⁸ Carter, M. (2003). *Fashion classics from Carlyle to Barthes*. (p. 19). Bloomsbury. Retrieved from: <https://www.bloomsburyfashioncentral-com.lib.costello.pub.hb.se/products/berg-fashion-library/book/fashion-classics-from-carlyle-to-barthes> (05-01-2019)

or backstage, is what we do when we are in private, and these actions are preparations for entering the front stage. One example is when people are home in their closet trying what clothes to wear before walking outside.¹⁹ Today, people can choose what parts of their life to put forward, to bring to the front stage, with the help of social media. What people post online is thus the parts of the identity they want people to see. The theory will be used to explain that people consume certain products and post them online in order to show a desired identity to others. Goffman's theory will be used to explain how premium mediocre shoppers use social media to do so.

Markets

Author Patrik Aspers writes about different markets in the book *Market*. One of the theories Aspers use is a so called neoclassical theory about markets. The theory states that actors on markets are acting in order to maximize profit.²⁰ Understanding how actors on different markets operate is important in understanding why Gucci choose to lower themselves by selling premium mediocre products. The theories presented by Aspers will help interpret the second question this thesis sets out to answer.

The Gift

French sociologist Marcel Mauss wrote the book *The Gift* in 1925. In *Social Solidarity and the Gift*, author Aafke Komter discusses and explains *The Gift*. Komter examines products and commodities, which Mauss calls 'gifts', and how the gifts embody meaning within the context of the people exchanging the gifts. Komter writes that in western society, things are things, and people are people. Two separate matters. However, in some non-Western societies, it is believed that things, or products, have a spirit and communicates messages from the person originally in possession of an item to its recipient.²¹ This means that the thing has a life of its own, and that the meaning is transferred from one person to another when it is handed over. Komter also discuss that Mauss writes that when giving something to another person, our intentions are often not entirely

¹⁹ Smith, G. (2006). *Erving Goffman*. Routledge. Retrieved from: <https://web-a-ebscobost-com.lib.costello.pub.hb.se/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxIYmtfXzE3MTA3OV9fQU41?sid=3bbb019b-961f-46ef-b768-9476688aa4e7@sessionmgr4009&vid=0&format=EK&lpid=acid20&rid=0> (03-05-2019)

²⁰ Aspers, P. (2011). *Markets*. (p. 21-22). Polity.

²¹ Komter, A. (2005). *Social Solidarity and the Gift*. Cambridge. Retrieved from: http://eds.a-ebscobost-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/eds/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxIYmtfXzEzMTQwNV9fQU41?sid=914e5fcc-e46d-453d-bbe3-23cc63154434@sdv-sessmgr06&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp_13&rid=0 (10-05-2019)

unselfish.”²² Furthermore, Komter writes that human activities can be ordered in 4 models. One of the models is called ‘equality matching’, which he explains as “people share with each other, contribute to each other, and influence each other equally”.²³ Important to mention is that ‘people’, in this matter, is not necessarily physical people, but can take other forms, such as a company, too. This theory will not be used to analyze the empirical data, but is relevant for understanding the relationship between the 2 questions that the question framing is made up of.

1.7 Limitations

This thesis has limited the geographical area of where data was collected for the interviews. It has also limited the brand of which it is focused on. It will be presented below why Florence and Gucci were chosen to examine.

1.7.1 Place of study

In order to make the study more manageable, the geographical area has been limited to Florence, Italy. That is because Gucci was first founded in Florence. From the observation and the interviews, it has been detected that some tourists have made active choices to purchase their Gucci goods in Florence because of the special bond shared between the city and the brand. In Florence, the observation and the interviews has been made at 3 different places: Gucci Garden, The Gucci Boutique at Via Roma and the Gucci store at The Mall. Gucci Garden was relevant since it is the first place Gucci adoring people would go to learn more about the brand or shop its products. Some of the items sold at Gucci Garden are completely unique and cannot be found in any other store in the entire world. This, by itself, attracts Gucci lovers. There is also a souvenir shop for those dying to buy Gucci goods without wanting to spend three-figured-numbers on it. The boutique at Via Roma is one of 3 in Florence. The reason for choosing that specific store was mainly because it was interesting to investigate if the same people went there as the ones going to Gucci Garden. The third place, Gucci at the Mall was chosen since it is an outlet and sell products to heavily reduced prices. Although The Mall is made up by a large amount of designer brands, the Gucci store is by far the largest. It was an interesting location because the people going on the 40 minutes long bus ride connecting Florence to The Mall most likely have an agenda.

²² Komter, A. (2005)

²³ Komter, A. (2005)

1.7.2 Brand of choice

The fact that Gucci has become increasingly mainstream over the past few years makes it a prime choice for this thesis. A lot of people today are dying to wear Gucci.²⁴ This raises the question how the brand has managed to become so popular among the greater masses. Gucci being a historically exclusive high-end brand, has now become a brand that does not exclude people the same way, and it makes possible to discuss the brand with the help of premium mediocre. Even if the thesis target Gucci specifically, my hope is that it will also explain why people, mostly millennials, consume affordable luxury in general.

1.8 Definitions

Below are definitions of some of concepts that are being used throughout this thesis, in order to get a deeper and more clear understanding of the study.

Premium mediocre is a term, or phenomenon, that was coined in a blog post by Venkatesh Rao with the title *The Premium Mediocre Life of Maya Millennial*. Rao describes premium mediocre as “mediocre with just an irrelevant touch of premium, not enough to ruin the delicious essential mediocrity.”²⁵ In this thesis, Gucci will be discussed with the help of premium mediocre. However, it is important to mention that Gucci is not premium mediocre, but some of the products sold at Gucci can be perceived as premium mediocre. *StyleZeitgeist* describes premium mediocre products at Gucci being the labels entry [price] level products.²⁶ What premium mediocre is can thus not be described with the help of an explicit price range. Instead, this thesis will define premium mediocre by how in-exclusive a specific product is, but also what underlying reasons people have for buying a specific product.

Affordable luxury is similar to premium mediocre, and will in this thesis sometimes be used instead of premium mediocre. Julia Hanna described affordable luxury in an article for Harvard Business

²⁴ Kim, I. & Reed, J. (2018). *Millennials and teens are making Gucci cool again. Here's how the brand nearly doubled its sales in 2018*. Business Insider. Retrieved from: <https://www.businessinsider.com/gucci-millennials-teens-love-designer-comeback-2018-11?IR=T> (04-26-2019)

²⁵ Rao, V. (2018).

²⁶ Rabkin, E. (2018). *How premium mediocre fashion conquered the world*. StyleZeitgeist. Retrieved from: <https://www.sz-mag.com/news/2018/11/how-premium-mediocre-fashion-conquered-the-world/> (04-30-2019)

School as products that had been raised to a level of connoisseurship.²⁷ Although affordable luxury is an oxymoron used to describe products that sets out to be luxury without being no such thing, one must remember that luxury is subjective. What is considered as luxury to someone, might be premium to someone else. Affordable luxury and premium mediocre are synonyms.

Millennial are young adults. Oxford dictionary describes millennials as “Denoting people reaching young adulthood in the early 21st century”²⁸

1.9 Deposition

As explained in the purpose chapter, this thesis will try to investigate why some people are buying affordable luxury products at Gucci in Florence. In order to understand why people are so eager to shop premium mediocre at Gucci, it is also important to understand why Gucci are promoting such products. Therefore, the analysis part of this dissertation will be divided into 2. The first part is called *why buy?* and will, with the help of the empirical material collected, look closer at the consumers purchasing premium mediocre items at Gucci, and why they choose to do so in Florence specifically. The second part is called *why sell?*, and will explore some the reasons Gucci have for selling premium mediocre nowadays, and why millennials are particularly interesting in purchasing it. Henceforward, the first part of the analysis aims to disclose the first question, and the second part will disclose the second question with the help of the findings in the first one.

²⁷ Hanna, J. (2004). *Luxury Isn't What It Used To Be*. Harvard Business School. Retrieved from: <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/luxury-isnt-what-it-used-to-be> (04-26-2019)

²⁸ Oxford dictionary, (n/d). *Millennial*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved from: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/millennial> (05-06-2019)

2. Analysis

2.1 Why buy?

This chapter aims to analyze why people buy premium mediocre products at Gucci in Florence.

2.1.1 Trickle-down and trickle-across

[...] 'fashion' is related to the Latin word *factio*, from which the modern word 'faction' derives. 'Faction' has an obvious political sense; it already refers to conflict between groups and to the possession and exercise of power by different groups.²⁹

Discussing fashion and trends from a class division point of view is nothing new, like the quote above states. Looking back a few centuries, actual laws prohibited people to dress in clothes meant for those higher up in the societal hierarchy. In Sweden, in the 1760's, so called sumptuary laws forbid working class women to wear silk, among other things. It was meant exclusively for royalties and the nobles.³⁰ Even if no explicit laws prohibit people to wear whatever they want these days, at least in most parts of the world, some theorists suggests that fashion emerges in the top strata of the society and later becomes widespread among the greater mass. One of the theorists claiming this is Georg Simmel who came up with the so called trickle-down theory. According to Simmel, trends emerge when upperclass people wear it. Individuals that do not belong to the upper class have a desire to wear the same styles. Therefore, they imitate the clothes of the upper classers in an attempt to feel kinship. When a specific trend is adapted by the public, people in top of the hierarchy want to distinguish themselves from the lower strata and hence move on to newer trends.³¹ This is then adapted by the middle class, and so the merry goes round. Simmel's theory was developed in 1904 and can therefore be seen as somewhat outdated. However, trickle-down is still relevant in explaining why certain people shop luxury products these days.

Although the trickle-down theory is one of the most well known ones regarding fashion and class, it does not come without problems. In *The handbook of fashion studies*, Katherine Appleford argues that Simmel's theory is too simplistic and that the fashion industry is far too complex. She means that it is ignorant to suggest that all fashion trends emerge in the upper class and that fashion

²⁹ Barnard, M. (1996). *Fashion as Communication*. (p. 37). Routledge.

³⁰ Renefelt, L. (2015). *Att hasta mot undergång: Anspråk, flyktighet, särställning i debatten om konsumtion i Sverige 1730-1830*. (p. 79). Nordic Academic Press.

³¹ Carter, M. (2003).

changes is not driven by the need for class distinction.³² Appleford suggests fashion today rather is about consumer fashion instead of class fashion, and that fashion stems from all social classes.³³ How trends emerge can thus not be understood only by the trickle-down theory, but trends can also trickle-across and even trickle-up.

In the 11 interviews conducted with Gucci consumers at Gucci in Florence, one of the questions asked was “What does Gucci mean to you?”. Audra, 25, from Tennessee, USA, answered:

I wasn't really a big fan of Gucci a few years ago, but she [Audra nods towards her sister next to her] got a purse from her boyfriend for her 30th birthday like a year and a half ago, and I love that bag and low-key want the same. And I mean you see the Gucci logo everywhere nowadays so it's easy to get attached to it. I don't loooove Gucci but everyone has it so of course I have to have it too [haha].

Another interviewee was Louise, 19, from the Netherlands. She was asked the same question and answered:

Gucci and Louis Vuitton are my favorite designers. I don't know what Gucci means to me exactly but I always get jealous of girls I see that has Gucci bags. I don't remember when I started liking Gucci but I remember I wanted the bag with flames that Kylie [Jenner] had on Insta, so maybe that's when it started.

A third answer to the question was from Sydney, 22, USA:

Well, Gucci is what all the A-people and celebs back in the states wear these days, so obviously it means a lot to be able to buy the same stuff as them. In the end it's just a brand though.

Looking at the interviews, it can be interpreted that Audra bought her premium mediocre product at Gucci because she had been influenced by the people around her, mainly her sister. Audra's reply proves, like Appleford suggests, that not everyone is influenced by the trickle-down effect, and that some people simply buy fashion because they have seen people, presumably within their social strata, wear certain products. The replies from the 2 other interviewees, Louise and Sydney, however advise that they bought their products because they had seen celebrities wearing it. Along the lines of trickle-down is Torstein Veblen's theory called conspicuous consumption. Veblen proposes that people consume luxury products and services in order to show off their wealth and social status.³⁴ Trickle-down and conspicuous consumption can further help explain why Louise and Sydney purchased their Gucci products. Having coded the replies received from the interviews, a

³² Black, S., de la Haye, A., Entwistle, J., Rocamora, A., A. Root, R., & Thomas, H. (2013). *The Handbook of Fashion Studies*. (p.104). Bloomsbury Fashion Cathedral.

³³ Black, S., de la Haye, A., Entwistle, J., Rocamora, A., A. Root, R., & Thomas, H. (2013) (p. 104)

³⁴ Wolfe, A. (2001) (pp. 52-75)

theme that keeps coming back is that the interviewees talk about Gucci as if they *need* to buy Gucci. Not a single interviewee mentions that they shop at Gucci because of any reason related to the quality or design of the product, nor do they discuss the items they have bought very much. It can be interpreted that they talk about buying Gucci, rather than buying specific items.

The trickle-down theory states, as mentioned above, that the middle class copies the upper class. However, the most fashionable items shown at the biannual fashion weeks by high end designers, such as Gucci, can only be purchased by a handful of people because of the hefty prices. For example, the most expensive dress sold at the Gucci website right now is the *Silk dress with shell appliqués* for €5,500.³⁵ The most expensive coat is the *Leather jacket with appliqués* for €9,500.³⁶ On top of the list is the *Five band Ouroboros ring in gold and gemstones*. It comes with a price tag of €14,500.³⁷ The items mentioned above can only be bought by the most affluent people in society, and therefore cannot trickle its way down. Furthermore, Appleford means that only people in the top strata of society wants to buy such products because they are “so highly coded that they are not easily understood by the general public”.³⁸ This means that the most fashionable, expensive, products at Gucci stays within the top strata. High street might not even try to copy such items, since, like Appleford mentions, it is not likely it will be adapted by the middle class since it is highly coded. However, regardless if typical middle class individuals *cannot* buy the *Leather jacket with appliqués* because of its price, or if the person *choose not* to purchase the coat because it is ‘too fashionable’, it is most likely that they understand that ultra luxury fashion houses such as Gucci generates high-end fashion and is a frontrunner in adapting new trends.

³⁵ Gucci. (n/a). *Silk dress with shell appliqué*. Gucci. Retrieved from: https://www.gucci.com/fr/en_gb/pr/women/womens-ready-to-wear/womens-dresses/long-midi-dresses/silk-dress-with-shell-appliques-p-560884ZABR71152?position=2&listName=ProductGrid&categoryPath=Women/Womens-Ready-to-Wear (07-05-2019)

³⁶ Gucci. (n/a). *Leather jacket with appliqués*. Gucci. Retrieved from: https://www.gucci.com/fr/en_gb/pr/men/mens-ready-to-wear/mens-leather-casual-jackets/leather-jackets/leather-jacket-with-appliques-p-558711XNAC59133?position=1&listName=ProductGrid&categoryPath=Men/Mens-Ready-To-Wear (07-05-2019)

³⁷ Gucci. (n/a). *Five band Ouroboros ring in gold and gemstones*. Gucci. Retrieved from: https://www.gucci.com/fr/en_gb/pr/jewelry-watches/fine-jewellery/rings/five-band-ouroboros-ring-in-gold-and-gemstones-p-527035J8E728524?position=1&listName=ProductGrid&categoryPath=Jewelry-Watches/Fine-Jewellery (07-05-2019)

³⁸ Black, S., de la Haye, A., Entwistle, J., Rocamora, A., A. Root, R., & Thomas, H. (2013) (p. 104)

The notorious Gucci belt with the GG logo for approximately €270 is a great example of a premium mediocre product.³⁹ Similar belts can be purchased at many high street shops for a slightly cheaper price. Yet, many consumers, such as 2 of the interviewees, chose to buy the belt at Gucci. When asked if the purchase was planned before entering the store, one of the interviewees buying the belt said: “Yes and no. I wanted to buy something special so I had planned to buy *something* but I wasn’t sure what.” (Julia, 21, Sweden). Audra from the US also bought a belt, and she said, when asked the same question:

Yes. We went to Gucci Garden because I wanted something unique. Yet I ended up with a belt haha. It’s special though because it’s from Gucci Garden. No one at home will have it for sure. Gucci is from Florence as I’m sure you know so it feels extra cool to have bought it here.

The replies indicate that the interviewees had planned on buying something Gucci, but they were not sure exactly what. Why? Because Gucci as a brand has trickled its way down and has been adapted by the mass. People want Gucci because they believe Gucci equals fashion. They do not care much for the products, but they care for what they believe the brand is representing. And it can explain why premium mediocre products at Gucci are so popular.

In the book *Fashion as Communication*, Malcolm Barnard writes “Fashion and clothing are forms of non-verbal communication in that they do not use spoken or written word.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, Barnard stresses that even when garments are covered in words like slogans or brand names, there is still a level of non-verbal communication.⁴¹ By purchasing premium mediocre products at Gucci, the consumers are trying to communicate non-verbal messages. Whether it is an attempt to climb in the social hierarchy, like Simmel and the forums suggest, or if it is done in a belief that Gucci equals fashion remains unknown. Nevertheless, it is likely that people buy premium mediocre products to feel some sort of belonging in order to create a strong identity.

2.1.2 Identity and self-presentation

“So much has been written about fashion and identity that it has become something of a cliché to say that fashion articulates identity.”⁴² Those were the words of Joanne Entwistle in *The Handbook*

³⁹ Gucci. (n/a). *Leather belt with Double G buckle*. Gucci. Retrieved from: https://www.gucci.com/it/en_gb/pr/women/womens-accessories/womens-belts/leather-belt-with-double-g-buckle-p-409417AP00T5729?position=11&listName=ProductGrid&categoryPath=Women/Womens-Accessories/Womens-Belts (07-05-2019)

⁴⁰ Barnard. (1996). (p. 26)

⁴¹ Barnard. (1996). (p. 26)

⁴² Entwistle, J. (2013). (p. 97)

of *Fashion Studies*. Although she might be right, fashion and identity can, at least to some extent, be explained with the help of one another. One example is subcultures, which emerges from people, often adolescents, wanting to differentiate themselves from the norms that the bigger mass of society follows.⁴³ They do so to show individualism and identity and subcultures have a way of distancing themselves with the help of particular types of clothes and accessories. In the book *Fashion*, Christopher Breward says “In the drift toward anomaly and alienation that followed the rise of industrial capitalism and urbanization, the communicative power of clothing emerged as an important tool, both for guaranteeing a sense of belonging and as an aid to identification.”⁴⁴ Breward’s words is further proof that the connection between fashion and identity is more than what Entwistle expresses as a ‘cliché’.

Herbert Spencer tries to explain the origin of clothes [as something else than shelter] in *The Principles of Sociology*, published in 1879. Despite the fact that his ideas might be somewhat outdated, it explains where peoples’ desire to dress to show individualism derives from. Just like Darwin, Spencer thoroughly talks about the survival of the fittest. He asserts that “the first set of distinction to emerge within the simple primordial social order derives from the superior talents of certain, again male, individuals to hunt and to repel enemies.”⁴⁵ According to Spencer, hunting men would adorn their bodies with trophies such as skins or body parts of animals to show power. That would in turn give them influence over others around them.⁴⁶ If one choses to believe in Spencers thought of the origin of accessories as a way of displaying individualism, one might also think that todays’ desire of showing identity through clothing is deeply rooted in our DNA. It thus comes from the need of showing strength and individualism.

In today’s globalized society, we, just like our ancestors; the hunting men, have a desire to show individualism and identity. However, it is often times no longer enough to just do so to the people within our vicinity. Instead, a lot of people feel the need to post content about themselves on their social media pages. One of the questions asked during the interviews conducted with shoppers at Gucci in Florence was “Did you post any photos on your social media when you were inside the store or do you plan on posting what you bought?”. The idea that it was a relevant question derived

⁴³ Hebdige, D. (1998). *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. (pp. 1-4). Taylor and Francis.

⁴⁴ Breward, C. (2003). *Fashion*. (p 217). Oxford History of Art

⁴⁵ Carter, M. (2003).

⁴⁶ Carter, M. (2003).

from observation made inside Gucci Garden. Inside the boutique, which is very ascetically pleasing, a lot of visitors were photographing themselves posing inside the dressing cabins which breaths luxury and intimacy. Some were taking pictures of the unique-in-this-world clothes and accessories, whilst others were photographing the huge wall covered in thousands of Gucci logos inside the exhibition part of Gucci Garden. Along these lines, it can be interpreted that people shop at Gucci to adorn their bodies stuff they believe is representing their identity.

Out of the 6 people interviewed at Gucci Garden, *all* had taken photos inside. 4 of them had already uploaded pictures and/or videos onto their social medias, and several were planning on uploading even more at a later stage. The interviewees were asked why they had taken photos. By interpreting the interviews, it stood clear that they did so because they wanted others to see where they were at. Sure, saying that people upload content onto their social media for others to see is stating the obvious, but the interviews also explained just *how* important it was. One interviewee, Dayana, 29, from Mexico, said she had not uploaded anything yet since she did not have any internet access. She also said that her phone was running out of battery and that she was stressed that her pending posts would disappear if she could not post them before her phone died.

Social media plays a big part in a lot of people's lives today. It is often through social media that we read or news, meet like-minded, or decide that we have to visit Gucci Osteria to have the hamburger served in a pink Gucci branded paper box. Social media also gives us a chance to choose which parts of our lives we want to put forward, and it can work as a tool for creating identity and building a personal brand. Today, social medias is not only a variation of the traditional media, but it increasingly becomes a tool for people to interact. Symbolical interactionism can be used to describe the interaction. The theory was established by the American philosopher and sociologist George Herbert Mead in the end of the 19th century, and can be used to understand the modern phenomenon of social medias and how people us it to create an identity. According to Mead, people use symbols to interact with each other, and the interaction is possible because we interpret these symbols.⁴⁷ In order to understand symbolic interactionism, it is also important to understand the concept of *self* and how it interacts with society. Social medias can thus be used as a place where people, with the help of symbols, can show desired parts of their identity which later can be

⁴⁷ Côté, J-F. (2019). *The Interaction Order*. Emerald Publishing Limited. Retrieved from: <https://www-emeraldinsight-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/doi/full/10.1108/S0163-239620190000050006> (05-05-2019)

displayed for others. According to symbolic interactionism, the self is dynamic and in constant change.

Sociologist Erving Goffman uses symbolic interactionism as a keystone in his theory about society as a stage. Goffman means that people's everyday life is made of a series of performances.⁴⁸ He says that people act on 2 different stages, one front stage and one backstage. On the front stage, people act knowing they are in public. However, actions that prepare people for entering the front stage, that is, in public, occurs backstage in solitude.⁴⁹ Goffman also mentions that people know when they are in public and when they are not, and act accordingly.

Understanding Mead and Goffman can also help understanding why Gucci consumers use social media to display their purchases, and how it all connects to the creation of identity. By only bringing forward certain parts of ones life, it helps building a picture of the self and how one wants to be portrayed by others. Social Media clearly occurs in what Goffman describes as the front stage. Mead describes the self as being in constant change and it is therefore important to show purchases on the front stage so that other people can get an idea of ones self. By showing others that one has visited Gucci Garden and even purchased something there during their visit in Florence helps building a desired identity to show to others. In the book *Fashion as Communication*, Malcolm Barnard writes "Individuals may [also] derive aesthetic pleasure from either 'creating personal display' or from appreciating that of others."⁵⁰ Moreover, Barnard suggests that "the emotional survival of humans somehow depends upon their ability to strike a balance between conforming to society and preserving a sense of self-identity."⁵¹ Barnard's words further explains the importance of showing the individuality Spencer mentions. From the observation and interviews conducted at Gucci, it can be interpreted that posting pictures from Gucci in Florence on social media, the front stage, helps showing a part of the life and thereby identity that others can adorn. Therefore, it is likely that the reasons behind purchasing premium mediocre products at Gucci is to display a desired identity for others.

⁴⁸ Smith, G. (2006).

⁴⁹ Smith, G. (2006).

⁵⁰ Barnard, M. (1996). (p. 57)

⁵¹ Barnard, M. (1996). (p. 58)

2.1.3 Gucci, Florence and brand heritage

A few years ago, I visited 31 rue cambon in Paris during a visit with a school class. We were about 25 fashion students, and at least half of us ended up buying a nail polish or lipstick in the store. Why? Because it was the original Chanel boutique, and buying something from there almost felt like purchasing it from Gabrielle herself.

One of the questions asked during the interviews was if the purchase was planned before the consumer entered the store. Out of the 11 interviewees, 8 answered yes. Both the women interviewed at The Mall said yes and that they had planned their purchases because they were aware of the heavily reduced prices at the outlet. 5 people mentioned Florence when asked if they had planned their purchase beforehand, and further conversation led to the understanding that the 5 interviewees bought their premium mediocre products at Gucci in Florence because Gucci was founded in Florence.

The opening of Gucci Garden in 2018 implies the importance Gucci feels towards Florence and its heritage. By selling unique products that cannot be found anywhere else in the world at the boutique inside Gucci Garden, Gucci lovers from all over the world is drawn into the store. While there, the entrance fee to the exhibition hall is close to non-existent so that people already in the boutique can take the short climb to the second floor to learn more about Gucci and its history. The opening of Gucci Garden proves that Gucci is a so-called historical brand. A historical brand is defined as “a brand with a positioning and an added value based on its heritage, the result of the praise choice to use its history as a key component of the brand’s identity.”⁵² Tradition and identity are important assets on the increasingly globalized market and Gucci’s strong heritage is possibly one of the reasons they are doing so well. Patrizio di Marco, chief executive of Gucci between 2009 and 2014 once said, referring to Gucci; “Authentic heritage is something that you can see, feel and sense in every product.”⁵³ It is thus likely that many people choose to purchase their products in Florence rather than other places, since the city is a part of the identity of the label.

⁵² Bologna Business School. (2018). *Brand Heritage: Between Culture and Nostalgic Marketing*. Bologna Business School. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbs.unibo.eu/hp/brand-heritage-between-culture-and-nostalgic-marketing/> (05-05-2019)

⁵³ Menkes, S. (2010). *Heritage Luxury: Past Becomes the Future*. The New York Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/09/fashion/09iht-rsuzy.html> (05-05-2019)

In 2018, Gucci presented their cruise collection inside the famous renaissance Palazzo Pitti located in central Florence.⁵⁴ Alessandro Michele, Gucci's current creative director said "the very beginning of European aesthetics started from Florence. Everything here was beauty, money and creativity, the power of the good money. [...] It's still fascinating, it's still in our culture, still here."⁵⁵ In the article, written for Women's Wear Daily, Michele put further emphasize on Florence and its renaissance history, and the importance of that.⁵⁶ Furthermore, Edgardo Osorio, the creator of Aquazzura, said in an intervju with Vogue the following about Florence: "Here you feel the energy like in no other fashion capital. Florence is charming, cozy, beautiful, inspiring - it has so many great places to go and so many unique things to see that you won't find anywhere else!"⁵⁷ For the city of Florence, lending one of its most valuable palazzos for Gucci's fashion show is a way of showing that the city is a competitor to fear in the never ending race of which is the number one fashion capital in the world. Osorio's words conciliate just that.

When asked if the purchase was planned beforehand, one of the interviewees, Ellie, 24, United Kingdom, replied:

Yes it was. I even knew before coming to Italy that I was gonna buy them [€270 slides]. I was actually planning of buying them online back home because I wanted to have them when I was in Cancun in February but I decided to wait since I knew I was going to Italy. [Why?] because it's not as fun buying them online as in a store, and it's a special feeling buying them in Italy since Gucci is Italian.

Ellie's reply meant that she had been waiting the buy the slides in Florence although she would have wanted them earlier. She put emphasize that she rather would buy them in a physical store than online, and that she would rather buy them in Italy than anywhere else. Ellie knew that Gucci was an Italian fashion house but when she was told it was in fact florentine, her reply was "Oh really? Now I'm even happier I waited to buy them." Audra from the US said "Gucci is from Florence as I'm sure you know so it feels extra cool to have bought it here". Furthermore, Sydney from the US said:

⁵⁴ Menkes, S. (2017). *Guccify Me! An Ode To Forentine Art*. British Vogue. Retrieved from: <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/suzy-menkes-gucci-cruise-guccify-me-an-ode-to-florentine-art> (05-05-2019)

⁵⁵ Zargani, L. (2017). *Gucci Hosts Cruise 2018 Show in Florence*. WWD. Retrieved from: <https://wwd.com/fashion-news/designer-luxury/gucci-cruise-resort-2018-show-florence-review-10896963/> (05-05-2019)

⁵⁶ Zargani, L. (2017).

⁵⁷ Shapovalova, D. (2015). *Is Florence Becoming the World's Fifth Fashion Capital*. Vogue. Retrieved from: <https://www.vogue.com/article/florence-fashion-capital> (05-05-2019)

“I read this article about Gucci and Florence and Gucci Garden. They showed a few of the items sold there and that’s where I saw the sunnies. The article also said Beyonce has them so I decided to buy them if they had them in the store. They have unique stuff here so I thought it’d be cool to buy it here instead of anywhere else.”

Sydneys words explicit states that she chose Florence and Gucci Garden to conduct her purchase. In conclusion, Florence can be seen as the 5th fashion capital of the world.⁵⁸ Gucci is a so called historical brand, and the heritage of Gucci constitutes a big part of the identity of the brand. Gucci Garden further proves the importance the brand feels towards Florence, and since Florence is such a big part of the brands identity, tourists are more likely to shop their products in Florence than in other cities.

2.1.4 Millennials and the 'treat yourself' culture

Guy Debord wrote, in *Society of the spectacle* “our era prefers the image to the thing, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality, appearance to being.”⁵⁹ The ‘representation to the reality’ indicates that it is more important what something represents, than what it actually is.

The very first paragraph of this thesis ended with “such a place screams exclusivity, without actually excluding anyone”, referring to Gucci Garden. It is inclined that Gucci Garden, along with many of the products that can be purchased there, represents exclusivity, expensiveness, high fashion and class, while in fact being rather mediocre. It further more explains that people choose to purchase premium mediocre at high end luxury brands such at Gucci because of what it represents, or what they believe it to be representing. In an article published by *Rescapement*, premium mediocre is described as “a segment of economic activity largely dreamed up by marketers to give the masses the illusion that they are consuming luxury, when in reality they were doing nothing of the sort.”⁶⁰ The interviews conducted further indicates that people consuming affordable luxury products does so believing that they are consuming actual luxury and high end fashion. The interviews also gave an idea of who the people are, that are the most eager to consume premium mediocre. All of the interviewees were under the age of 33. In the introduction, it was mentioned that the age and country of origin of the interviewees was selected by mere coincidence. I therefore did not target young people specifically. However, much can be said from the fact that all of the interviewees happened to be young adults. A larger amount of interviewees would have either

⁵⁸ Shapovalova, D. (2015).

⁵⁹ Debord, G. (1987). *Society of the spectacle*. (p. 18) Rebel Press, London

⁶⁰ Rescapement. (2018). *Watches and the Rise of “Affordable Luxury”*. Rescapement. Retrieved from: <https://www.rescapement.com/blog/premium-mediocre-and-watches> (06-05-2019)

strengthen the supposition that mostly young people are eager to consume premium mediocre, or it would have shown that so is not the case. Nonetheless, fact remains that the people interviewed was young and other people considered for the interviewer was not selected because they did not fall into a specific age range, but because they had bought items that would not be considered premium mediocre.

By googling 'millennials' + 'luxury', countless of article pops up stating that millennials, such as all of the interviewees, are eager to consume luxury. Millennials seems to live in a sort of “treat yourself” culture where they feel entitled to consume what they believe to be luxury. Such items are premium mediocre items. Sure, it cannot be said for *all* millennials, but an increasing amount of vicenarian people shop for what they believe is luxurious items. During the interviews conducted, one of the question was what the interviewees thought Gucci was trying to signal. The answers to the question was various, but by coding the interviews it was discovered that most of the interviewees agreed that Gucci was trying to signal luxury. The article in *Rescapement* further explains: “We [millennials] all feel entitled to luxury, but if we still can’t afford an Hermes Birkin Bag, perhaps a cardholder from the Carriage will do.⁶¹ The premium mediocre products sold at Gucci are at the labels entry level product range. In an article written by Eugene Rabkin for *StyleZeitgeist*, he follows the lines of the article in *Rescapement*, and gives Gucci headbands as an example of premium mediocre. Furthermore, he explains that Givenchy and Gucci sandals are the most sought after products at [lyst.com](http://www.yst.com) because millennials feel entitled to luxury.⁶² Rabkin describes affordable luxury as “[...] not luxury, but luxury dust sprinkled on top of mediocrity; but the point is that to many people it doesn’t feel like it.”⁶³

Luxury brands, with Gucci in the lead, thrive on the perception of exclusivity. Marco Bizzarri, chief executive of Gucci once said that the modern luxury industry has perfected the art of selling exclusivity by the millions of units.⁶⁴ Debord wrote, our generation prefers the representation to the reality. This means that millennials are eager to consume luxury in the shape of premium mediocre

⁶¹ Rescapement. (2018). Retrieved from: (06-05-2019)

⁶² Rabkin, E. (2018). *How premium mediocre fashion conquered the world*. StyleZeitgeist. Retrieved from: <https://www.sz-mag.com/news/2018/11/how-premium-mediocre-fashion-conquered-the-world/> (06-05-2019)

⁶³Rabkin, E. (2018).

⁶⁴ Solca, L. (2018). *Is Inclusivity the New Exclusivity? Gucci Certainly Thinks So*. Business of Fashion. Retrieved from: <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/professional/is-inclusivity-the-new-exclusivity-gucci-certainly-thinks-so> (06-05-2019)

because they believe it to be representing exclusivity. In an article for Newcastle Business School, Aron O’Cass writes “Life’s meaning, achievement and satisfaction is often judged in terms of what possessions have or have not been acquired. [...] Thus, individuals often define themselves and others in terms of their possessions.⁶⁵ Millennials consume premium mediocre believing they are consuming exclusivity and luxury. They do so trying to build an identity that they can represent to others in an attempt to climb the hierarchal ladder. What reasons lies behind the fact that Gucci has become increasingly mainstream will be presented in the next chapter.

⁶⁵ O’Cass. A. (2004). *Fashion clothing consumption: Antecedents and consequences of fashion clothing involvement*. Emerald Publishing. Retrieved from: <https://search-proquest-com.lib.costello.pub.hb.se/docview/237026804/fulltextPDF/EDA234ED981343A7PQ/1?accountid=9670> (06-05-2019)

2.2 Why sell?

The main focus of this thesis has been to analyze why people consume premium mediocre products at Gucci in Florence. However, it is important to understand that the reason for buying is connected to the reason for selling. Or, as Patrik Aspers and Frédéric Godart puts it; “Fashion is both a significant sociological topic and a social phenomenon par excellence.”⁶⁶ Because of this, it is necessary to discuss the topic of premium mediocre from both a consumer perspective, and from Guccis perspective. So, this chapter aims to analyze why Gucci sell premium mediocre products.

2.2.1 The era we live in

In order for people to purchase premium mediocre products at Gucci, Gucci must be offering premium mediocre. Unquestionably. In *The fashion reader*, Linda Welters writes “Successful companies sell the right merchandise at the right time at the right price.”⁶⁷ In the end, fashion is, above all, a business. Welters content by stating that for a business to be successful, they need to understand the market market and meet the demands of their potential customers.⁶⁸

The most fundamental principle for a market to exist is that there has to be different actors. These actors normally consists of producers (sellers) and consumers (buyers). One of the market models is a so called disassociated production market. In the book *Market*, author Patrik Aspers describes how a disassociated product works. He writes “a producer of standardized screws usually makes these without any co-operation from the consumers who use the screws. A haircut, on contrast, normally requires the producer and consumer to work together.”⁶⁹ This means that both the producer and consumer contributes to the result. It is likely that Gucci operates on a disassociated product market, and listens to the needs and desires of the consumers. Aspers also mentioned the so called neoclassical theory about markets. He says that a market is “the outcome of profit maximizers who act rationally”.⁷⁰ Hence, Gucci offers affordable luxury products because it is what the consumers desire, and they do so in an attempt to maximize their profit. In the content analysis used as a method for this thesis, one word kept occurring in the various articles: millennials. The young adults has been discussed in the previous chapter, but by coding the articles in the content analysis,

⁶⁶ Aspers, P. & Godart, F. (2013). *Sociology of Fashion: Order and Change*. Annual Reviews. Retrieved from: https://www.icos.umich.edu/sites/default/files/lecturereadinglists/godart_13.pdf (10-05-2019)

⁶⁷ Welters, L. & Lillethun, A. (2007). *The Fashion Reader*. (p 349). Berg.

⁶⁸ Welters, L. & Lillethun, A. (2007). (p 349)

⁶⁹ Aspers, P. (2011). (p. 21-22)

⁷⁰ Aspers, P. (2011). (p. 26)

they further stresses that millennials shop for premium mediocre. Two of the articles was *Millennials and tenns are making Gucci cool again. Here's how the bran nearly doubled its sale in 2018*, posted in Business Insider, and *6 fashion brands winning millennials over*, for Southern China Morning Post.⁷¹ The articles explicit discussed Millennials and their relationship to Gucci, but so did the other articles. Irene Kim and Jay Reed for Business Insider said that 18-35 year olds contributed to an 85% growth in the luxury-goods market in 2017.⁷² A theme that was central in all of the articles was also *change*, which can be related to millennials, and that the fashion industry is going through a change in how it is structured right now. It could be interpreted that millennials and young adults are embracing the change. A change that partly lies in the digitalization of the fashion industry, and hence makes fashion brands increasingly mainstream.

The fact that Gucci has become increasingly accessible to the masses is not because people all of a sudden has more money to spend on luxury, but because Gucci actively has chosen to become more accessible. In an interview with British Vogue, Alessandro Michele said “[...] I’m trying to make fashion accessible, not only whether or not you have money, but in a sense close to rock ’n’ roll.”⁷³ What he referred to talking about rock ’n’ roll is irrelevant for the point being made, but fact remains that Michele actively tries to make Gucci less exclusive and more in reach for people with less money to spare. However, although Gucci are offering some premium mediocre products, there are still items that only high-end consumers can reach. Appelford writes; “In a bid to satisfy celebrities, professionals, executives, and the very rich, designers product an array of products that are on the one hand highly conformist and on the other hand ‘so highly coded that they are not easily understood by the general public.’”⁷⁴ Appelford means that high end fashion houses, such as Gucci, manages to keep their long-lasting VIP clients with the help of highly coded items, although the brand itself has become reachable for more people.

Yet, the products that sells the best are not the *leather jacket with appliqués* for €9,500 or the *silk dress with shell appliqués* for €5,500 that was mentioned in an earlier chapter, but the premium

⁷¹ Ng, D. (2017). 6 fashion brands winning millennials over. Southern China Morning Post. Retrieved from: <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/fashion-beauty/article/2084368/6-fashion-brands-focusing-millennial-followers> (01-06-2019)

⁷² Kim, I. & Reed, J. (2018).

⁷³ Madsen, A. C. (2018). *Alessandro Michele Opens His Gucci Garden In Florence*. British Vogue. Retrieved from: <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/gucci-garden-alessandro-michele-florence> (10-05-2019)

⁷⁴ Black, S., de la Haye, A., Entwistle, J., Rocamora, A., A. Root, R., & Thomas, H. (2013) (p. 104)

mediocre products. *StyleZeitgeist* wrote, referring to premium mediocre products; “as far as 2015, according to Euromonitor International, luxury small leather goods accounted for \$5.7 billion in sales, projected to grow to \$7.5 billion by 2020.”⁷⁵ Consumers crave luxury products that are accessible to them. Furthermore, in an article written for Quartz, author Marc Bain writes “Their moneymakers these days are fragrances, handbags, shoes, and accessories. Indeed, new research suggests, for the Pradas and Louis Vuittons of the world, too much dependence on clothes can actually be a liability.”⁷⁶ Although Bain was not specifically referring to Gucci, it is safe to say that Prada and Louis Vuitton plays in the same league and are offering premium mediocre products at an approximate entry level.

Premium mediocre consumers choose to consume premium mediocre because of what they believe the brand to be representing, and not so much because of the meaning of the actual product they buy. Aspers talks about the correlation between switch-role and standard markets. He suggests that there sometimes is a difference between the offer and the consumer. “Which meaning is the most entrenched: the meaning of the actor’s identities and their roles (the social status) or the objects (the standards), writes Aspers.”⁷⁷ What premium mediocre Gucci consumers clearly are after is what Aspers explains as the meaning of the actor’s identity. They crave Gucci and buy whatever product from there they can afford. The *StyleZeitgeist* article confirms it. “The logo is key, because in the age of Instagram, where people curate their lives in 2 dimensions on a small screen, the logo is more important than the product itself.”⁷⁸ One of the key takeaways from the content analysis in the articles was that *doing* is more important than *having*, but in order to do, one must have. Millennials crave premium mediocre because of internet and what they can do with the products they have acquired. The article *The luxury conundrum: addressing exclusivity in the age of inclusivity*, written by Greer Hughes for WGSN states that there is a correlation between social media and luxury purchases.⁷⁹ Gucci must be aware of it. They probably have figured it out that the bigger the and more distinguishable the logo is, the easier it will be recognizable on social media. Selling

⁷⁵ Rabkin, E. (2017).

⁷⁶ Bain, M. (2019). *For luxury brands, selling clothes is basically a marketing expense*. Quartz. Retrieved from: <https://qz.com/996233/big-luxury-labels-like-gucci-prada-and-louis-vuitton-arent-in-the-business-of-selling-clothes/> (08-05-2019)

⁷⁷ Aspers, P. (2011). (p. 119).

⁷⁸ Rabkin, E. (2017).

⁷⁹ Hughes, G. (2017). *The Luxury Conundrum: Addressing exclusivity in the age of inclusivity*. WGSN. Retrieved from: <https://www.wgsn.com/blogs/luxury-brands-conundrum-exclusivity-vs-inclusivity/> (29-06-2019)

affordable luxury with distinct logos to millennials; the kings and queens of social media, will likely result in more millennials wanting the same items.

It all comes down to the globalized society we live in today. Premium mediocre is not a new concept. Though the term was coined by Rao in 2017, the phenomenon occurred as early as in the 1980's.⁸⁰ Yet, it was to no extent as widespread as today. The ones that are to most eager to consume affordable luxury is the millennials, as described in an earlier chapter. The millennials feel entitled to luxury in a far greater extent than earlier generations. It is supposedly, at least to some extent, because of the digital revolution we live in. With social media, luxury is seen everywhere, particularly within pop culture. "If the story you're selling and the dream you're trying to create doesn't relate to pop culture and people at large, your channels are not going to drive growth", said Ian Schatzberg, president for Wednesday, a digital creative agency.⁸¹ Gucci has an important role within pop culture. Athletes, models and artists, such as Lady Gaga who wore a glittery Gucci suit while performing the National Anthem at the 2016 Super Bow, all love Gucci.⁸² Millennials see Gucci through their social media and wants to buy the brand. Like earlier suggested, it is the logo and not the item that is the most important. That is why small leather goods; affordable luxury products, sell so good. Michele is aware of the globalized community, and are gladly making Gucci more accessible. In the end, it is all about making a profit.

2.2.2 What premium mediocre does to Gucci

Gucci is undoubtedly a giant on the global fashion market. As previously mentioned, a big part of it lies in the fact that they nowadays are selling products that are accessible to a greater amount of people than before. In today's modern society, luxury is becoming increasingly accessible and less exclusive because more people than before, mostly millennials, feel entitled to luxury. It can be argued that the fashion industry has become more democratized. This is mentioned in the article *How streetwear and accessible luxury sneaked into high fashion*, written by 'Emma' for Tribe to Magazine. She means that the democratization of the fashion industry has lead to the fact that high

⁸⁰ Rabkin, E. (2018). *How Premium Mediocre Conquered Fashion*. Business of Fashion. Retrieved from: <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/opinion/op-ed-how-premium-mediocre-conquered-fashion> (04-26-2019)

⁸¹ Milnes, H. (2016). *The digital strategy driving Gucci's growth*. Digiday. Retrieved from: <https://digiday.com/marketing/digital-strategy-driving-guccis-growth/> (08-05-2019)

⁸² WWD Staff. (2016). Lady Gaga Wears Gucci at Super Bowl 50. WWD. Retrieved from: <https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-scoops/lady-gaga-gucci-super-bowl-10341869/> (07-06-2019)

fashion no longer solely being assigned to the rich and famous.⁸³ In the article *A new age for luxury marketing*, Rezwana Manjour claims the same; “We’re seeing the democratization of luxury at an unprecedented level, driven by globalization and the digital revolution. Long gone are the days when luxury was only available to the select few. The idea of luxury, once perceived as a ‘rarity’, has now evolved into ‘*masstige*’.”⁸⁴ The democratization is also one of the themes that was discovered in the articles used for the content analysis. In *The Washington Post*, writer Sarah Halzack said that high-end consumer chose not to shop for highly recognizable brands, such as Gucci, because it was considered too mainstream and therefore tacky.⁸⁵ The fact that brands such as Gucci has become increasingly mainstream is one proof that the industry has become democratized. In *Digiday*, Milnes writes that “Brands are trying to be everywhere in every capacity”, which further indicates that brands are trying to reach a wider consumer range.⁸⁶ *StyleZeitgeist* and writer Eugene Rabkin however does not agree. He stresses that democratization of fashion is an illusion, and that there is difference between real luxury and premium mediocre.⁸⁷ He might be true to some extent, but fact remains that Gucci are offering premium mediocre in an attempt to reach a wider consumer range, and although those new millennial consumers most likely cannot afford everything at Gucci, an increasing amount of them can still shop for some things. It can therefore be argued that affordable luxury products at high end fashion houses is a step in the right direction.

“Michele’s dresses are more commonly on magazine covers than ones by any other label.”⁸⁸ Gucci can nowadays be seen everywhere; on magazine covers, in pop culture, or on the girl in front of you on the local bus. The fact that Gucci are trying to stay exclusive but at the same time reach a wide audience might not be such a successful concept after all. As it becomes more accessible to the masses, the so called ‘ultra-rich’ people look otherwise. And with the rise of social media and the digital world, it is easier than ever before to find alternative brands. Sarah Halzack for the *Washington Post* claims that wealthy shoppers prefers hard-to-find pieces rather than a purse that

⁸³ ‘Emma’. (n/a). *How streetwear and accessible luxury sneaked into high fashion*. *Tribute to Magazine*. Retrieved from: <https://tributetomagazine.com/accessible-luxury-street-style/> (08-05-2019)

⁸⁴ Manjur, R. (2015). *A new age for luxury marketing*. *Marketing*. Retrieved from: <http://www.marketing-interactive.com/features/a-new-age-for-luxury-marketing/> (02-05-2019)

⁸⁵ Halzack, S. (2015).

⁸⁶ Milnes, H. (2016).

⁸⁷ *Stylezeitgeist*.

⁸⁸ Wolf, C. (2016). *The Guccification of Fast Fashion Is Here*. *Complex*. Retrieved from: <https://www.complex.com/style/2016/06/gucci-fast-fashion-topman> (02-05-2019)

screams Gucci. Halzack further writes that affluent people search for personal taste and individuality and are looking for it in discreet luxury goods.⁸⁹ That is, the opposite to Gucci where most items are covered in logos and monograms. Looking back at the article written by Manjur, she seems to be on the same page; “As an increasing number of people enter the world of wealth, luxury is available to more. However, the 1% of ultra wealthy consumers still seek exclusivity. While brands obviously want to benefit from the growing pool of wealthy consumers, they also need to do so in a way that does not “cheapen” their cache in the eyes of the “most wealthy”.⁹⁰ Although Gucci still do offer products that can only be reached by the 1%, there is no doubt that the brand has become increasingly mainstream due to the popularity of their premium mediocre items. Where that will leave the brand in the future can only time tell.

⁸⁹ Halzack, S. (2015). *Why Louis Vuitton, Gucci and Prada are in trouble*. The Washington Post. Retrieved from: https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/louis-vuitton-and-guccis-nightmares-come-true-wealthy-shoppers-dont-want-flashy-logos-anymore/2015/06/15/e521733c-fd97-11e4-833c-a2de05b6b2a4_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.8ca4d123a0c4 (27-04-2019)

⁹⁰ Manjur, R. (2015).

3. Conclusion

3.1 To conclude

The aim of this thesis has been to investigate why certain people, mostly millennials, are eager to consume affordable luxury products at high end luxury brands. The curiosity for the subject arose after having observed tourists consuming such products at Gucci in Florence, Italy. Since it was at Gucci the phenomenon was first noticed, it came natural that the study would also focus around Gucci, rather than other brands within the same sphere. Yet, my hope is that the topic of this thesis can be used to understand how similar brands are operating, and to understand the bigger picture of the premium mediocre phenomenon. The focus of the thesis aimed towards the people who are consuming premium mediocre at Gucci, what defines them, if they have anything in common, and why they feel the urge to consume such products. However, it was soon discovered that in order to understand why people wanted to buy affordable luxury, it was also needed to understand why Gucci were offering those products.

Consequently, the question framing of the thesis was made up of 2 questions that at first glance may seem somewhat disjointed, but in fact plays an important role in understanding the full concept of the phenomenon. To demonstrate the relationship between the questions, help was taken from Marcel Mauss ideas about ‘the gift’, explained by author Aafke Komter in the book *Social Solidarity and the Gift*. The gift stresses the importance of the relationship between the giver and receiver and that the value of the gift is determined by both actors.⁹¹ Moreover, Komter writes; “One gives to those from whom one may expect some direct or future benefit.”⁹² His words further illustrates that discussing Gucci solely from a consumer perspective would not have been enough, since Gucci unquestionably have an agenda by selling premium mediocre products, and it is thus important to analyze the matter from both sides in an attempt to understand the full concept.

The first question turned toward the consumer side of the aspect. It set out to answer why people consume premium mediocre products at Gucci in Florence. Furthermore, the question wanted to discover if there was anything in particular that defined the people consuming such products, and why they chose Florence to conduct their purchases. To get an understanding of the matter, short interviews were made with people right after they had acquired their Gucci products. 11 people were interviewed. Although the interviewees were chosen by fortuity, and hence cannot represent

⁹¹ Komter, A. 2005

⁹² Komter, A. 2005

everyone buying premium mediocre items, it was still useful in getting a consumer perspective on Gucci.

By interpreting the interviews, alongside the usage of various theories, the conclusion has been made that people consume premium mediocre products at Gucci because of mainly 2 reasons. The first reason is because of what they believe Gucci to be representing. The second is since they feel the need to showcase themselves and the identity they aspire to have. The analysis was discussing whether people are purchasing Gucci since they have a desire climb the hierarchal ladder of society, or to feel belonging to people already within their orb. Some interviews suggested the first, whilst other the second. It was also understood that people consume Gucci believing that the brand generates high fashion. Although that might be true to some extent, all products at Gucci cannot be seen as fashion *just because* they are from Gucci.

There is no coincidence that the term ‘premium mediocre’ occurred in a blogpost only 2 years ago. The phenomenon is not new, but it has become increasingly adapted by the fashion industry because of the globalized world we live in today. The digital era has given us a generation, the millennials, that seems to be living in a “treat yourself” culture where they feel entitled to luxury. Since many of the items sold at Gucci aren’t within their reach, they settle for the labels entry level products; the premium mediocre products. By conducting content analysis in 8 articles regarding the matter, it also stood clear that millennials are the reason why Gucci has become less exclusive and are now offering affordable luxury products. It would however have been interesting to get an opinion from Gucci. In the initial part of writing this thesis, I tried to get an interview with a Gucci employee. Unfortunately without success. That would have deepened the understanding of why Gucci are offering premium mediocre, than, as now, basing my theories entirely on what is written in articles.

3.2 Reflection

I believe that Gucci has become too popular for its own good, and with millennials sweeping the luxury market, there is no stopping on how exploited the brand will become.

Katherine Appelford described in *The Handbook of Fashion Studies* that some products sold at high end luxury brands are so highly coded that they are not easily understood by the general public.⁹³ Her words suggests that although Gucci as a brand has become mainstream, there are still a range of products that are not, and those products are why the top strata of the society still shops for Gucci. However, Halzack for The Washington Post claims that affluent people within the over class,

⁹³ Black, S., de la Haye, A., Entwistle, J., Rocamora, A., A. Root, R., & Thomas, H. (2013). (p. 104)

increasingly choose brands without logos.⁹⁴ If that is the truth, then the highly coded and expensive products at Gucci will not be sold, and the brand will be left with selling nothing but its entry level products. Where does that leave Gucci? That is a question only the future can tell.

While writing this thesis, I have begun to ask myself what the relationship between luxury and exclusiveness is, and what luxury would be without exclusiveness. I think it would be an interesting future discussion. And not only luxury, but fashion over all. What is fashion without exclusiveness? Would trends even exist if there was no exclusiveness? I do not know.

⁹⁴ Halzack, S. (2015).

Appendix 1.0

Interview questions

- What did you buy at Gucci?
- Was the purchase planned before you entered the store?
- What does Gucci mean to you?
- What do you think Gucci is trying to signal?
- Did you post any photos on your social media when you were inside the store or do you plan on posting what you bought online? [If yes, why?]

Presentation of interviewees (name, age, country, purchase, price)

Gucci Garden:

Interviewee 1: Louise, 19, Netherlands, iPhone cover €190

Interviewee 2: Anna, 31, Germany, t-shirt €340

Interviewee 3: Audra, 24, USA, belt €270

Interviewee 4: Sydney, 22, USA, sunglasses €210

Interviewee 5: Julia, 21, Sweden, belt €270

Interviewee 6: Dayana, 29, Mexico, sandals €395

Gucci Boutique at Via Roma:

Interviewee 7: Ellie, 24, United Kingdom, slides €270

Interviewee 8: Jason, 32, China, hat €195

Interviewee 9: Victoire, n/a, France, tights €90

Gucci at The mall:

Interviewee 10: Cindy, 31, China, cardholder €170, iPhone case €190

Interviewee 11: Jelly, 27, China, slides €240

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