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Luxury web atmospherics: an examination of homepage design

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to address the on-going debate in research on how a luxury brand's image of exclusiveness and uniqueness may be preserved in the ubiquitous mass medium internet. Specifically, the study aims to provide insights on how luxury brand homepages should be designed to evoke perceptions of luxury.

Design/methodology/approach – First, desk research on 81 existing luxury brand homepages and expert interviews are used to empirically detect specifics of luxury homepage design. Second, a randomised laboratory experiment is conducted to analyse the effects of luxury versus conventional homepage design on perceived luxury.

Findings – First, luxury homepage design differs from conventional homepage design in four main aspects: the use of darker background colours, the use of a larger or full screen space to present the stage content, a horizontal navigation bar, and a substantial reduction of elements. Second, experimental results indicate that luxury homepage design significantly affects consumers' perceptions of conspicuousness and uniqueness.

Research limitations/implications – The experiment was conducted in a laboratory setting. Future research could use this work as a framework and extend it to a field environment, analysing the effect of luxury homepage design on key performance indicators, such as site traffic and conversion rates.

Practical implications – The results of the study provide luxury managers with guidance for designing luxury brand homepages.

Originality/value – While previous research has mainly addressed luxury homepage design conceptually, this paper is the first to empirically identify key characteristics of luxury homepage design and empirically examine the effect of luxury homepage design on consumer perceptions of luxury.

Keywords Homepage design, Luxury brand image, Online retailing, Web atmospherics

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, Cartier, and Ferrari are associated with finest quality, prestige, exclusiveness, and hedonism (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012; Moore and Birtwistle, 2005; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Although these characteristics may be properly promoted through physical stores, they are seemingly incompatible with the internet (Okonkwo, 2009). In particular, the internet is characterised by its ubiquity and worldwide accessibility rather than targeting an exclusive group of affluent

consumers. Therefore, the internet is assumed to attract mainly price-conscious consumers instead of the prestige-seeking clientele. Unlike physical stores, the internet is not capable of creating a shopping experience which addresses all senses (Wiedmann and Hennigs, 2012). Despite the presence of this "internet dilemma" (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012, p. 247), it has become inevitable for luxury brands to be present in the digital space.

Today many popular luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, Tiffany and Co. and Hermès are selling their products through the internet. Online sales of personal luxury goods have shown a strong annual growth of 20 to 25 per cent over the past years up to €7.0 billion in 2012 (Bain & Company, 2012). Against the backdrop of the increasing importance of online retailing in the luxury sector, luxury goods companies still lack guidance on how to preserve luxury brand image within the ubiquitous digital world (Hennigs *et al.*, 2012; Okonkwo, 2009).

While prior research has made some efforts to analyse how the affluent consumers' desire for emotions and aesthetic experience can be addressed in physical luxury stores (Dion and Arnould, 2011; Godey *et al.*, 2009), research lacks studies empirically analysing how the aesthetic atmosphere can be transferred to an online environment (Okonkwo, 2009). However, an effective website design is critical to sustainable success in e-commerce (Colla and Lapoule, 2012; Lim *et al.*, 2009).

Consequently, this paper empirically examines the effect of homepage design on consumer perceptions of luxury. In doing so our paper especially contributes to the research on luxury goods marketing in two ways: First, we analyse 81 existing luxury brand homepages and detect systematic differences between a conventional and a luxury homepage design. Second, we conduct a randomised laboratory experiment in order to examine the effects of a typical luxury homepage design on consumers' perceptions of a brand's degree of conspicuousness, uniqueness, quality as well as hedonism. Actually, our findings suggest that luxury as opposed to a conventional homepage design leads to significantly higher perceptions of conspicuousness and uniqueness.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: section 2 reviews existing literature on homepage design. This is followed by an empirical analysis of the homepage design of 81 existing luxury brand homepages. On the basis of these results, an experimental study on the effect of luxury brand homepage design on characteristics of luxury brand image is conducted in section four. Data collection, research design and findings are outlined. The paper concludes with a discussion, managerial implications and directions for future research.

2. The internet and luxury

In academic research as well as in managerial practice a controversy has evolved whether luxury brands should use the internet purely as a means to communicate or whether to understand the internet as a sales channel as well (Hennigs *et al.*, 2012; Kapferer and Bastien, 2012; Okonkwo, 2009). So far, the luxury industry seems to have been slow in embracing the internet's potential. Launching their corporate websites only in 2005 and 2007, Versace and Prada symbolically represent the industry's hesitation towards the internet (Okonkwo, 2009).

The main reason for the scepticism of luxury brands to engage in online retailing lies in the seeming contrasts of luxury and the internet: while luxury stands for rarity,

inaccessibility, and exclusiveness (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009), the internet is characterised by accessibility and democracy (Hennigs *et al.*, 2012). Kapferer and Bastien (2012) coined the term "internet dilemma" for luxury brands in this context. While Kapferer and Bastien (2012) agree that an internet strategy is generally required, they suggest that it should be limited to communication. From their point-of-view the drawbacks, mainly the inability of the internet to provide a multisensory experience, outweigh the benefits of selling online and hence recommend waiting with selling luxury brands online for the prospective Web 3.0, where consumers may experience luxury brands in a suitable way. In contrast Hennigs *et al.* (2012) and Okonkwo (2009) recommend that luxury brands should not only communicate online, but should also engage in online retailing. Even though they acknowledge the risks of selling luxury brands online, they do conclude that the internet has become a source of information and purchase for both the affluent and the super-rich and that luxury brands cannot afford to miss the opportunity to make use of the fastest growing sales channel in the luxury sector.

Given the lack of agreement in literature about the role a luxury brand assumes online, it does not seem surprising that the luxury industry lacks conventions how to approach the digital environment (Okonkwo, 2009). The luxury industry fills this gap by drawing on conventions of website design for non-luxury companies (Okonkwo, 2010). In the following, we will consequently discuss prior literature on conventional homepage design and the few studies which have tackled specifics of luxury homepage design.

2.1 Conventional homepage design

A homepage is the most important component of a website, which is also called the "company's face to the world" (Nielsen and Tahir, 2001, p. 1). It serves as a central point of navigation where visitors may refer back to from any page of the website (Brinck *et al.*, 2002). For users entering the website, the homepage serves as the very first impression of a branded website. This impression then strongly influences the decision whether people start browsing through a website or not (Okonkwo, 2010). The design of a website or homepage, also called web atmospherics (Manganari *et al.*, 2009), includes a considerable number of parameters ranging from fonts and colour schemes to the positioning of elements. Furthermore, it has been found to have a major influence on visitor satisfaction (McKinney, 2004), shopping pleasure (Eroglu *et al.*, 2003), online purchase intention (Ranganathan and Ganapathy, 2002) as well as on the probability to visit the website again (Liang and Lai, 2002). By having a closer look at the parameters of homepage design, previous research indicates that an ordinary homepage background is more effective than a complex one (Stevenson *et al.*, 2000), that fidelity and motion of images positively affect a visitor's time-on-site (Lee and Benbasat, 2003), and that cool and relaxed colours positively affect a visitor's attitude towards the website (Gorn *et al.*, 2004). Altogether, Manganari *et al.* (2009) give a comprehensive review of research on web atmospherics.

2.2 Luxury homepage design

Little is known whether the above mentioned effects equally hold true for luxury brand homepages, and, if not, how a luxury-specific homepage design should look like. Nevertheless, Hennigs *et al.* (2012) provide a conceptual framework for branding

luxury online (i.e. "values of e-luxe"). Their framework refers to the financial (e.g. premium pricing), functional (e.g. web atmospherics), individual (e.g. emotional attachment), and social brand value (e.g. interaction with visitors). A more specific framework (i.e. "luxemosphere") has been introduced by Okonkwo (2010). The luxemosphere framework covers five dimensions representing the human senses sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. Along these five dimensions Okonkwo (2010, p. 145) provides 44 luxemosphere tactics specifically designed to create a multi-sensory online experience. According to this framework, a luxury homepage is amongst others made up of a harmonized colour theme, high-pixel images, legible text and a full-screen mode. However, it must be acknowledged that all of the proposed frameworks for creating luxury web atmospherics by prior research are purely conceptual and lack empirical evidence.

3. Study one: evaluation of luxury brand homepages
To empirically detect the differences between conventional and luxury homepage design, we systematically examined 81 luxury brand homepages based on 31 evaluation criteria. We then compared the resulting luxury homepage schematic to the conventional homepage schematic.

3.1 Sampling
We selected a sample of 81 luxury brands covering a broad range of luxury consumer goods (wine and spirits, perfume and cosmetics, fashion and accessories) and luxury durable goods (watches, cars, yachts, jewellery, home design). We relied on four well established luxury brand rankings, namely Brand Networks (2011), Brandz (2012), Interbrand (2008), and World Luxury Association (2012) as well as Okonkwo's (2010) list of best practice luxury brand homepages to select luxury brands for the sample. An overview of the specific brands evaluated is provided in Table I.

3.2 Evaluation criteria
Next, we defined a set of 31 criteria based on which we evaluated the luxury brand homepages. Since we intended to identify differences between conventional and luxury-specific brand homepage design we drew upon literature covering both luxury-specific and conventional homepage design elements. Okonkwo's (2010, p. 145) 44 luxemosphere tactics provide a basic pool of luxury-specific criteria covering five dimensions of a website (sight, aural, smell, haptic, and taste). Since we are mainly interested in the visual design of brand homepages we excluded criteria related to the human senses of smelling (e.g. scent emission) and tasting (e.g. tasting events).

We complemented this basic pool of evaluation criteria with conventional homepage design guidelines (Nielsen and Tahir, 2001; McKinney, 2004; Jones, 2007; eResult, 2010). Nielsen and Tahir (2001, pp. 52-53) provide a total of 113 homepage guidelines out of which 40 are especially dedicated to the design of a conventional homepage. Essential elements that should be part of every homepage include the logo placement at the upper left corner and a search function, while other elements such as job openings could be posted if deemed necessary. Further criteria were drawn from McKinney (2004), proposing 36 atmospheric variables for internet environments, encompassing many of the criteria proposed by Nielsen and Tahir (2001). Especially,

Cars	Fashion and accessories	Home design	Jewellery	Perfume and cosmetics	Watches	Wine and spirits	Yachts
Aston Martin	André Ross	bulthaup	adler	Biotherm	A Lange & Söhne	Dom Perignon	Azimut
Bentley	Apple	COR	Boucheron	Chanel	Blancpain	Krug	Beneteau
Bugatti	Burberry	Gaggenau	Cartier	Givenchi	Breguet	Moët & Chandon	Ferretti Yachts
Ferrari	Dior	Meissen	Chaumet	Guerlain	Chronoswiss	Veuve Cliquot	Lürssen
Koenigsegg	Escada	Robbe & Berking	Harry Winston	Helena Rubinstein	Glashütte Original		Pershing
Lamborghini	Fendi	SieMatic	Mikimoto	La Mer	IWC		Princess
Maserati	Ferragamo	Thonet	Montblanc	La Prairie	Jaeger-Le Coultre		Riva
Maybach	Giorgio Armani		Tiffany & Co.	Lancome	Patek Philippe		Sunseeker
Pagani	Gucci		Van Cleef & Arpels	Sisley	Piaget		Wally
Porsche	Hermès				Rolex		
Rolls Royce	Jil Sander				Vacheron Constantin		
Spyker	John Galliano						
Wiesmann	Prada						
	Roberto Cavalli						
	Versace						
	Valentino						
	Zegna						

Table I.
Luxury brands used for homepage design evaluation

she provides the five design variables colour scheme, graphics, text or typography, allocation of space and positioning of elements (McKinney, 2004, p. 270).

To identify the most relevant criteria from the large pool of criteria derived from academic literature and ensure their practical relevance we conducted four face-to-face expert interviews. All experts were senior managers in the household appliances industry responsible for website design (Head of E-Commerce International, Vice President Marketing Communication International, Project Manager Website and Webshop, Manager Graphic Design Online). The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were conducted in person. This process resulted in the final 31 evaluation criteria which we grouped into four categories: typography (e.g. fonts and colour scheme), graphics and multimedia (e.g. stage content and position), navigation (e.g. horizontal navigation bar), and the positioning of elements (e.g. logo positioning). A full overview of the applied criteria and the respective results can be found in Table II.

3.3 Evaluation and findings

Finally, we actually screened the 81 luxury brand homepages and recorded the observations with respect to the 31 evaluation criteria. All criteria related to the positioning of homepage elements were coded based on twenty-five quadrants as displayed in the schematics of Figure 1. To enhance an easy-to-understand presentation we only indicate the most frequent positioning. To further identify typography criteria not visible to the naked eye such as font family the web development tool "Firebug" was used (Mozilla, 2010).

Figure 1 illustrates the most important findings of the homepage design evaluation for luxury brands (1b) and compares it to a conventional homepage schematic (1a). A detailed listing of findings for all 31 evaluation criteria examined may be found in the Table II. When comparing the luxury against the conventional homepage schematic we identify several differences for each of the four categories typography, graphics and multimedia, navigation, and positioning of elements. Firstly, luxury brand homepages most frequently employ a white Arial-type font on a black background whereas conventional homepage design guidelines propose a black Helvetica or Sans-Serif-type font on a white background (typography).

Secondly, the stage which embodies the main content is positioned in the centre of both the conventional and the luxury brand homepage (graphics and multimedia). However, the space dedicated to the stage of luxury brand homepages is substantially larger than that of conventional brand homepages. A total of 26 per cent of luxury brand homepages examined even make use of the full screen space to present the main content of the brand.

Thirdly, the main navigation type is horizontal as opposed to the left-hand vertical navigation indicated by the conventional schematic (navigation). While the meta-navigation has established itself for conventional homepages (eResult, 2010), 49 per cent of the analysed luxury brands do not possess a meta-navigation. Of those that do, 27 per cent place the meta-navigation in the upper centre position. In comparison, only 19 per cent of luxury brands place it in the upper right position where the meta-navigation would be expected for conventional homepages.

Finally, the luxury-specific homepage design contains fewer elements than proposed by the homepage conventions (positioning of elements). Specifically, the

Category	Criterion	Conventional homepages Most frequent Characteristic	Luxury homepages Most frequent characteristic	Second most frequent characteristic
Typography	Font family[a]	Helvetica, sans-serif	Arial (0.58)	Sans-serif (0.53)
	Body text colour	Black	White (0.59)	Grey (0.40)
	Background colour[a]	White	Black (0.36)	White (0.30)
Graphics and multimedia	Sound	No auto-play	None (0.85)	Yes (0.15)
	Screen position	Middle	Middle (0.68)	Full-screen (0.26)
	Stage content	n/a	Product milieu (0.35)	Product (0.32)
	Stage slide show	n/a	Dynamic (0.43)	None (0.27)
	Slide show page indication	n/a	None (0.81)	Yes (0.19)
	Slide show control tool	n/a	None (0.59)	Yes (0.41)
Navigation	Welcome page	None	None (0.74)	Yes (0.22)
	Navigation type	Left-hand vertical	Horizontal (0.81)	Left-hand vertical (0.10)
	Main navigation position	Left-rail	Upper centre (0.45)	Upper left (0.17)
	Number navigation elements[b]	n/a	6	–
	Meta navigation	Upper right	None (0.49)	Upper centre (0.27)
	Number footer elements[b]	Max. 7	8	–
Positioning of elements	Logo position	Upper left	Upper left (0.49)	Upper centre (0.28)
	Home button	Upper left	None (0.81)	Upper left (0.09)
	Contact	Upper centre	None (0.30)	Bottom left (0.22)
	Help	Upper right	None (0.95)	Yes (0.05)
	Dealer locator	None	None (0.33)	Bottom left (0.20)
	FAQ	Upper right	None (1.00)	-
	Newsletter	Middle right	None (0.67)	Upper right (0.10)
	About Us	Bottom left	None (0.58)	Bottom left (0.12)
	Jobs	Bottom left	None (0.67)	Bottom left (0.15)
	Social Media reference	none	None (0.49)	Bottom right (0.28)
	Online-Shop	n/a	None (0.74)	Upper right (0.14)
	Login	Upper right	None (0.73)	Upper right (0.17)
	Search function	Upper right	None (0.62)	Upper right (0.27)
	Search type	Search box	Search box (0.87)	Search button (0.13)
	Search box colour	White	White (0.52)	Grey (0.26)
	E-commerce reference	Upper right	None (0.74)	Upper right (0.14)

Notes: Relative frequencies of luxury brand homepages with given characteristic are indicated in parenthesis; [a]multiple characteristics may apply; [b]Median figures are reported

Table II.
Evaluation of luxury brand homepages
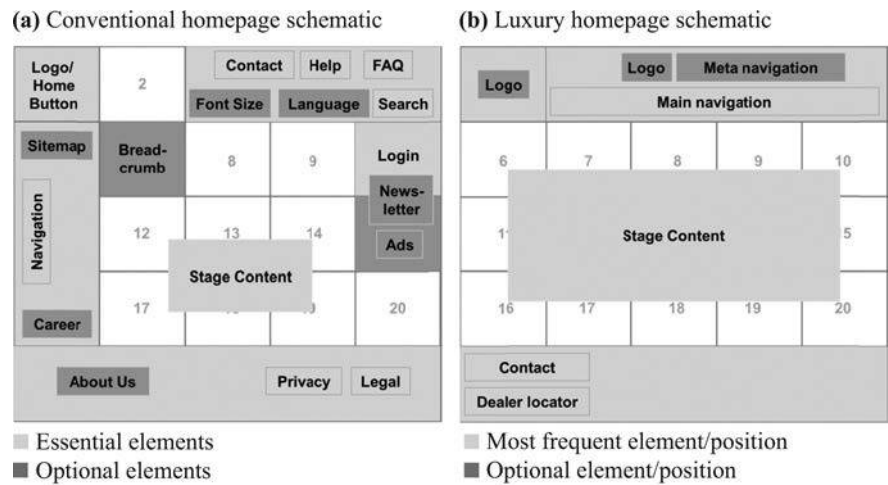
Figure 1.
Conventional and luxury homepage schematics

(a) Conventional homepage schematic (b) Luxury homepage schematic

■ Essential elements   ■ Most frequent element/position
■ Optional elements   ■ Optional element/position

Source: eResult (2010 p. 79)

majority of luxury brands do not integrate "FAQs", "Help", or a "Login". Other typical elements such as "About Us", "Career" or "Newsletter" are not employed either.

In summary we can therefore conclude that luxury homepage design differs from conventional homepage design in especially four important aspects: the use of darker background colours, the use of a larger or full screen space to present the stage content, a horizontal navigation bar, and a substantial reduction of elements.

4. Study two: effects of luxury homepage design on perceptions of luxury
4.1 Development of hypotheses
After having identified the specifics of luxury homepage design, it is important to investigate whether a luxury-specific homepage design is actually evoking perceptions of luxury. A luxury brand image can be well defined by four dimensions: Perceived conspicuousness, perceived uniqueness, perceived quality, and perceived hedonism (Dubois *et al.*, 2001; Kapferer, 1998; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999, 2004).

First, conspicuousness refers to a consumer's intention to convey social status through the conspicuous consumption of luxury brands (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). To elicit a feeling of "consumption" it is, however, not necessarily required to actually buy the goods. Already the act of browsing on a homepage as an early stage in a shopping process (Bloch *et al.*, 1989; Nsairi, 2012) can stimulate perceptions of conspicuousness (MacInnis and Price, 1987). From the generous use of space with high-resolution images, the focus on few products as well as the discreet price communication associated with luxury brand homepages, consumers may infer a higher price level and hence stronger associations of perceived conspicuousness. More formally, we hypothesise:

H1. A luxury homepage design, as opposed to conventional homepage design, leads to a higher degree of perceived conspicuousness of the luxury brand.

Second, uniqueness refers to a consumer's desire to dissociate himself or herself from the mass through the snobbish consumption of scarce and exclusive products (Leibenstein, 1950). In an online environment it is expected that luxury brands cater for this need not only by displaying their exclusive and unique offerings, but also through a distinctive homepage design. As such we expect the luxury homepage design to convey perceptions of scarcity by discreetly communicating the brand image rather than promoting sales. More formally, we argue:

H2. A luxury homepage design, as opposed to conventional homepage design, leads to a higher degree of perceived uniqueness of the luxury brand.

Third, finest quality is inherent to luxury brands (Kapferer, 1998). Generally, consumers expect luxury goods to provide the highest quality in the relevant market (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Consumers infer product quality from perceived website quality (Wells *et al.*, 2011). Through the use of high-quality media content and specific design elements such as colours, fonts, etc. (Ha and Im, 2012) luxury brand homepages are assumed to have greater visual appeal and aesthetics than conventional homepages. As such, we expect that luxury homepage design increases perceptions of product quality. More formally, we hypothesise:

H3. A luxury homepage design, as opposed to conventional homepage design, leads to a higher degree of perceived quality of the luxury brand.

Fourth, perceived hedonism refers to aesthetics and multi-sensory experiences associated with luxury brands (Dubois *et al.*, 2001). However, providing multi-sensory experiences online is limited with today's technologies. Many senses like the unique smell and touch of a handmade Louis Vuitton bag cannot be addressed through today's internet. Even though the ability for homepage design to address multiple senses is limited, experiencing a product online might still unleash perceptions of hedonism (Eroglu *et al.*, 2003; Mummalaneni, 2005). As luxury homepage design builds on artistically arranged images and full screen mode, it can be assumed to have a positive effect on the perceived hedonism of the luxury brand. More formally, we hypothesise:

H4. A luxury homepage design, as opposed to conventional homepage design, leads to a higher degree of perceived hedonism of the luxury brand.

4.2 Method
4.2.1 Experimental design and subjects. A randomised between-subjects experiment was designed to test the derived hypotheses. For the purpose of testing for significant differences between luxury and conventional homepage designs, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. In particular, participants in the first group evaluated a luxury homepage design while the second group was confronted with a conventionally designed homepage.

The web-based study was conducted between August and September 2012 in Germany. For practical reasons, participants were chosen through accidental sampling (Kerlinger and Lee, 2000) as well as through snowball sampling (Iacobucci and Churchill, 2010). Participants who did not complete the experiment were excluded from the data set. The final sample consisted of 92 consumers. Specifically, participants differed in levels of education, occupation, age (between 17 and 66 years), and gender (50 per cent males). It is important to note that the sample consisted of both affluent

consumers (i.e. consumers who can afford to buy luxury goods) and consumers with a lower buying power. This sample composition is desirable as Kapferer and Bastien (2012) point out that a luxury brand image should be communicated to both its target clientele and to those who cannot afford buying the brand. In particular, a luxury brand is only signalling the status of its owner if recognised and admired by others. Therefore, the sample can be considered as being representative for the target group of a typical luxury brand.

4.2.2 Stimuli. We developed two digital mock-ups as test stimuli building on the conventional and luxury homepage schematics identified in study one. Firstly, in terms of typography we used a black (white) background colour for the luxury (conventional) homepage mock-up. Secondly, in terms of graphic and multimedia we positioned the stage content in the centre of both the conventional and the luxury homepage mock-up. However, we dedicated substantially larger space to the stage of luxury homepage mock-up than to that of conventional homepage mock-up. Thirdly, in terms of navigation we did (not) employ a meta-navigation bar in the conventional (luxury) homepage mock-up. Finally, in terms of positioning of elements we integrated a considerably lower number of elements in the luxury than in the conventional homepage mock-up (positioning of elements). Specifically, the conventional homepage mock-up embodied "FAQ", "Career", "About Us", "Newsletter" and "Help" buttons whereas the luxury homepage mock-up did not.

A pre-test was conducted to come to valid (i.e. realistic) homepage designs for the two experimental conditions. We again referred to website design experts to discuss the homepage schematics described above (see Figure 1). The interviews revealed several modifications for the homepage designs (especially for the conventional homepage design) and led to the development of the final test stimuli as displayed in Figure 2.

In order to mitigate consumers' emotions connected with other types of luxury brands (e.g. cars, jewellery, or fashion), the experimental manipulation was carried out in the field of household appliances. Furthermore, household appliances show a lower probability of being recognised as luxury goods in a first instance. Therefore, the specific homepage design was further emphasised. Notably, the fictitious brand
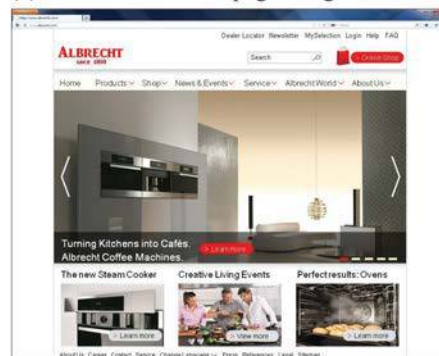
(a) Conventional homepage design   **(b)** Luxury homepage design

Figure 2.
Experimental test stimuli

Note: The illustration of the actors in the luxury homepage design is blurred for copyright reasons

"Albrecht" was used to eliminate response biases according to prior knowledge of a brand. The designed homepage was also shown on every page where respondents had to answer questions about the Albrecht brand.

4.2.3 Measures. Consumers' perceptions of Albrecht's conspicuousness, uniqueness, quality as well as hedonism served as dependent variables. The items were extracted from the well-established scale by Vigneron and Johnson (2004) (De Barnier *et al.*, 2012) and marginally adapted to fit into the study context. All 16 items were measured by a six-point Likert-type scale anchored from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 6 ("strongly agree"). Items are reported in Table III. All four factors showed internal consistency, that is, Cronbach's Alphas were higher than 0.70 (Nunally, 1978).

4.3 Findings
To examine the hypotheses, independent sample *t*-tests ($\alpha = 0.05$) were performed. In particular, means for conspicuousness, uniqueness, quality, and hedonism were compared between the participants in the luxury homepage condition and the conventional one. Results are presented in Figure 3. An ANCOVA revealed that there were no significant effects of gender, age, education, internet usage frequency, or luxury website usage frequency while the main effects of homepage design on conspicuousness, uniqueness, quality, and hedonism remained unchanged. First, the expected difference for conspicuousness was highly significant ($t = 4.50$, $df = 90$, $p < 0.001$). In other words, the luxury homepage design ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 0.54$) was perceived as more conspicuous than the conventional one ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.85$). Therefore, *H1* could be accepted. Second, an expected effect for perceived uniqueness could be found ($t = 2.87$, $df = 90$, $p < 0.01$) between the luxury homepage condition ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.80$) and the conventional one ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.83$). Therefore, also

| Construct	Internal consistency	Items	
Conspicuousness	$\alpha = 0.78$	Albrecht is …	(1) conspicuous (2) elitist (3) expensive (4) for the wealthy
Uniqueness	$\alpha = 0.79$	Albrecht is …	(1) exclusive (2) precious (3) rare (4) unique
Quality	$\alpha = 0.86$	Albrecht's products are …	(1) crafted (2) luxurious (3) best quality (4) sophisticated (5) superior
Hedonism	$\alpha = 0.82$	Purchasing and using Albrecht is …	(1) exquisite (2) glamorous (3) stunning

Notes: Items are measured using a six-point Likert-type scale anchored from 1 "strongly disagree" to 6 "strongly agree"
Source: Items are based on Vigneron and Johnson (2004)

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Figure 3.
Main effects of homepage
designs on perceived
luxury

Notes: *Significant at $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed); **significant at $p < 0.001$
(two-tailed)
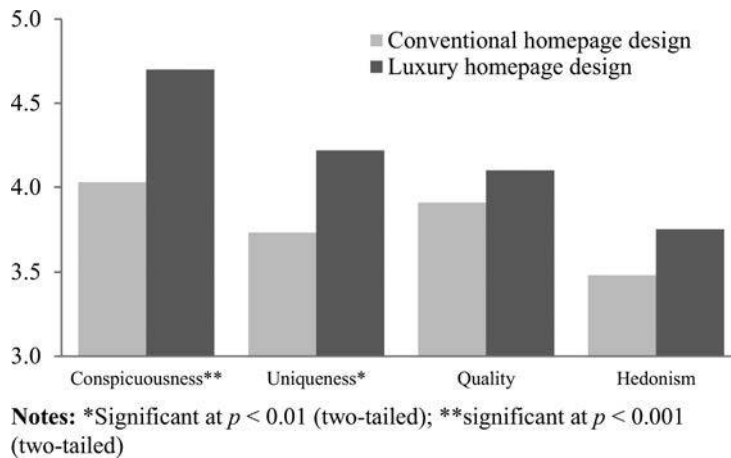
H2 could be accepted. Third, the experiment revealed no significant difference with
regard to perceived quality ($t = 1.11$, $df = 90$, p = n.s.). Despite the fact that perceived
quality was higher for the luxury homepage design ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.70$) than for the
conventional one ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.87$), *H3* could not be accepted. Finally, there was
no significant effect for perceived hedonism ($t = 1.21$, $df = 90$, p = n.s.). However,
values for the luxury homepage group ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.12$) were higher compared to
the conventional one ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.00$). Nevertheless, *H4* could not be accepted
either.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Despite the managerial importance of luxury homepage design research on this topic is
still in its infancy. Preserving the luxury brand image of exclusiveness and uniqueness
within the mass medium Internet represents a fundamental challenge for luxury firms.
As the very first impression of a luxury brand's website the homepage plays a
significant role in shaping consumer perceptions of luxury. We provide two empirical
studies that contribute to the existing knowledge on how luxury brand homepages
should be designed in order to evoke desired perceptions of luxury.

First, by analysing the design of 81 luxury brand homepages based on 31 evaluation
criteria we identified systematic differences concerning the typography, graphics and
multimedia, navigation, and positioning of elements in contrast to conventional
homepage design. Our results show, that luxury homepage design differs from
conventional homepage design especially in four important aspects: the use of darker
background colours, the use of a larger or full screen space to present the stage content,
a horizontal navigation bar, and a substantial reduction of elements.

Second, using a randomized between-subjects experimental design we tested
whether a luxury-specific design evokes higher perceptions of luxury. Building on the
luxury and conventional homepage schematics as identified in study one we developed
both a luxury-specific and a conventional digital homepage mock-up as test stimuli.
92 frequent internet users were randomly confronted with either the luxury or the
conventional homepage mock-up and were then asked to indicate whether the

homepage conveyed an image of conspicuousness, uniqueness, quality, and hedonism. Results of independent samples *t*-tests show that luxury homepage design leads to stronger perceptions of conspicuousness and uniqueness on behalf of the consumers. Additionally, we find that luxury homepage design affects perceived quality and perceived hedonism stronger than conventional homepage design. However, these differences were not statistically significant. A possible explanation for the non-significant effect on perceived hedonism is the reduced possibility to use multi-sensory stimuli in an online environment. A homepage as a one-page gate keeper to the website is not able to address senses like smell and touch and may therefore be limited in the ability to evoke hedonic perceptions. This point is especially crucial because hedonic consumption refers to the multi-sensory experience that is sparked through the consumption of luxury goods (Wiedmann and Hennigs, 2012). The luxury homepage design also does not show a significant effect on the perceived quality of the brand. This may be attributed to the product category of household appliances used in our study. For utilitarian goods such as household appliances, the reliability and perceived usability of a product play a major role in evaluating the product quality. Therefore, since respondents may have mainly focused on the perceived usability of the homepage in order to assess the quality of the household appliance brand, luxury homepage design may not have activated superior product quality perceptions.

5.1 Managerial implications

It has become inevitable for any luxury brands to operate a branded website and to respond to the strongly increasing online sales of luxury goods. However, many luxury firms still struggle how to preserve the brand image of conspicuousness and uniqueness in the ubiquitous digital space. We found that by applying a luxury-specific homepage design luxury firms evoke significantly higher perceptions of conspicuousness and uniqueness. Among others, these specificities of luxury homepage design include the use of a white, Arial-type font on a dark background, the use of large or even full screen space to present the main stage content, a horizontal navigation bar positioned at the top of the homepage, and a substantial reduction of conventional homepage elements such as the "FAQs", "Help", "Login", "About us", "Career", or "Newletter" button. According to these luxury-specific design elements we developed a luxury homepage mock-up and confronted 92 consumers randomly with either the luxury or the conventional homepage mock-up. Notably, results indicate that the luxury homepage design evokes significantly stronger perceptions of conspicuousness and uniqueness than a conventional homepage design. Indeed, luxury homepage design can be seen as an easy-to-implement and effective way for luxury brand managers to influence consumers' perceptions and hence to support overall luxury brand objectives.

5.2 Limitations and directions for future research

Our studies have several limitations which provide avenues for future research. First, study two on the effect of homepage design on perceptions of luxury is restricted to the category of household appliances. Category-specific effects in homepage testing are imaginable. More research across different categories (e.g. fashion) is needed to generalise the findings. Second, in our second study a holistic set of variables was manipulated at a time. Therefore it can only be inferred, that the manipulation as a

whole leads to the findings of the study, without allowing us to draw any causal inferences from the manipulation of specific single stimuli on the results. It is up to future research to run further experiments, analysing the effect of individual stimuli on perceived luxury. Third, since we have conducted our experiment in a laboratory setting it was not possible to measure actual performance, e.g. site traffic or conversion rates. Analysing these key performance indicators could provide a systematic basis for providing best practice recommendations. Last, research could further extend the luxury brand homepage evaluation conducted in study one by extending the number of brands and criteria to develop representative luxury website conventions.

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