

A study on the development and evolution of consumer behaviour in India

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Abstract

Consumption and consumer behavior are crucial factors in contemporary societies. As Sulkunen (2009, 99) notes, besides welfare state and life-regulation policy these topics belong to the three most important issues of modern capitalism. Considering the last two-three decades, digitalization has been a major factor of consumer behavior. As with all societal developments, digitalization has been producing new ways of life, changing and replacing the previous ones. We talk about the emergence of a new generational cohort, the Digital Natives (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), also referred to as Generation Z (Bassiouni & Hackley, 2014). Characteristic to this generation is that it is online (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). The “Internet-induced” changes can be found not only in human actions but also in attitudes and ethics (e.g. Cesareo & Pastore, 2014; Simmons, 2008). This turns up in phenomena such as digital piracy¹. As a recent article in a Finnish newspaper (Helsingin Sanomat 19.4.2015) describes, digital piracy seems to continuously find new forms and shapes. Understanding the consumer behaviour is the basic for marketing strategy formulation. Consumers reaction to this strategy determines the organization success or failure. Under this backdrop, this empirical study on the evolution of consumer behaviour tries to answer the following questions - How has consumer behaviour changed in recent years and what are the main causes of this change? What effect have the changes in consumer habits from 2005 to 2011 had on luxury brands' accessories? Have the changes in consumption and in consumerism in recent years given rise to a wider accessibility of luxury in the fashion industry? Have those changes in consumption devalued luxury and high fashion? This study is descriptive and empirical in nature.

Keywords: consumer behaviour, luxury, descriptive, empirical

1. Introduction

Consumption and consumer behavior are crucial factors in contemporary societies. As Sulkunen (2009, 99) notes, besides welfare state and life-regulation policy these topics belong to the three most important issues of modern capitalism. Considering the last two-three decades, digitalization has been a major factor of consumer behavior. As with all societal developments, digitalization has been producing new ways of life, changing and replacing the previous ones. We talk about the emergence of a new generational cohort, the Digital Natives (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), also referred to as Generation Z (Bassiouni & Hackley, 2014) ^[11]. Characteristic to this generation is that it is online (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Or, as Bassiouni and Hackley (2014) ^[11] put it, the life of this generation is filled with the possibilities of digital communications. It is well-argued to say that the drastic changes in contemporary consumer behavior are enabled, in particular, by the services of the Internet (e.g. Soopramanien *et al.*, 2007). The “Internet-induced” changes can be found not only in human actions but also in attitudes and ethics (e.g. Cesareo & Pastore, 2014; Simmons, 2008) ^[19]. This turns up in phenomena such as digital piracy¹. As a recent article in a Finnish newspaper (Helsingin Sanomat 19.4.2015) ^[47] describes, digital piracy seems to continuously find new forms and shapes.

Since digital music is of a particular interest in this thesis, we briefly describe, as an example, how the field of music as well as the music industry has evolved through the Digital Era. By

the Digital Era we mean the time period that started around the mid-1990s as the Internet services came available to a wider audience.

First Phase. In the late 1990s and at the beginning of the new millennium, distribution of digital music started via peer-to-peer (P2P) networks. In contrast to the typical client-server architecture, in those networks each node of a network serves as both a server and a client. This architecture is (cost) efficient in distribution of digital content such as digital music. It is, however, ¹ Digital piracy is defined as illegal use of copyrighted digital content (compare with Al-Rafee & Rouibah, 2010, 283) ^[7] complicated to manage. To no-one's surprise, P2P networks have widely been used for illegal purposes. Hence, P2P networks have also been widely accused of the decline of the music industry (see Halttunen *et al.*, 2010b.)

Second Phase. During the first five to ten years of the new millennium, a large number of music download stores, such as the iTunes Store, emerged. At first, these stores relied on digital right management system (DRM) of various kinds to prevent the illegal use of the offered digital contents. The DRM systems did not prove, however, efficient in general, due to which several download stores followed the decision of the iTunes Store in 2009, to provide music without DRM protection. During this period, piracy remained a remarkable problem. (Halttunen *et al.*, 2010a; Halttunen *et al.*, 2010b.)

Third Phase. Since the music download stores were not as successful as had been hoped, there was a threat that digital

piracy would gain ever more ground. New commercial alternatives were, however, became under development around 2010. Most of these new music services are streaming-based, which means that the music is received as streamed instead of being downloaded. A good example of services of this category is Spotify, a Swedish music service.

The streamed content is DRM protected. Obviously, Spotify has succeeded in meeting the consumers' needs quite well. However, Spotify has several parallel business models that differ from each other in both pricing and delivering the music content. Therefore, it is difficult to know for the moment how the different alternatives are accepted by the users in a longer run. Despite apparently good user acceptance of streaming-based music services (SBMS) in general, a recent study suggests that the piracy problem has not been resolved by SBMSs (Borja *et al.*, 2015) ^[18].

The persistence of the digital piracy problem is a good example of the phenomena of the Digital Era that evokes thoughts about needs for a wider understanding of digital content consumer behavior: while at micro level a consumer's needs are better and better met by commercial services, at macro level the problem of illegal use of digital content remains. A crucial question is

how this can be explained. Another interesting trend, which is worth deeper consideration, relates to the materialization/dematerialization of products. While the general trend of the Digital Era is towards favoring dematerialization of commodities (e.g. streamed music or videos), signs of re-materialization have also been found by Magaudda (2011), for example. Since Magaudda's study focused on music, which is usually seen as an archetype of digitizable products, the finding is interesting. There is a similar finding in our own study reported in Article 3 of this thesis (Makkonen *et al.*, 2011). This rises the question of whether it is possible that tangible products may coexist and flourish with their intangible counterparts in a market where digitalization seems to be the trend.

The developments in the Digital Era have often been examined from the perspective of technological or business evolution, or a combination of these. We, however, aim to have a more comprehensive understanding. While realizing the importance of technological and business innovations on societal developments, we emphasize the ways societies and individuals shape the developments of technologies and businesses. Furthermore, they not only shape the economic and technological evolution but are also in a mutual relationship with each other (see Pilcher, 1994).

Although, in theoretical sense, we are interested in the entire field of consumer behavior of digital contents, a main part of our empirical investigations is limited to digital music. This is done for the following two reasons. First, in a short time, music consumption has gone through several changes that reflect the changed conditions in technology, business, and society². This provides a remarkable benefit when acquiring the empirical data: namely, it implies that even adolescents have witnessed a great deal of the evolution of this area. Second, music is consumed by a majority of people which make it easier to investigate the issue empirically. In the next subchapters we first describe in more detail the phenomena on which we focus in this thesis. Next, we set the research

questions for the thesis, and then we present its structure.

2. Literature Review

This research aims to determine whether or not recent changes in consumer behaviour have affected the luxury accessory business in a positive or negative way. In *Deluxe, How Luxury Lost Its Lustre*, Dana Thomas (2007) illustrates how changes in consumption of luxury fashion goods, as well as the pursuit of economical profit margins, have lead to a decline in true luxury in the fashion industry. A triggering change in consumption habits is the rise and expansion of the Internet as a source of information on products and goods as researched by Solomon (2009) in *Consumer Behaviour: Buying, Having and Being* or the development and proliferation of retail and e-commerces making luxury accessible to all as exposed in the *Global Luxury Goods Market Report* (2011).

Simultaneously, due to changes in consumer buying behaviour, brands have become more aware of and have developed their brand images and personalities as exposed by Keller and Lehmann (2006), *Brands and Branding: Research Findings and Future Priorities*.

Ways of developing and affirming this important visibility factor have been enhanced by exploring new ways of marketing their image such as the use of celebrities representing brands or by working in collaboration with fashion bloggers influencing trends and consumer behaviour as written by Wiseman's in her article of 2009 *Tavi Gevinson: the 13-year-old blogger with the fashion world at her feet*.

Controversy of changes occurring in the luxury fashion industry include the development of the market from a selected elite to an expansion in the luxury fashion market structure by spreading to the masses as emphasizes by Knowledge@Wharton in the online article *Illusion, Not Quality: The Transformation of the Luxury Niche into a Global Mass Market* (2008).

According to the literature sources above it is possible to deduct that changes in consumer behaviour have affected the luxury accessory business by reflecting a positive change on sales but perhaps a negative one as regards to the luxury reputation.

The literature review shows a need for and supports the authors' theoretical and qualitative research.

3. Scope of the study

The limitations of this study include its size and the limited amount of time that can be spent on it. The writer can only consider limited aspects and analyze them to a certain degree of depth in this research. In regard to the sample size, the author will focus on an area limited to a market niche: the luxury accessory business.

The author will not be able to compare and contrast:

- , Middle Differences and attitudes across all age ranges
- Differences and attitudes across different income brackets
- Differences between countries for e.g. EMEA (Europe East, Asia)

4. Research Questions and the Multi-view Approach Applied

As our objective is to have a comprehensive picture of digital content consumer behavior, in general and, of digital music

consumer behavior, in particular, our thesis is constituted of a few “sub-targets”. These targets are concretized through three research question that we define as follows:

RQ1: What is characteristic to consumer behavior on the current digital content markets, as considered in its societal and economic context?

RQ2: How consistent is consumer behavior as a whole? Can there be variance in consumer behavior among different consumer subgroups, i.e. between consumers of different socioeconomic status, gender or age, for example?

RQ3: How can consumer behavior be described and explained as part of wider societal changes?

Consumer behavior, like other human behavior, naturally changes in the course of time. Changes take place in connection with technological, economic and other societal developments. We believe that understanding current phenomenon is based on understanding earlier developments and vice versa, that is, predicting future developments requires understanding of current behavior. Thus, predicting what will happen in the field of digital content markets in future requires deep understanding of the current phenomena. This is, obviously, an extremely important question in modern, rapidly digitalizing societies.

5. Research Methods

Research methods are defined by being actions or activities that are useful in generating data (Greener 2008 p.10) such as in the case of this study, a qualitative interview.

5.1 Data collection methods

Secondary data for this research has been collected by researching and gathering information from academic sources such as books, journals, articles and online sources. Thereafter, interviews have been performed, which can also be described as a qualitative method, which connects and makes reference to secondary data.

The interviews, or in other words the source of qualitative data, are one specific sort of research strategy, which includes data that has not been quantified or that is nonnumeric (Saunders *et al.* 2009 p.480).

Bryman *et al.* (2007 p.402), argue that qualitative research is “a research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data”.

5.1.1 Compiling the interviews

The author chose to conduct interviews as the source of primary data collection method of this research. This enabled the author and gave the opportunity to ask respondents about the specific points raised in the secondary research part of the thesis; which in turn ensured relevant answers for the discussion and subsequent results to answers the hypothesis made.

The questions asked in the interviews were formulated as open questions as to give respondents more space in their answers leaving them the freedom of how much information

they would like to reveal.

The interview requests were sent out by email to selected and suitable companies in the luxury fashion sector and prior research of these companies indicated the most relevant and targeted personnel to conduct these interviews. This was carried out to ensure that the interviews were effective for the purpose of this research. Furthermore, the main part of these interviews (see Appendix 1/3, Appendix 2/3 and Appendix 3/3) were sent out to the selected companies by e-mail as it is a fast, effective, time saving, cost free and widely used means to carry out this sort of primary research.

This also enabled time to the interviewees as to consider their replies and also give them the opportunity to consider their feelings and prevent any possible discomfort due to environmental pressures.

The interviews were flanked by further informal discussion and contact, whether it would be for elaboration and/or clarification purposes.

The interviews were designed and distributed amongst a diverse range of companies including luxury conglomerates, boutiques and high street stores. Unfortunately many companies were unresponsive or did not reply in time for the deadline of this research.

The case study therefore is comprised of the given respondents presented of companies ASOS, Helsinki 10 and FINISK. The answers given in the interviews constitute the original primary data collected. The interviews were designed to acquire information regarding, consumption patterns, market trends, beliefs regarding products and services in the industry, attitude towards luxury, economic and social motivations for luxury buying behaviour and influences; which are affecting changes within the industry and in consumer behaviour and their perception and consumption of luxury accessories.

The method was chosen in relation to the nature of the survey's subject, the population sample and research constraints. The order of the interview questions raised was also carefully considered. The interviews were asked in the form of logically ordered questions so not to confuse the respondents. No leading questions or questions that broached ideas where made in order not to influence the response of that particular question or questions posed thereafter.

The questions of the interviews were following a logical time frame, e.g. present behaviour discussed before that of the past or the future.

The use of open interview questions was decided as opposed to closed questions to elicit rich qualitative data. This choice enabled and provided the respondent with an opportunity for freedom of expression and thought. Although this has been beneficial to the richness and quality of answers given, open questions can be a minus as these kinds of questions take longer to answer which de facto may confuse or tire the respondents, which can in turns create answers that can be harder to interpret.

5.1.2 Sampling frame of the interviews made

The population of this survey includes all luxury goods retailers whether Internet or store based.

The sample of the population selected to reply to the interviews spans across ages, socio-economic groups, genders

etc.

Retailers ranging from low to high-end, web-based only and store based only are all included to obtain a sample that is representative of consumers.

The author designed a tailored and company specific interview to elicit relevant information from appropriate and selected companies. In total the author distributed the questionnaire to 15 handpicked favored businesses in the fashion industry that represented the more relevant companies eligible for the research and its topic.

The respondent percentage was about 4, 5% to whom a more thorough investigation was carried out.

This was done using informal interview techniques with open questions to enable to the respondent to have freedom of expression in their replies.

The 15 businesses originally contacted were selected due to the association with not only the fashion industry but luxury fashion, in particular, accessories. The respondents themselves were chosen due to their position within a company. In these cases, buyers, who are more involved in the business side of the company than an average floor-assistant?

Interpreting the data collected was, due to its qualitative nature, time consuming and it was important not to allow preconceptions and biased interpretations.

The respondents of the interviews that were ultimately used in the company case are selected personnel of the UK based Internet retailer ASOS, the store Helsinki10 based in Helsinki, Finland and FINSK the high-end fashion UK shoe brand.

5.1.3 Interpreting data analysis

After getting the detailed interviews with the answers of the respondents, ASOS,

FINSK and Helsinki 10, the data was summarized, categorized and structured as a narrative in support of the research in order to demonstrate and discuss a meaningful analysis answering the questions and hypotheses raised in the research aim (Saunders *et al.* 2009, p.482 ff.).

When using qualitative data, it is required of the author to classify the data into categories, so-called conceptualization or conceptual framework, as the results collected are non-standardized because the data is based on meanings expressed through words. In order to improve data analysis, the author has presented the findings of the interviews according to the different themes.

ASOS's, Helsinki 10's and FINSK's interviews have been compared to each other but also compared with the American Express Report of 2011 and to the theory part of the thesis.

The analysis provides evidence for the hypotheses proposed during the beginning of the thesis.

6.1 Results and Discussion

6.1.1. Results

Results of the interviews presented in written form will be critically analyzed and compared in relation to the data found in the *American Express Spend Sights Special Report: Global Luxury Fashion Spending Overview 2011*. Numeric data will be critically analyzed and also displayed in graph format for clear interpretation.

The company case answers and results will be linked to the *American Express Spend Sights Special Report: Global Luxury Fashion Spending Overview 2011*, which focuses on the United States and the global spending habits in the luxury clothing and accessories industry in 2011 and comparing it with 2010.

Being a member of Global Merchant Services, the company provides insights about how consumers of a certain industry spend their income according to data collected made from transactions of around 90 million cards over 125 countries (2011 p.9).

American Express (2011 p.3) divides its fashion luxury and accessories consumer group in two categories. The first being the "*fashion enthusiasts*" representing the 5% of the American Express card users spending the most on high-end fashion clothing and apparel regardless of their gender, age group or degree of wealth. The second group the "*average consumers*" who represent the rest of the consumers who spend a considerable amount of their disposable income in that product category regardless of their gender, age group or degree of wealth.

The author has also compared and analyzed the answers found in the three interviews with each other, drawing similarities and differences, between the three companies ASOS, FINSK and Helsinki 10 but also comparing the answers to the secondary research sources exposed in the theoretical discussion.

6.1.2 Discussion and analysis

According to the interviews given by the three respondents, ASOS, FINSK and Helsinki 10, the author can draw a parallel in the companies' core selling activities. Indeed, all firms sell fashion products and all define their image as selling fashion clothing and accessories ranging from high-street brands, to designer and to high-end and luxury products. Their business strategies are clearly complemented by Knell's (2007) definition of consumption where consumers engage in consumption in order to convey specific messages about their identity and their lifestyles.

ASOS sell emerging newly discovered brands, emerging talents and established brands "*we tend to sell emerging, newly discovered talent as well as well-known established brands*" and Helsinki 10 sell brands from high to low price giving the customer and inspiring experience from outside Finland "*no matter what the price is, the customer gets a feeling of luxury and sees the experience as an 'inspiring experience from outside Finland'*".

FINSK describes their own brand as being "*designed to be wearable and covetable*". Each company uses design as a tool to appeal to a wider customer base.

ASOS and Helsinki 10 both set a premium on selling innovative designer brands to fashion enthusiasts, and their wide customer base targets women and men between the ages of 16 to 40 for ASOS and 15 to 75 for Helsinki 10. This indicates that luxury fashion buying is, whether carried out online or in an actual retail store, made by a large market segment of consumers. FINSK describe their own consumer group in similar broad terms. The phenomenon of diversification, whether it is on reaching a wide customer base regarding the products and accessories sold from lower to high

prices, from high street to luxury accessories and from teenagers to mature adults; seems to be a keystone in our company case successes.

The focus of Helsinki 10's and FINSK's main customer base are those predominantly interested in fashion, those who are described as the "*fashion enthusiasts*" group in the American Express Spending Insights 2011 report. ASOS aims to cater more to what AmEx describes as "*average consumers*". Helsinki 10 and FINSK describe their target group as "*people who are interested in fashion and understand the quality in design and sustainability*" and "*for anyone that appreciates fashion and design*" respectively. ASOS on the other hand are describing their customer base as "*high street*".

To ensure uniqueness of their luxury brand accessories, the companies purposely limit the available quantities of certain products. For example, Helsinki 10 describe how they limit stock by selling items in low quantities to ensure the exclusive aspect of products sold "*we also buy our shoes and bags in low quantities, which make them even more special*".

ASOS utilizes a similar strategy whereby ASOS sells high-end fashion and luxury brands with limited stock and with very high prices to those who can afford it to achieve that same effect. This however, is accompanied by offering affordable products to target groups with more limited budgets in order to guarantee service to its wide customer range "*Our premium brands are made with time and care therefore costing a little more. Our more high street brands focus on more mass-produced product*".

FINSK also emphasizes this exclusivity and high-quality strategy: "*We provide an aesthetic you can't find anywhere else*", "*Using the highest quality materials and handcrafted techniques*".

This idea of a limited amount of items available only to a limited number of consumers is a key theme throughout the book of Dana Thomas (2007) *Deluxe, How Luxury Lost its Lustre*.

Despite very high prices and despite the economical crisis of 2007 (discussed pages ff.), evidence thus far suggests that there is still a clear demand for exclusive luxury accessories.

Blundell (2008) stipulates that in the evolution of consumer behaviour, there are very few economical areas affected. Knowledge @ Wharton (2008) also describes how luxury is supposed to be immune to market fluctuations. This is true of both ASOS "*Luckily it (the brand) wasn't affected at first and has continued to grow however, we are keen on increasing lower priced items in order to appeal to those who were affected*". Helsinki 10, despite the crisis, insist on having a constant growth in sales and stocks.

This indicates that despite the changes that the recession of 2007 might have induced in other business sectors, the luxury fashion and luxury accessory sector remains relatively unaffected. Helsinki 10 says that one possibility why the sector has remained unaffected is that fashion aficionados always find other ways to save up in order to increase their disposable income dedicated to buying luxury accessories "*(our sales have) not that much (been affected by the financial crisis) as many people who are into luxury products find other ways to save up if necessary*". FINSK recognizes that the recession has been difficult for a lot of brands but they believe that it is their brand's individuality and exclusivity that has

kept them unaffected.

As discussed in the secondary data, high pricing is synonymous with high quality. ASOS sells premium brands made with time and care that cost more than more average, mass-produced brands. As raised by Solomon and Thomas p.16, ASOS agrees that the price of a product is synonymous with higher quality, which is often a decisive factor in purchases made by newcomer consumers on the market "*(This equation is) very true and I believe this is translated all over the world, no matter which brand*" and this is something that FINSK agrees is almost universal. "*This applies to most luxury fashion brands. A lot of work and development, and the best materials go in to making every product*". Contrastingly, Helsinki 10 reject this idea. They believe that this equation is not necessarily a true one and that nowadays price is no longer an equivalent for quality "*This depends a lot on the brands. Some of them ask high prices and sell really poorly made products*". Helsinki 10 have built their strategy accordingly, choosing to sell a selection of products with a unique design based on "*durability not only in the quality*" and this is something that FINSK too recognizes as being an important aspect to focus on in their ethos. "*Customers are investing more in luxury pieces. They want a product they can wear for years without it going out of fashion*" The phenomenon of selling items that are made to last follows the idea exposed by Raghavendra (2010 p.23) in which consumers have become more aware since the crisis in 2007 and are increasingly opting to buy one carefully chosen item that is 'built to last' as opposed to buying several items. This refers to the Euromonitor International research as exposed in pages 24 and 25, which exposes the slow growth in that sector induced by the crisis in 2007.

The American Express Spend Sights Special Report (2011 p.2), indicates that the top 5% of the "*fashion enthusiasts*" who spend on luxury clothing and accessories have influenced the whole fashion industry contributing to the expansion of the sector. The report indicates that the US average male consumer spent more than 156% more money in an hour in 2011 on luxury fashion goods compared to 2010 and that the same criteria is valid for US average female consumers who spent 125% more per hour.

American Express registered global decreases of 14% in Australia, 10% in France, 1% in Hong Kong, 22% in Japan and 14% in the United Kingdom on luxury among *fashion enthusiasts* however, the "*average consumer*" has increased his spending with 1% in Australia, 13% in France, 3% in Hong Kong, 26% in Japan and 27% in the United Kingdom. ASOS confirm this as although their international sales have grown drastically, their UK Sales have decreased "*International sales have grown massively as have UK but they have slowed in comparison*".

Helsinki 10 insists good quality is important, specifically when selling more expensive brands as durability also benefits the environment "*Selling long-lasting items is also a benefit for the environment*". This complements Raghavendra (2010 p.23) and Euromonitor International pages 24 and 25 who pinpoint that the financial crisis of 2007 has led to the reduction of disposable incomes which no longer permits consumers to indulge into the throw away culture signaling a heightened interest in the luxury market for average

consumers and with spending occurring in a more calculated manner.

All the companies investigated agree with the idea that consumer behaviour is influenced as to reach a desired state or goal (Bagozzi & Dholakia 1999). Helsinki 10 comments:

"I think that consumers do that a lot in order to access a piece of the dream" FINSK describes such consumer behaviour as *"to feel closer to a lifestyle they aspire to"* The companies' verdict is unanimous that consumers are buying a piece of the dream with accessories as they are more accessible than couture clothing. ASOS adds that this phenomenon has been a long lasting one that has emerged prior to e-tailers as a general trait of consumer behaviour *"I believe that this happens all the time, due to celebrity lifestyles etc. but I suppose this has been happening for many years, even prior to e-tailers"*. FINSK are planning the growth of their company around accessories for this reason. *"(to develop the brand) over the next few months to also provide accessories like scarves and purses in order to make us more accessible."*

The importance of Internet retailing, (Okonkwo p.20, 21 and the Global Luxury Goods Market Report p.21), globalization (Kotler *et al.* p.19, Solomon p.19 and De Mooij p.19) and celebrity advertising (Okonkwo p. 21 and Thomas p.22) are major influences in consumer buying behaviour for all three companies. One of the major changes incurred, as Helsinki 10

points out, is that consumers are already aware of brands and products they want to buy, thanks to the spread of advertising and communication of specific brands and their products *"Definitely a positive effect, internet retailing and globalization have helped smaller and more unknown brands to step up to people's knowledge and that is one reason why we don't need to advertise new brands that much. People already know about them."* The heightened communication channels are a positive influence on consumer behaviour for FINSK. *"I think it helps our products reach more people and a broader range of people, which is good for us because we make a wide range of shoes."*

The Internet has undoubtedly brought changes in consumption habits. Solomon p. 16 states that consumer behaviour is a young and dynamic field affected by exterior influences, like the Internet. The Global Luxury Goods Market report (2011) p.13 emphasizes that e-commerce makes luxury available to all and Solomon (p. 17) indicates that the Internet brings upon fast accessibility and a quick spread of information. Helsinki 10 and ASOS states that e-tailing is a great way to reach an international customer base *"Internet retailing is good for reaching people outside Finland"* comments Helsinki 10.

FINSK articulates how more of their stockists are choosing to retail the brand through their online platforms as well as in store that has had an obvious positive effect on sales.

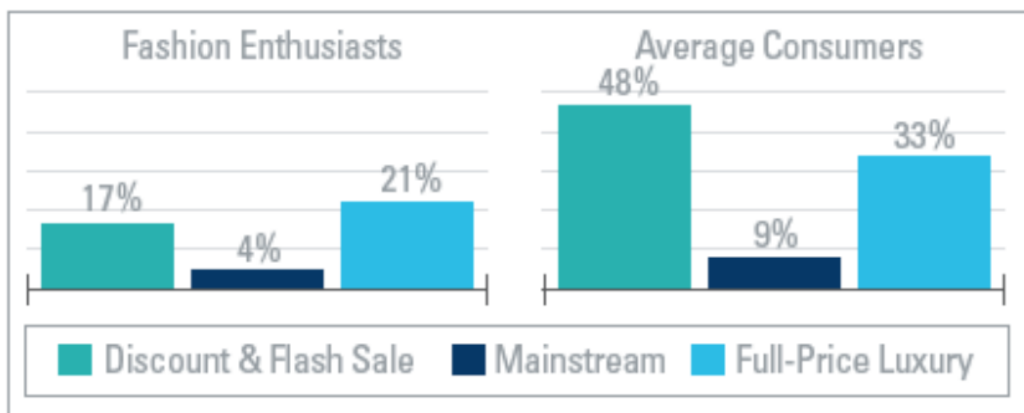


Figure 6 - Change in US Online Speed: Fashion Enthusiasts & Average Consumers (1 hour spending in 2011 compared to 1 hour spending in 2010). Copyright American Express.

Indeed, Figure 6 displays that the Internet luxury shopping experience is growing as numbers demonstrate that their customer base, buying online fashion, is feeling more comfortable spending larger amounts of their income online. Figure 6 indicates the rise in amount spent per hour per consumer, in percentages from 2010 to 2011 of their *"fashion enthusiasts"* but also their *"average consumers"* on full-price luxury as respectively 21% and 33% increase.

The Amex Report (2011 p.5) also remarks that *"fashion enthusiasts"* from ages 18 to 45 have decreased their in store spending in 2011 as opposed to 2010 but that instead their *"average consumers"* have highly increased their spending habits during that period.

In fact, *"average consumers"* from the age group 18 to 29 increased their spending by 100% and from the age group 30

to 45 increased their spending by 142%, between 2010 and 2011. American Express also indicates that the *"fashion enthusiasts"* in countries such as Japan and Australia, are following trend. As a matter of fact, Japanese consumers from ages 18 to 29 have decreased their spending from 13% and consumers from ages 30 to 45 have decreased their spending from 23%; Australian consumers from ages 18 to 29 have decreased their spending from 12% and consumers from ages 30 to 45 have decreased their spending from 15%. FINSK appreciates the *"ease and accessibility of a good online retailer"* yet is aware of the lacking kinesthesia *"you don't get the experience of shopping at a boutique"* Helsinki 10, owning both a web-shop but also a physical shop, as opposed to ASOS being an online retailer only, insists that having an actual shop is essential to the customer luxury buying

experience despite the growing changes in consumption and consumer behaviour that have occurred, as the result of globalization, Internet expansion and the growing popularity of online shopping (see Solomon p.17) *“the customer service and shopping experience of being in the store, feeling fabrics and actually trying on the garments cannot be found in the online experience”*. Helsinki 10 sets a premium on adding that, the customer buying experience is magnified by the sense of touch, sight and feel as exposed by Okonkwo in 2005 p. 20 and 21; as far as being able to touch the fabric of the garments and by being able to try them on *“Online stores lack in the human aspect of the shopping experience but also lack in sensory experience such as feeling the fabric or fitting into a certain garment”*. Okonkwo p. 20 says that high-end fashion luxury goods are sensory (sight, touch, feel) and draws a parallel of the experience the consumer gets in Helsinki 10 as the senses are stimulated in the store atmosphere which contributes to the buying experience. Helsinki 10 mentions the presence of perfumes they use to contribute to the experience. In order to minimize the loss of sensory experience, ASOS uses strong visuals such as videos or slideshows in which, each garment is presented on the catwalk and accompanied by up-tempo music as to enhance what has the potential to be a sterile shopping experience. Other tactics to overcome the potential downfall of e-tailing as described by the Global Luxury Market Overview Report of 2011 include listing the products’ attributes such as fabric composition, sizing comparison and suggesting other items to complete ‘the look’. As with internet retailing, the case studies underline the importance of social media as a change in advertising fashion luxury accessories as exposed by Solomon pages 17 and 28; but also as an interesting direct communication platform of advertising and mutual constructive exchange between consumers and brands. Helsinki 10 says *“(social media platforms are an) easy way to reach people and the advertisements in Facebook are more like a dialogue with the customers”*. Helsinki 10 says that its Facebook page has proven itself as an easy way of communication and advertising *“our Facebook page has risen in popularity and has proven itself as a really easy forum to advertise”*. ASOS says that social media is a vital way of advertising as this means reaches millions of people daily *“these sites being used by millions of people daily, this type of advertising is vital”*. Euromonitor p.24 states that in order to be more active with their websites and social ways of promoting brands and connect with their consumers. The importance of advertising and how it is executed seems to differ between online retailers and physical store retailers. ASOS solely having an online market presence relies heavily on advertising in media as opposed to Helsinki 10, which relies on word-of-mouth *“We don’t advertise that much in common media. Good customer service and printed shopping bags are enough advertising for us”*. Word-of-mouth is an important factor in consumer behaviour buying influences when it comes to reference groups and psychographics as exposed by Solomon p.14 and p.15 and by Thomas p.22 exposes French luxury shoe brand Louboutin who, like Helsinki 10 rely on their reputation and quality products solely as a means of advertising. Solomon p. 17 states that social networking has been established one of

the biggest consumer development in recent years, fact which both ASOS and Helsinki 10 agree on. Solomon also says p. 18 that this phenomenon has a big impact on brands and on how they promote themselves.

Included in the global consumer culture as exposed by Solomon p. 19 are celebrities who are known worldwide to a same consumer culture. Helsinki 10 and ASOS agree that celebrity advertising and branding helps selling the products but also help the luxury reputation of brands having celebrities wearing them. About that matter at hand, Helsinki 10 says that *“Celebrity advertising helps also giving the luxury reputation because everyone knows how big the budgets are in these kinds of commercials/adverts/editorials. They give an extra special aspect to the product”*. ASOS says that the influence of celebrity branding on their sales is very big especially when *“it’s an exact product. We tend to see this item fly out!”*

Solomon p. 22 refers to the importance of celebrities as reference groups and style icons as influences selling brands. Both companies agree that celebrity branding and endorsement as researched by Okonkwo p. 21 and Thomas p.22 is an important tool in influencing a consumer’s purchase behaviour when it comes to luxury fashion and accessory buying, as agreed by ASOS and Helsinki 10. Items worn by celebrities are known to excel in selling out at a swift pace in the high-end fashion business as supported by ASOS in its questionnaire answers. ASOS also says that celebrity endorsement equals high sales for their brand. In fact, at its origin, the acronym ASOS stood for *As Seen On Screen* and the company focused on providing consumers with access to identical or near copies of garments worn by celebrities on and off screen. FINSK stresses the effect of American pop-singer and song-writer, Lady Gaga wearing the brand. *“(When she) wore a pair of our wedges they sold out straight away, and we got a*

lot of new interest”. The blogging phenomenon as detailed by Solomon p.18, explains how individuals present their lives in diary form. Wiseman p.18 elaborates on the influence of fashion bloggers such as Tavi Gevinson. The opinion on the influence of blogs on consumer buying behaviour seems to differ from ASOS and FINSK to Helsinki 10. ASOS states that blogging is a growing trend that is very influential on their consumers purchasing habits and that also inspires the brand in their creations *“very influential and it only keeps growing. We often look at blogs for inspiration”*. Similarly FINSK comments, *“style bloggers are very influential in today’s market. They generate a lot of buzz for us when they wear or feature our shoes”*. Helsinki 10’s opinion contrasts saying that their customer base is not influenced by fashion blogs *“In our opinion it doesn’t affect our customers buying behaviour that much since our customers are trying to avoid the hype”*.

Despite this opinion, it is interesting to note that Helsinki 10 has its own blog. The amount spent on luxury fashion from 2010 to 2011, amongst US consumers alone, has rapidly grown in the *“average consumer”* group, with an increase for the men of 156% and women of 125%; as opposed to the *“fashion enthusiasts”* of which the spending amount of men dropped 11%.

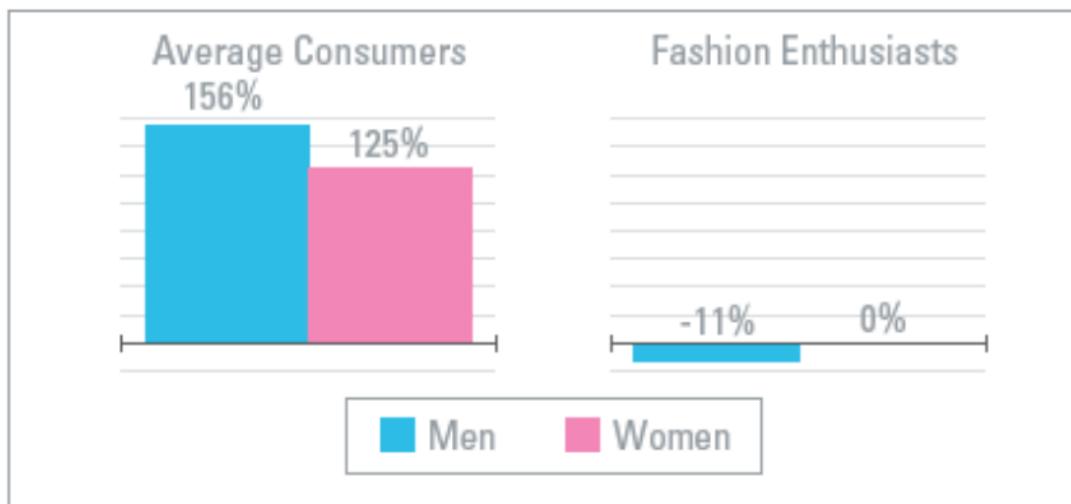


Figure 7- Luxury fashion Spend by US Average Consumers and Enthusiasts per hour from 2010 to 2011. Copyright American Express.

The case studies agree that changes in consumer behaviour in recent years have given a rise in the accessibility of luxury and the American Express Report supports both companies' opinions. Helsinki 10 says that "due to changes like globalization and the Internet being more widespread over the years, luxury goods are available to more people". Kotler p. 19 introduced the idea of a global market place, in which multinational companies see the world as one big market with a standardized way of marketing, so-called global marketing. For example, the introduction of low-priced accessories that a bigger market segment can afford (Thomas 2007) is a clear example of this.

In the same vein, Solomon p. 19 brings forth the concept of global consumer culture, with the same products, brands and goods appealing to a same market. The companies all agree that globalization has permitted to the launching to and expansion of international markets, which have widened their consumer base.

Due to changes certain brand names are broadcasted on a wider scale and consumers have now understood that luxury products and specifically accessories are a good value to invest on.

Helsinki 10 states that consumers have understood that luxury is not only for wealthy individuals, as investing in luxury accessories is a good investment for the future. ASOS adds, concerning international designers, that the wider accessibility of broadcasting the brands on a wider scale means that luxury is more available but that the prices of luxury accessories are still the prices of luxury so by definition not affordable by all "the prices are still that of a luxury brand so they don't become common". American Expresses' Spend Insights Report supports that idea by indicating that "fashion enthusiasts" have decreased spending on mainstream fashion. Thomas p.19 indicates that corporate branding has branded luxury accessories to the middle market linking to the notion of mass consumption in which, high-end luxury is turning into a more accessible and democratic market with the lower prices

for luxury accessories so that a bigger market segment can afford them. FINSK believes that although "designer fashion has become much less exclusive", the "owning of luxury goods is still an inspiration for many people" and therefore limits the depreciation.

As indicated by Thomas and the Global Luxury Goods Market p.10, the increase of demand of luxury accessories has increased the phenomenon of getting the impression of instant wealth to a certain social class which brings the bigger profit for brands Solomon p.19, which all companies agree is the biggest developing and most profitable area for the luxury fashion industry business.

Therefore, although luxury fashion goods are more available on the global market, luxury and luxury brands and their products still have luxury prices and are still, as before, available to a restricted consumer base with a certain income. Another point indicating that luxury is not depreciating is that the luxury items can remain unique if precautions are taken. ASOS secures this by having taken up measures to ensure the exclusivity of their luxury accessories by using methods in order to prevent counterfeits through online and high-street researching. This is not just restricted to product lines but includes all aspects of the brand. Helsinki 10 agrees that counterfeits are damaging to luxury brands as brands lose their profits and can get a bad image of a brand whilst seeing counterfeits with a brands logo on them "Counterfeits are very damaging to luxury brands as brands lose some of their profits or a customer might alter his opinion about a brand seeing a low quality representation of a certain brand".

FINSK treats counterfeiting very seriously for similar reasons "(it) reflects very badly on us", "We will pursue legal action against anyone faking our shoes."

The companies of this research share an opinion regarding the benefits of changes in communication and globalization (Solomon p.17) that have lead to the emergence of consumer forums, consumption communities and comparative search sites. Whereby, they have a positive effect on the fashion

industry by improving the understanding that companies and fashion houses have of their target consumer base. ASOS says that consumer forums are important to reply to customer's needs and thus give them what they want *"I'd say it's a positive effect because it shows those who plan to buy something other people's views. Whether positive or negative, our comments are truthful & will help us gain understanding to what our customers want"*. Helsinki 10 states that effective is positive as it shows that customers have specific needs and that these forums improve the customer experience. FINSK believes that whilst *"testimonials and reviews from customers are positive"* sites such as comparative price sites *"can make it difficult for small boutiques."*

As regards to luxury being devalued in the high fashion industry, the companies agree that the value of luxury has remained the same despite the evolution of consumption and consumer changes in recent years. ASOS, FINSK and Helsinki 10 sell high-end accessory brands and set a premium on the fact that these brands make quality items made with time and expertise, which will ensure that the product will last throughout the years. ASOS insists that the value of luxury has at least stayed the same if not increased and Helsinki 10 agrees by pinpointing that luxury is still very much appreciated in the industry *"I think that the value of luxury has stayed the same over the years. Luxury is still appreciated as much as it used to be in previous years in the fashion industry"*.

In regards to the future, Helsinki 10 makes a point of remaining tuned into the time people live in and to constantly remain au fait with novelties as well as to change their stocks at least every season. ASOS also tries to stay ahead of the fashion elite by ensuring the fact that they sell new brands that are unique.

ASOS believes that the biggest emerging market for the company in the future is China and the Far East. Their progress in conquering the international markets will therefore focus largely on Asia. Similarly, FINSK plan to target *"China, India, Russia and South Africa"*. It seems that this is an industry wide prediction as The American Express Spend Sights Special Report of 2011 also noted that Asia Pacific consumption of luxury fashion is increasing. As described previously in this research, in 2010 Japan increased its spending of 26% (AmEx 2011) and in 2004 Japanese consumers accounted for 41% of luxury sales (Thomas 2007 p.10). The Global Luxury Goods Market Research (2011) report hypothesizes that China will eclipse the already booming Japanese market due to their growing economy enabling a considerable rise in living standards which further provides evidence that ASOS' strategy is founded.

It is interesting to note that despite the American Express report and other results suggesting that people are decreasing their spending on average fashion and increasing their spending on luxury fashion, ASOS and FINSK are considering expanding their "average consumer lines". FINSK has already launched a sister brand 'Skin by FINSK' aimed at the accessory market as well as aiming to make the brand *"aesthetic more accessible to a wider market"* with a more *"casual and day-wear"* touch. Helsinki 10 predicts a future that supports the AmEx report indicating the continuous sale of highend fashion indicating no depreciation of luxury.

7. Conclusion and Further Research Possibilities

This study aimed to find out whether changes in consumer behaviour in recent years have given a rise to wider accessibility of accessories in the luxury fashion market and if so, assess whether or not this phenomenon has created a depreciation in the perception of luxury.

Reliable academic sources such as books, journals, articles and other literature were studied in order to list and analyze the general influences of consumer buying behaviour. The main changes in consumer buying behaviour from 2005 to 2011 where there after listed and analyzed.

Relying on qualitative methods, the author conducted interviews with selected employees of the companies chosen and targeted for this research. Results of the interviews were contrasted, compared and analyzed in the results and discussion part in order to reply to the research questions asked and hypotheses established in the introduction.

According to the results and discussion, it has been established that there is a greater availability of luxury accessories on the high-end fashion market due to changes in consumer behaviour and due to the expansion of the Internet and Internet retailing, but that despite this factor luxury has not been depreciated in value.

Further research could comprise suggestions and solutions for this specific industry e.g. to professionals of the sector and on how to maintain a certain standard, quality and strong image for luxury accessories.

As an interesting outlook on the future and as claimed by the company ASOS, emerging markets such as the Far East and China will be the growth leaders for brands selling designer and luxury products. Further research could thus include a study examining the luxury fashion market and its development in these countries.

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