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"Mix-and-Match" Fashion Trend and Luxury Brand Recognition: An Empirical Test Using Eye-tracking

Cesare Amatulli, Gianluigi Guido, Antonio Mileti, Carla Tomacelli, M. Irene Prete and Anna E. Longo

Cesare Amatulli is an Adjunct Professor of "Trade and Retail Marketing" at the LUISS University, Rome, Italy. camatulli@luiss.it

Gianluigi Guido is a Full Professor of Marketing and Place Marketing at the University of Salento, Italy. gianluigi.guido@unisalento.it

Antonio Mileti is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at the University of Salento, Italy. antonio.mileti@unisalento.it

Abstract

The paper explores the "mix-and-match" consumption trend and the brand recognition of luxury fashion brands. Results show that consumer recognition of luxury fashion brands increases when pairing these branded products with those made by fast-fashion companies. Findings also show that luxury fashion brands are mainly recognized through accessories. Eye-tracking technology has been used to conduct the study.

KEYWORDS: mix-and-match, luxury fashion brand, fast-fashion brand, eye-tracking, consumer behavior

Carla Tomacelli is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at the University of Salento, Italy.
carla.tomacelli@unisalento.it

M. Irene Prete is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at the University of Salento, Italy.
mariairene.prete@unisalento.it

Anna E. Longo is a Research Assistant of Marketing at the University of Salento, Italy.
annaelenalongo@gmail.com

Introduction

Luxury products are currently embedded in an international debate that concerns managers and academics alike. This debate mainly centers on how luxury items are determined by consumer behavior, branding (e.g. Miller and Mills 2012), and retailing (e.g. Amatulli and Guido 2012). In particular, managers and academics seek to understand how and why luxury product marketing differs from—and sometimes seems opposed to—the marketing of mass-market products (Miller and Mills 2012). However, although luxury is hard to define and lacks a universal conception, luxury goods are primarily divided into four categories: fashion products (clothing and accessories), perfumes and cosmetics, wines and liquors, and watches and jewelry (Fionda and Moore 2009). In particular, this article focuses on fashion products, which represent the main product category of the most prestigious luxury brands (Vigneron and Johnson 2004).

Nevertheless, even though luxury and fashion represent two different worlds (Kapferer and Bastien 2009b), in the last decade the overlap between fashion and luxury has been deepened by two distinct but connected phenomena: (a) the invention of fast-fashion brands (Gabrielli, Baghi, and Codeluppi 2013; Okonkwo 2007); and (b) the *mix-and-match* (hereafter M&M) consumption trend (Cillo and Verona 2008; Nueno and Quelch 1998; Rohwedder 2004; Yeoman 2007), which speaks to a shift in consumer preferences. Indeed, the fast-fashion model has appeared in recent years alongside the traditional models of high fashion and prêt-à-porter, revolutionizing the world of ready-to-wear fashions (Gabrielli, Baghi, and Codeluppi 2013). In particular, fast-fashion brands are those characterized by permanent assortment rotation, low prices, and accessible items with a great aesthetic content, which derives from those brands' capacity for imitating and reproducing the latest luxury fashion brand catwalk offerings (Byun and Sternquist 2011).

The emergence of fast-fashion brands has spurred the second phenomenon of mixing brands with completely different positioning and image (Okonkwo 2007). In particular, M&M consumers tend to buy and wear luxury fashion brand products and fast-fashion brand products together, rather than buy an entire ensemble from one luxury designer (Nueno and Quelch 1998). One driving reason for this trend may be consumers' desire to create their own personal style (Okonkwo 2007). At the same time, economic factors likely play an important role, especially for consumers who want a stylized image but can only afford to buy a few luxury brand items, leading them to supplement their attire with inexpensive fast-fashion products.

From a marketing standpoint, this new, global consumption trend allows consumers more freedom in terms of purchasing choices. As a result, it may alter the effectiveness of the (typically very expensive) advertising and branding campaigns developed by luxury fashion companies. In the past, basic brands and luxury brands mainly competed in different markets, targeting different consumers through different marketing approaches. Today, however, they often compete directly for a shared client base (Nueno and Quelch 1998), especially when products like Ralph Lauren's clothes may be identified as "mass-produced" (Kapferer 2014). Consequently, luxury fashion firms need a better understanding of this consumption trend in order to adapt their product, communication, and retailing strategies to the current competitive scenario.

However, academics have remained notably quiet on the topic of M&M, despite the trend's widespread diffusion. In particular, prior studies have not determined what happens to luxury brand recognition when luxury brands are paired with fast-fashion brands, and specifically whether or not luxury brands are negatively affected by this mix. We do know that a well-recognized brand is one of the most valuable assets a firm can possess (Porter and Claycomb 1997). Moreover, brand awareness is especially important in the luxury fashion business where design and style must clearly represent the brand image regardless of the logo's visibility on the product (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010), particularly when customers' product decisions are made in the store. By making luxury fashion products recognizable by their stylistic identity—that is, stylistic codes belonging to a brand such as forms, colors, or materials—rather than mere brand prominence (i.e. conspicuous brand display), luxury companies are able to reach a consumer segment comprised mainly of wealthy consumers who do not really need to show their status (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010).

To fill this gap, this research aims to explore the effect of the "mix-and-match" on the recognition of fashion brands—and particularly whether or not this trend diminishes the recognition of luxury fashion brands. Moreover, the study focuses on the role that accessories may play in luxury brand recognition. Therefore, a series of studies was conducted in order to analyze: (a) how the recognition of luxury brands changes in conditions where fast-fashion and luxury products are shown together; and (b) what role fashion accessories play in luxury brand recognition.

In the first study, conducted on a group of college-age students, we utilized a screening survey in order to identify the sample of test individuals. In particular, this study aimed at identifying participants involved with fashion products.

In the second study, which was carried out in an eye-tracking laboratory, we drew on the contrast effect theory to see if consumers better recognize a luxury fashion brand when paired with a fast-fashion brand. Moreover, building our hypotheses on the analytic and holistic information processing theory, we studied how accessories represent the main means, in terms of stylistic elements, by which consumers recognize a luxury fashion brand more easily.

Findings show that fast-fashion brands do not represent a threat to luxury brands; on the contrary, they actually represent a boost. Indeed, luxury brands are significantly more recognizable when paired with fast-fashion brand products, compared to when they are presented alone.

Luxury Brands versus Fast-Fashion Brands

While sales of luxury goods were undoubtedly affected by the global economic crisis, the overall market for such products has grown rapidly over the last two decades (Kapferer 2014) and is worth nearly $1.4 trillion (The Boston Consulting Group 2012). Academics refer to luxury goods when describing the top category of prestigious brands, that is goods "for which the simple use or display of a particular branded product brings esteem on the owner, apart from any functional utility" (Vigneron and Johnson 2004, 286). For luxury products, the aesthetic, artistic, and symbolic elements are key to sustaining a competitive advantage (Cillo and Verona 2008), especially as luxury brands strive to preserve the gap between themselves and those competitors that imitate the codes of luxury (Kapferer 2014). Indeed, luxury goods are traditionally defined as goods such that the mere use or display of a particular branded product brings the owner prestige apart from any functional utility. In particular, luxury fashion brands (such as Louis Vuitton or Gucci) are typically characterized by nine principal dimensions that encompass both tangible and intangible elements, namely: product integrity, design signature, premium price, exclusivity, heritage, environment and service, culture, and clear brand identity (Fionda and Moore 2009).

Parallel to these luxury fashion brands are the fast-fashion brands, such as the Spanish Zara or Mango, or the Swedish Hennes & Mauritz. Fast-fashion brands are low-cost brands—contemporary and without a protracted history—that reproduce the seasonal trends through clothing very similar to those displayed on luxury designer runways, but at affordable prices; selling something affordable but also fashionable is the basic concept of fast-fashion brands. One substantial difference between luxury brands and fast-fashion brands involves the variety of production and the number of collections distributed within the space of a year. Indeed, a fast-fashion brand can succeed in creating 12 collections in a year, many more than the number traditionally set by a luxury fashion brand. As such, timing is a very important asset for fast-fashion brands; they are able to react to trends and improve response times, thus offering the market a continuous stream of new merchandise that reflects momentary tastes. These characteristics of fast-fashion brands allow them to convey a hedonic value through their products that appeals to pleasure-seeking customers. For these reasons, fast-fashion brands may be considered a potential threat to luxury brands that invest a lot of time and money into cultivating their prestigious brand image through their expensive but desirable products.

"Mix-and-Match": Origin and Peculiarity

The consumption trend to mix, in terms of clothing, luxury brands, and fast-fashion brands represents an expanding phenomenon found chiefly in mature luxury markets (e.g. United States, Italy, and France) (Bain and Company 2009). Indeed, the "mass fashion brands are showing that they have understood the language of differentiation and individualism and are able to offer the consumer alternatives to traditional luxury products or complimentary goods at better price-value" (Yeoman 2007, 289). As a consequence, mixing and matching cheap items with expensive labels has become acceptable and quite common (Yeoman 2007). While research has investigated the relationship between "genuine" luxury brands and "counterfeited" luxury brands, no empirical study to date has considered the M&M of luxury and fast-fashion, despite the fact that this trend has roused considerable interest across a number of traceable references (Feitelberg 2010), though they may not be purely academic.

M&M has attracted interest due to the complex and innovative nature of this kind of behavior, which represents a meaningful shift economically and culturally. In fashion, mixing products from different brands is traditionally described as simply a consumer choice. In contrast, some have suggested that this behavior results mainly from advertising campaigns and/or retailers (i.e. their sales force) pressuring customers when they are shopping in the store in order to improve the perceived service level and increase total sales (Wong et al. 2009). However, the rise of a "critical spirit" in fashion consumers renders these conceptions rather constrictive, as there are a variety of personal reasons linked to M&M. At the basis of this behavior, three main individual motives can be traced: variety seeking, individual style, and money. The desire to constantly change the products one wears, referred to as *variety seeking* (Ratner and Kahn 2002), is also strengthened by the merchandising strategies applied by fast-fashion brands. Indeed, "attracted by the speed at which new styles are in stores and the fun of buying 10 cheap knock-offs for the price of one authentic jacket, many wealthy consumers are becoming loyal to fast-fashion as well" (Rohwedder 2004, 1). Moreover, there is a desire for greater stylistic independence, motivated by the need to self-define one's own *individual style* regardless of the standards promoted by luxury fashion brands, which has been linked to co-creation theories (Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). In fact, the "style" concept is strictly related to the idea of combination, or, in other words, mixing and matching (Cillo and Verona 2008). Also, the notion of a system of intentional signs with distinctive features is especially relevant to the field of fashion and the M&M behavior stresses the most eclectic side of fashion: its strong link with taste (King and Ring 1980), its communicative potential through the semiotic process of selection and combination (Hebdige 1979), and the consequent freedom of selection among possible variants. Finally, M&M may be due to the desire to save money via economic choices (dictated, in this case, by the impossibility of matching luxury accessories to other high-cost products). Bain and Company (2009), which specializes in luxury market research, emphasizes that the economic crisis has changed purchase behavior in the luxury goods market in the following ways: a general reduction in purchases, an increase in inconspicuous goods production, and a focused search for "chic-onomic" (elegant but economical) products and real value—all of which has aided the development of the M&M approach.

In addition to these three personal reasons, there are at least two more of an ethical–social nature and a final one of commercial importance. Indeed, first of all, the compensatory consumption theory (Johnson and Meyer 1984) suggests that consumers pursue M&M in order to compensate for a possible *feeling of guilt* generated by the purchase of luxury goods, which are expensive and functionally unnecessary, in a period of global economic crisis like the present one (Vinelli 2009). Secondly, we must consider the *luxury democratization*—one of the most important modern-day marketing phenomena (Twitchell 2002)—which speaks to the growing possibility of more social classes having access to "the best" (Kapferer and Bastien 2009a). Indeed, in line with this concept, Dubois and Laurent (1996) have coined the category of "luxury excursionists"—consumers who, though they cannot lead a life completely immersed in luxury, can afford an occasional excursion into that field. Finally, from a commercial point of view, the specific *retailing strategy* adopted by fast-fashion brands should be considered. Indeed, fast-fashion brands have developed changes in retail tactics in order to reflect a "luxurious" appeal (Okonkwo 2007): the most representative fast-fashion companies (e.g. Zara or Hennes & Mauritz) have developed distributive strategies that until a few years ago were the prerogative of the luxury brands. In particular, fast-fashion brands have strengthened their retail identity by opening up their own mono-brand stores (mostly DOS—*Directed Operated Stores*) in prestigious locations once reserved for high-end brands.

Research Aims and Objectives

As emphasized by Nueno and Quelch (1998, 66), "more consumers today are tempted to mix and match luxury items rather than purchase an entire ensemble from one designer." Therefore, this research aims to explore the consequences of M&M on luxury fashion brand recognition, ultimately seeking to understand what product elements drive the recognizability of those brands. It is well known that product judgments are influenced by the characteristics of both the product in question and related other products (Lynch, Chakravarti, and Mitra 1991). According to the notions about luxury and M&M previously explained, our hypotheses are built on the "contrast effect" (Schwarz and Bless 1992), which is "any effect of contrasting stimuli on individual perception, cognition or resulting individual performance or action." Contrast refers to a negative (inverse) relationship between two values: the value people place on the contextual stimuli surrounding a target and the value they place on the target itself (Sherman et al. 1978). In the present research, the two contrasting values are represented by fast-fashion brands and luxury brands, the former characterized by low quality and the latter by high quality. In general, we know from seminal research that judgments are not context-free (Datoon and Dahlstrom 2003) and that judgments of objects can be affected by contextual factors. A combination of effects related to the overlap between a context and a target object, in tandem with the cognitive resources devoted to the judgment task(s), leads to specific results when more and less extreme conditions are paired (Herr 1989).

Moreover, contrast effects can stem from changes in how consumers mentally represent the stimuli in the anchoring of rating scales (Lynch, Chakravarti, and Mitra 1991). Indeed, the contrast effect is relevant for many topics in the consumer satisfaction and price perception literature (Lynch, Chakravarti, and Mitra 1991). Park et al. (2001), for instance, highlighted that the activation of a concept can generate a contrast effect on the interpretation of information. In particular, an extreme condition is perceived and judged as more extreme when paired with a very moderate condition than when paired with a less moderate one. For example, a car is perceived as much more expensive when paired with a very inexpensive one rather than when paired with another expensive one (Herr 1989). In our empirical context, if the sales force of a fashion store emphasizes the extreme excellence of some luxury fashion products, the customer may perceive them as higher quality when they are paired with basic clothes than when they are paired with other high-quality ones. In this circumstance, the customer may also judge the paired basic clothes as being of very poor quality—that is, of lower quality than when the same basic clothes are paired with other items of an equal quality level (not luxury). Indeed, contrast effects may occur when paired products are very different, that is, they share little or no overlap in features (Mayers-Levy and Sternthal 1993). In particular, the more extreme alternative of the paired products serves as an anchor or standard of comparison. Consequently, by following those mechanisms, luxury brands would stand out when next to fast-fashion ones. Therefore, consumers who follow the M&M trend would have the opportunity to create a "total look" (i.e. their own personalized matching of clothes and accessories) that showcases a high-end image against a low-cost one (e.g. a luxury accessory against a mass-market dress). Given such a perception, we hypothesize that consumers will be encouraged to recognize a luxury fashion brand by its contrast with a paired imitative brand. Formally, the first tested hypothesis is as follows:

H1. Customers' ability to recognize a luxury fashion brand is higher when this brand is paired with a fast-fashion brand than when it is not paired to any other brand.

This research also focuses on the role of accessories in the M&M phenomenon. The literature highlights how luxury brands are focusing more and more, in terms of production and advertising, on accessories, hence promoting "luxury democratization" (Twitchell 2002), the development of that consumer category called "luxury excursionists" (Dubois and Laurent 1996), as well as the use of M&M clothing choices. Indeed, the customer who buys an accessory today may purchase items of much higher value tomorrow (Nueno and Quelch 1998); therefore, luxury accessories represent an opportunity for luxury companies to attract aspirational luxury consumers and create a wide base of future high-spenders. This is in line with what Robert Polet (former CEO of the Gucci Group) emphasized in 2005, namely that consumers of luxury products are being "educated" by fast-fashion retailers who offer new products every six weeks, thereby creating a fast shopping rhythm. In fact, it is estimated that, for the last several years, most money in the luxury fashion field has been spent on accessories, especially women's accessories such as handbags and shoes, and particularly in the USA. Consequently, luxury companies are shifting their core business more and more towards accessories (Bain and Company 2009).

The theory concerning analytic and holistic information processing is crucial to our research and thus deserves a mention here. Generally speaking, holistic thinking is oriented to the context as a whole, including attention to relationships between a focal object and the field, while analytic thinking is based on detaching the object from its context (Nisbett et al. 2001). For instance, consumers' judgments of a product can involve a holistic interpretation of the stimulus as a unitary entity, an analytic understanding of the product's various attributes, or a combination of the two. Since the participants in this research are consumers involved in fashion who have a certain recognition capability regarding luxury fashion brands, their perception of the respective total look should be detailed rather than superficial, which is to say more "analytic" than "holistic" (Hutchinson and Alba 1991). Consequently, their perception should deal not only with the general style of the total look, but also with its different components, among which accessories are of primary importance. Indeed, subtle signals play a central role in fashion luxury consumption, as they allow luxury brands to target specific segments—such as consumers involved in fashion—based on their ability to decipher those signals (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010). In particular, luxury branded accessories represent single items with a specific self-standing meaning (Souiden, M'Saad, and Pons 2011), and even when they do not display the brand logo, they can communicate the style of the brand through other signals. Indeed, as emphasized by Cillo and Verona (2008, 657), nowadays people are able to buy just one item to "feel Gucci" and this consumption approach "fits well with the changing landscape brought about by the introduction of fast-fashion retailers such as Zara and H&M, turning key customers into smart shoppers who like to mix and match different brands." It naturally follows that accessories are highly strategic items for luxury fashion brands, thanks to their ability to more easily communicate the brand through specific stylistic codes (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010). Thus, when fashion consumers see a total look, accessories may help them to recognize the luxury brand name significantly more than other stylistic components of the total look. Hence, we further predict that luxury fashion brand recognition occurs more easily through luxury fashion accessories. Formally, the second-tested hypothesis is as follows:

H2. Customers' ability to recognize a luxury fashion brand is higher when their attention focuses on accessories rather than when it focuses on other stylistic elements.

This hypothesis implies that, if luxury brands appear to be more easily recognized according to the product category (e.g. accessories) or context variables (e.g. being placed in a non-homogeneous context of consumption or sale), then consumers are more likely to buy them mainly in "fragments" (just accessories: handbags, shoes, and small leather goods) for the purpose of matching some imitative brands. Such M&M behavior would be remarkable not only for scientific research, but also in terms of management implications. However, even when consumers are "unaware" of their choices, M&M behavior represents a phenomenon of wide dimensions with considerable economic and socio-cultural importance, especially in periods of economic crisis.

Operationally, this study's use of eye-tracking equipment enabled us to analyze the consumers' eye movements when they viewed pictures of different brands' total looks. We know that in order to process a specific object in a visual marketing stimulus, consumers have to move their eyes (Wedel and Pieters 2007). Therefore, the analysis of gaze directions is a central factor in understanding the relationship between marketing effects (e.g. brand recognition) and the ways that consumers process product stimuli. In particular, eye movements are an indication of information acquisition behavior. Indeed, different eye-tracking measures—such as gaze duration, fixation duration, fixation frequency, first fixation and the like—have been used in previous marketing research (Wedel and Pieters 2007). Thus, we studied the areas of visual attention, eye fixation frequencies, fixation dwell time, and how these parameters influenced the participants' brand recognition level.

Method

Sample Selection and Recruitment Strategy

This research was carried out in Italy, one of the most relevant countries for luxury goods, not only in terms of manufacturing capabilities and production volumes, but also in terms of consumption (The Boston Consulting Group 2012). The research was developed in two stages: during the first stage, a screening survey was used to identify the sample of test individuals, and in the second stage, we conducted the main study through the eye-tracking technology. Both research stages involved Italian university students. Heterogeneous samples are considered inappropriate in experimental research, while homogeneous ones allow researchers to maximize control and internal validity (Webster and Sell 2007). In line with this suggestion, our choice of a homogeneous sample composed of university students appears appropriate and consistent with the methodology used for the main study. Moreover, students involved in this research belong to generation Y—young people born between 1977 and 1994 (Martin and Turley 2004) who like purchasing branded products and represent the most relevant segment for the future consumption of luxury goods. In other words, luxury fashion categories and brands are particularly relevant to generation Y (Miller and Mills 2012).

Screening Survey

A screening survey was used to define the sample and choose the participants for the main study. A questionnaire was administered to 126 Italian university students. The questionnaire included a 34-item scale—adapted from Khare and Rakesh (2010)—intended to measure the participants' level of involvement with fashion. Participants recorded their responses using seven-point Likert scales. Moreover, 10 multiple-choice questions were used to assess their level of recognition capability regarding luxury fashion brands. Each question showed the picture of a total look featuring a luxury fashion brand. The pictures were chosen from the Internet and international fashion magazines by a panel consisting of five researchers with extensive experience in fashion marketing. For each picture, the students were asked to recognize, within a maximum time of eight seconds, the brand shown by choosing among three options: the correct brand, an imitative brand, and a third brand whose products are usually different from those of the correct brand. Through this screening stage, we obtained 40 participants who formed the sample of the main study. The selected participants were those both highly involved with fashion and characterized by a high level of recognition capability about luxury fashion brands, as they recognized at least 8 brands out of 10 just by observing pictures for short lapses of time. The sample was composed of 20 women and 20 men between the ages of 23 and 28. With qualitative exploratory studies, small sample sizes are the norm in order to provide insights into an unexplored domain (Crouch and McKenzie 2006). A few days after the survey, the selected participants were invited to the eye-tracking laboratory in order to partake in the main study.

Main Study

The main study aimed to test the two hypotheses presented earlier through eye-tracking and the completion of a questionnaire. We employed eye-movement recording and analysis tools to measure eye fixations in the visual space of a computer screen. This methodology is generally adopted when the research problem deals with the study of visual focusing in certain contexts and on certain subjects (see Duchowski 2007). The study was carried out in a laboratory with access to infrared rays, remote optical fibers, and a control-of-shot eye-tracking system. In particular, the system was based on infrared corneal reflection methodology. When the eye moves across a spatial stimulus, the difference between the incoming and outgoing angle of the infrared light beam changes. The eye-tracking equipment enabled us to test both time and frequency of the participants' fixation at different points as the images were presented. The minimum parameters were 0.05 seconds for eye fixations and 40 pixels for the diameter. The fixation maps included the results of the various fixations during each image's eight-second viewing window. Every fixation was numbered based on the chronological order in which the participant looked at a specific point.

Because we wanted to explore the relevance of different areas of interest on brand recognition, most of our analyses were based on the fixation frequency. The fixation frequency in the same areas of interest (i.e. the zones most fixated on, also called AOIs) is an indication of the degree of importance, whereas fixation duration is an indication of the complexity and difficulty of visual display (Fitts, Jones, and Milton 1950). Also, Wedel and Pieters (2000), analyzing how eye fixations on print advertisements lead to memory for the advertised brands, highlighted that eye movements are indicators of visual attention and that the number of fixations, not their duration, is related to the amount of information a consumer extracts from an image.

The main study was conducted across two different phases: part one assessed the recognizability of luxury fashion brands when shown alone, while part two paired the luxury brands with fast-fashion brands. After completing these two phases, participants answered a list of control questions about their choices.

Part One. The first part of the study involved testing participants' ability to recognize a luxury fashion brand style in the absence of a pairing. Participants were shown five images and allowed to observe each one for eight seconds; each image consisted of three total look pictures from the same brand. As stated before, the pictures were chosen from the Internet and international fashion magazines by a panel of five researchers with extensive experience in fashion marketing. Pictures were not chosen for their portrayal of accessories or the monetary value of the depicted products. Rather, the panel selected the total looks based on how consumers might encounter such luxury fashion brands in general readership magazines. It is worth noting that we used a small number of ads in order to achieve an intensive analysis of each ad. Thus, for each set of three pictures, participants were asked to state the following: the luxury fashion brand of the clothes and at least three stylistic elements that they believed helped them to recognize the brand. They were asked to exclude “color” from their answer, even if they used it as a cue, because with the eye-tracking technology adopted in the study, it was not always possible to easily track fixation frequency where a single color was dominant.

Part Two. The second part of the study, once again executed with the help of eye-tracking, also tested participants’ ability to recognize a luxury fashion brand, albeit with a different setup: this time, participants observed five images (each for 8 seconds) that each contained two pictures showcasing two very similar total looks. One picture featured a well-known and expensive brand (luxury fashion brand), while the other featured an equally well-known brand that was both imitative of the first and less expensive (i.e. a fast-fashion brand). As before, the pictures were chosen from the Internet and international fashion magazines by the same panel of researchers, who followed the same selection method used for the first part of the study. Each participant was asked to state the following: which of the two total looks was luxury branded, and at least three stylistic elements—again with the exception of color—that informed their judgment.

Results

Hypothesis 1

In the first part, the most recognized brands were Armani (55% of participants recognized it) and Gucci (52.5% of participants recognized it). All the other brands were recognized by less than 30% of the participants. In the second part, the most recognized luxury fashion brands were Armani (97% of participants recognized it) and Pucci (92.5% of participants recognized it); all the other brands were recognized by more than 80% of the participants. All brands turned out to be much more recognized in the second part than in the first. Each luxury fashion brand was recognized more easily when it was paired with a fast-fashion brand (Part Two) compared to when it was not (Part One). These findings are shown in Figure 1, where percentages of the correct answers given for each brand are summarized (with the light gray bars referring to Part One and the dark gray bars referring to Part Two). A paired sam-

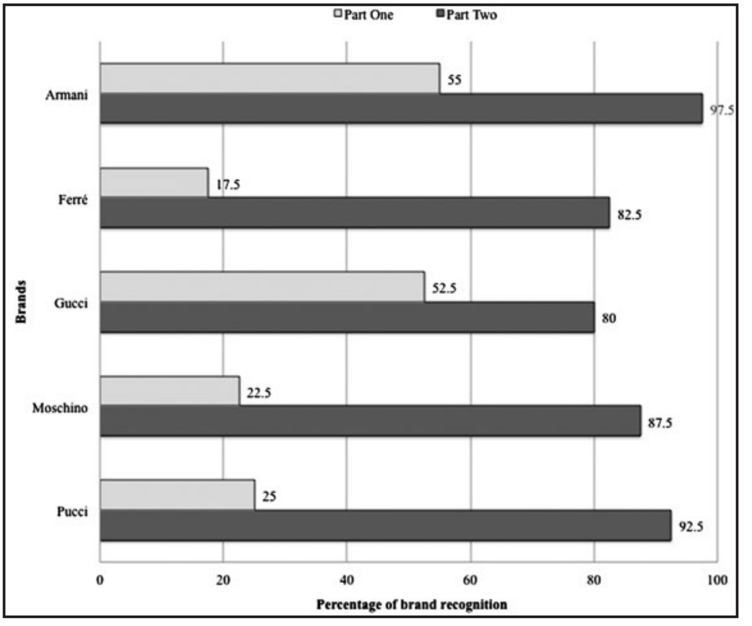

Figure 1
Luxury fashion brand recognition.

ple t-test confirmed that the difference between the means of the relative frequencies in the two phases was significant at $p < 0.05$ ($M_{\text{Part One}} = 0.34$; $M_{\text{Part Two}} = 0.88$). As a result, hypothesis 1 was accepted.

Hypothesis 2

Figure 2 shows the relevance of the three main stylistic elements—distinguishing between accessories (e.g. handbags or shoes) and non-accessories (e.g. cut, neckline, pattern, or fabric)—that participants who recognized the luxury brands fixated on most. These findings relate to the stylistic elements that, according to the eye-tracking analysis (see examples of the visual outputs in Figure 3), enabled the participants to recognize luxury fashion brands. As the analysis highlights, those stylistic elements were characterized by the highest fixation frequencies. The results show that participants with the greatest recognition of luxury fashion brands mainly focused their eyes on accessories. In the first part of the study, for instance, accessories by Gucci and Moschino were the main attractors; in the second part, accessories by Armani, Gucci, and Moschino gathered the most attention (see Figure 2). We aggregated the data from the two phases of the study and then ran a paired sample t-test: in comparing the main relative frequencies of eye fixations focused on accessories and the main relative frequencies of eye fixations focused on other stylistic elements (non-accessories) the difference was significant at $p < 0.05$ ($M_{\text{Accessories}} = 22.9$; $M_{\text{Non-accessories}} = 20.6$).

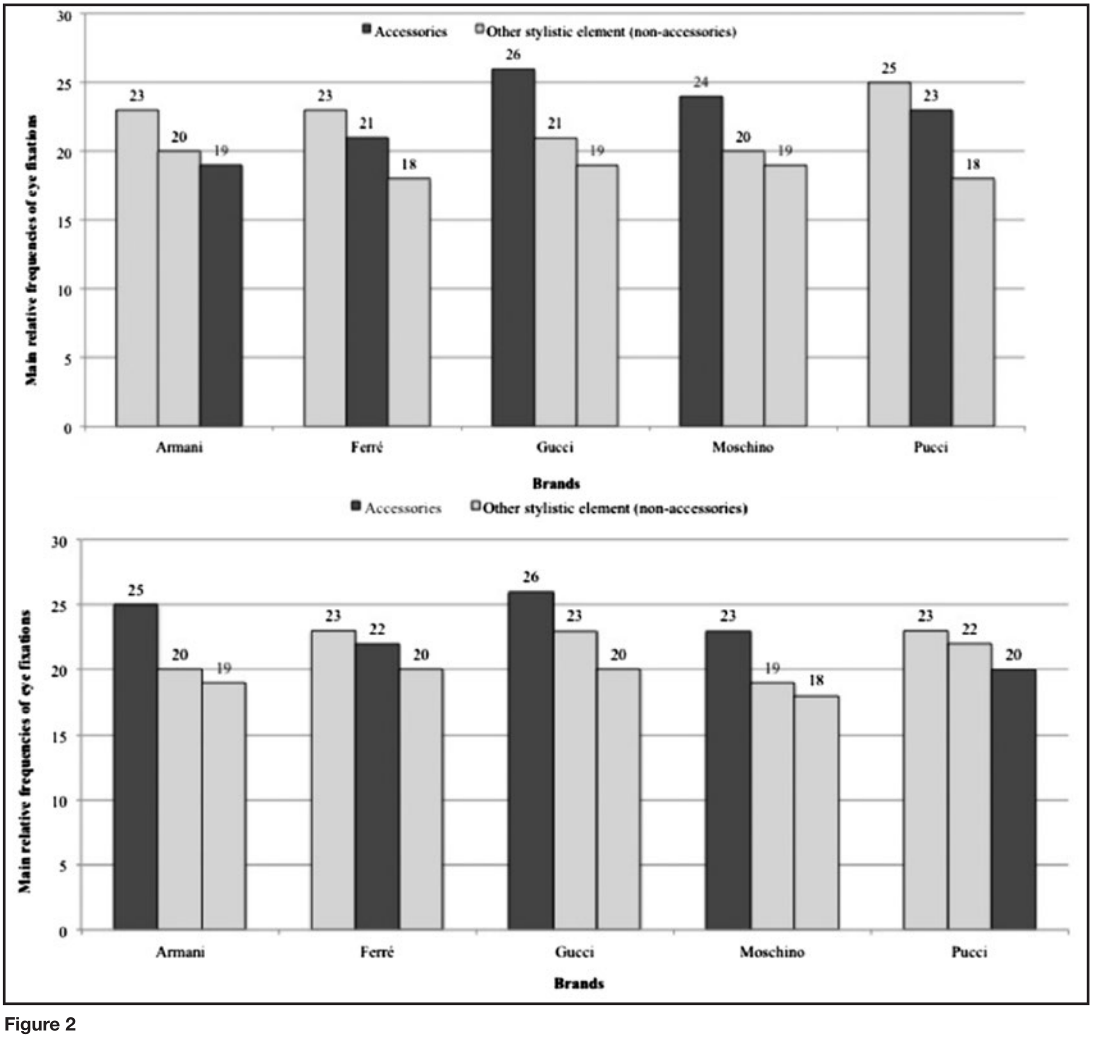

Figure 2
The three main stylistic elements on which the eye fixations of the participants who recognized the luxury fashion brand focused in Part One (first diagram) and in Part Two (second diagram).

Moreover, we conducted a one-way ANOVA test for each part of the study to further demonstrate a significant difference between the attention focused on accessories and the attention focused on other stylistic elements. Therefore, stylistic elements were considered as a dichotomous factor-variable (accessories versus non-accessories), while the dwell time of eye fixations served as the dependent variable (it was only considered an eye fixation if it lasted for at least 0.05 seconds). For the ANOVA test, data were averaged across participants to obtain aggregate measures at the stimulus level. Therefore, the dwell time of eye fixations considered for each stylistic element was the average of all

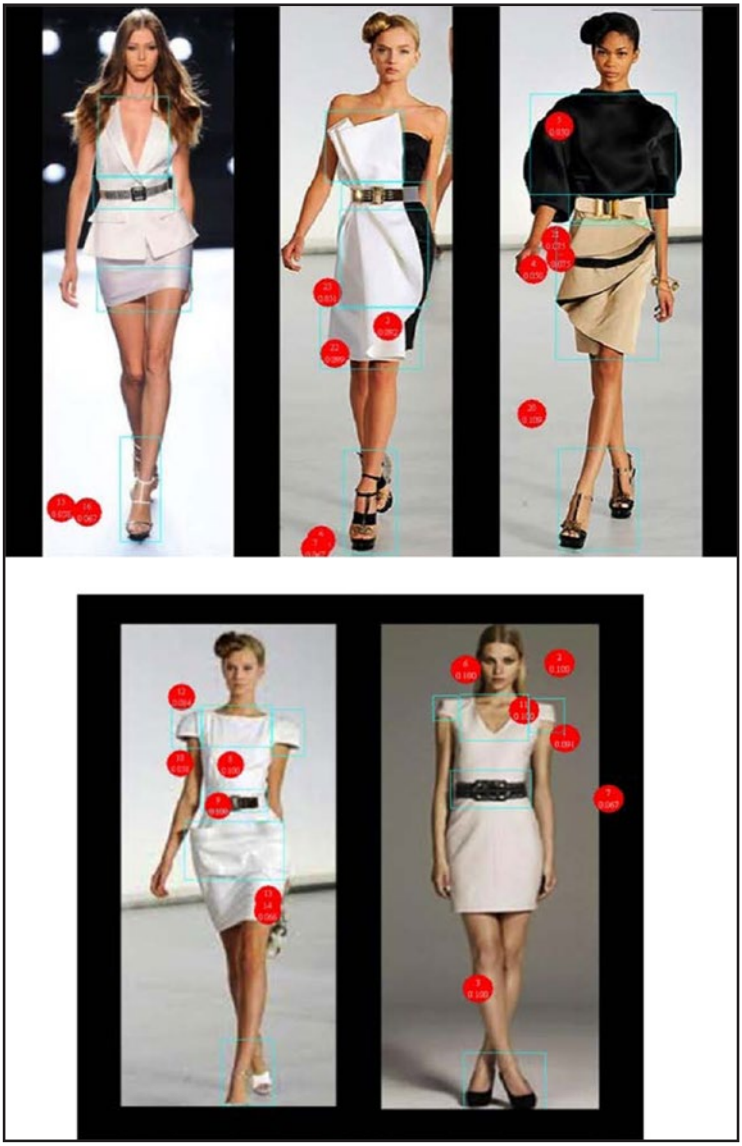

Figure 3
Examples of images used in the study: an image (the one above) with three total looks of a luxury fashion brand and an image (the one below) showing both a luxury fashion brand total look and a fast-fashion brand total look. The examples also show the quadrants of the areas of interest and single maximum points of fixation.

participants. Results from the first part of the study confirmed that the eye fixations focused on accessories ($M = 2.19$; SD = 1.79) were significantly higher than the eye fixations focused on other stylistic elements ($M = 1.36$; SD = 1.42), $F(1, 68) = 4.322$, $p < 0.05$. Likewise, results from the second phase confirmed that the eye fixations focused on accessories ($M = 3.69$; SD = 3.33) were significantly higher than the eye fixations focused on other stylistic elements ($M = 1.95$; SD = 1.45), ($F(1, 51) = 6{,}147$, $p < 0.05$).

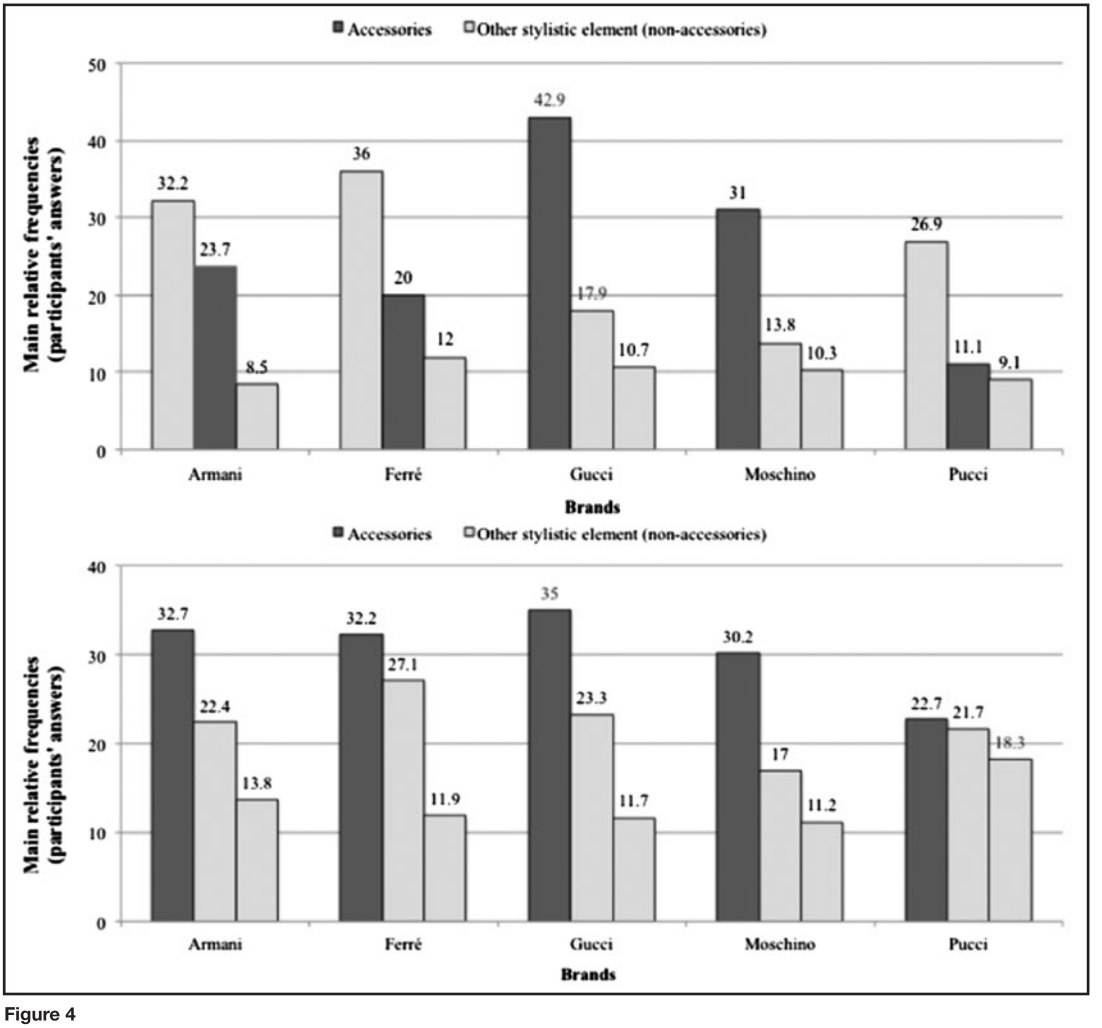

Figure 4
Frequencies of the three main stylistic elements mentioned by the individuals who recognized the luxury fashion brands in Part One (first diagram) and in Part Two (second diagram).

Figure 4 illustrates the relative frequencies of the first three characteristics that the participants who recognized the luxury brand declared to have used for that recognition in both parts of the study. In particular, the first diagram in the figure summarizes the percentage of participants who declared to have used accessories or other stylistic elements (non-accessories) in Part One of the main study, while the second diagram reports the same information related to Part Two. Among those participants who recognized the luxury fashion brand, their answers during Part One and especially their answers during Part Two of the study highlight the leading role of "accessories" in brand recognition.

In the first part of the study, accessories were mentioned as the primary identifying elements for Gucci (43%), Ferré (36%), and Moschino (30%), and the secondary identifiers for Armani (24%) and Pucci (11%). In the second part, accessories were mentioned as the primary identifying elements for four brands out of five: Armani (33%), Gucci (35%), Ferré (32%), and Moschino (30%). As before, we aggregated respondent data from both parts of the study and ran a paired simple t-test: the difference between the main relative frequencies of answers related to accessories and the main relative frequencies of answers related to other stylistic elements (non-accessories) was significant at $p < 0.05$ ($M_{\text{Accessories}} = 28.1$; $M_{\text{Non-accessories}} = 17.8$).

Taken together, the eye-tracking data and the participants' answers indicate the key importance of accessories in luxury brand recognition; therefore, hypothesis 2 was accepted. Table 1 summarizes the hypotheses, the stimuli used in the two parts of the study, and the related results.

Discussion and Conclusions

The subject of this research was "mix-and-match," a consumption behavior that has received limited attention in academic research despite its great importance in today's society. Wearing fast-fashion brand clothing with a luxury accessory enables a "mixer" consumer to avoid the financial cost of a luxury brand-dominated total look, as well as reduce the "psychological costs" that such purchase behavior would imply (Vinelli 2009).

In order to better understand this trend, we developed a two-stage research design: in the first stage, we used a screening survey to identify the necessary sample of test individuals; in the second stage, we conducted a main study using eye-tracking technology to test our hypotheses. The main study was also divided into two parts: in the first part, participants observed five images, each one consisting of three total look pictures of the same brand, in order to assess their recognition of luxury

Table 1
Synopsis table (hypotheses, stimuli, and main findings).

Hypotheses	Part One (first stimulus)	Part Two (second stimulus)	Main findings
H1. Consumers better recognize a luxury fashion brand when paired with a fast-fashion brand	Luxury Fashion Brand:	Luxury Fashion Brand vs. Fast-Fashion Brand:	The level of luxury fashion brands recognition was higher when they were paired with fast-fashion brands
H2. Consumers recognize a luxury fashion brand more easily through accessories than through other stylistic elements	Five images, each one consisting of three total look pictures of the same brand	Five images, each one consisting of two pictures showing two very similar total looks	With both stimuli, the luxury brands recognition was mainly based on the attention paid to accessories

fashion brand styles; the second part used the same methodology, except luxury brand total looks were juxtaposed with fast-fashion brand total looks. The main study revealed that M&M is linked to two important aspects: an absolute advantage in terms of luxury fashion brand recognition, and an increase in consumers' ability to recognize luxury fashion brands via accessories (especially handbags and shoes) when paired with fast-fashion brands. In sum, this research found that luxury fashion brands benefit from inclusion in M&M situations, albeit mainly in the form of accessories. Our participants did not easily identify other stylistic elements (e.g. neckline or fabric) of luxury brands.

As far as luxury brands are concerned, M&M presents two major advantages: this trend can not only spur greater brand recognition for major firms (because a luxury fashion brand turns out to be more recognizable when paired with a fast-fashion brand), but it also allows them to apply higher mark-ups (because mark-ups on accessories are usually higher than those on clothes, the increased importance of this product category allows luxury brands to increase their premium price). Our findings reveal that despite fast-fashion brands representing luxury imitation brands, their products act as positive contextual stimuli when juxtaposed with luxury fashion brands. These results are useful for fashion firms because the attention to and recognition of brands have been related to final purchasing decisions.

Our findings suggest that marketing managers of luxury brands should evaluate and select advertising magazines based on the presence of fast-fashion brand campaigns. Luxury brands will be well recognized in mass market magazines, where most advertising is for less expensive items, thereby enhancing consumer attention and brand recognition. In this way, luxury fashion companies can pay less for their ads (relative to ads in magazines exclusively for top luxury names) and reach higher levels of brand recognition, particularly among luxury "excursionists" (Dubois and Laurent 1996). On the contrary, fast-fashion brands should avoid direct comparison in advertising with luxury brands. The results suggest that fast-fashion brands should consider promoting their products on printed advertising spaces separate from those of luxury brands, thereby mitigating the risk of losing consumers' visual attention.

It is also prudent for managers to consider the importance of accessories in luxury brand recognition. Since accessories are the most important element in terms of luxury brand recognition, luxury fashion companies should emphasize this product category. In doing so, total looks may be planned strategically: For instance, the product mix of total looks developed for advertising campaigns or fashion shows could strategically include and position specific accessories. In their collection plans, luxury fashion brands should increase the relevance of accessories, reducing the number of SKUs (i.e. Stock Keeping Units) related to clothing. In contrast, fast-fashion brands should consider maximizing their product mix strategies by increasing the number of SKUs related to clothing and decreasing the number related to accessories.

It is likely that modern forms of digital communication (e.g. blogs, forums, social networks, and, above all, e-commerce platforms) will further increase the social and economic importance of M&M, improving the flow of information and the speed of purchases. Moreover, in merchandising, the development of collection plans will probably need to be even more efficient; luxury brands and fast-fashion brands can strategize their collections according to the M&M phenomenon.

Of course, we must recognize a few limitations in our study, mainly arising from the fact that our data was gathered from a sample group consisting of a small number of customers. Therefore, the same analyses should be performed on a larger dataset in order to obtain more effective estimates. Further research might also test the same hypotheses on other particular groups of consumers, such as the elderly, or segments of consumers with different psychographic and demographic profiles. Researchers might also extend the tools used in this study to develop causal models that more thoroughly examine the antecedents and effects of luxury fashion brand recognition and M&M behavior.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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