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Assessing the brand luxury perception through in-store and digital shopping experience: An empirical analysis

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, e-commerce has become an integral part of the business activities of any company as more and more individuals choose to make their purchases online. This applies to a variety of product categories and now also to luxury goods. Nevertheless, the online shopping experience and the more traditional one in a physical store differ considerably in several factors. The possibility of touching the product or wearing it in the case of a garment or accessory are undoubtedly the first differences that jump out at the consumer. To minimise the gap between the physical store and the online store, an increasing number of companies are using online augmented and virtual reality tools to provide the opportunity to "try on" products. In particular, luxury companies seek to offer highly innovative and engaging online shopping experiences.

The aim of the present study is to analyse, through an empirical research consisting of the administration of an online questionnaire, whether the use of virtual reality in the online shopping experience allows the consumer to perceive luxury and whether there is a difference compared to in-store shopping in order to assess its effects on consumer behaviour in terms of purchase intention and word-of-mouth. Participants were asked to evaluate two possible scenarios representing the online and in-store experience in terms of luxury perception as well as luxury brand authenticity, following a promotional campaign launched by Dior with the message "*Come in...and try on your luxury sunglasses*" through which the company invites people to enter a Dior store or use the virtual reality of the Dior app to try on sunglasses.

Through the survey, it was possible to assess whether the use of virtual reality to enhance the online shopping experience actually can compromise the perception of

luxury with any negative effects on consumer behaviour compared to the traditional in-store experience. The results reveal some interesting differences between digital and in-store concerning the perception of luxury and the effects on consumer behaviour, which allowed theoretical and marketing implications to be defined.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Preface

For almost as long as human beings have existed, they have needed to share, barter, sell and consume resources (Meyer, 2022). Therefore, to retrace the complete history of commerce from its inception, it is necessary to travel to a time when people exchanged objects or animals in order to survive. Primitive peoples as early as 9000 BC traded cows and sheep, currency arrived later in 3000 BC and the first retail stores took shape even later in 800 BC in ancient Greece (Meyer, 2022). Clearly these were not retail stores as we know them today, they were simply markets where merchants sold their goods.

With a leap of two thousand years, we come to retail very much like today. Between the 1700s and 1800s, family-run shops developed predominantly. Many of these stores were drug stores or general stores that sold everything from food and textiles to toys and tools that could be useful for everyday life (Meyer, 2022). In the next phase, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, economic sectors changed radically and the first department stores were created, such as Le Bon Marché in Paris, Harrods in London and later La Rinascente in Italy. The idea of central locations where shoppers could visit multiple merchants has existed since the agora of ancient Greece, but the modern concept of a shopping mall as physically built shops connected in one location with common facilities began in the 20th century (Meyer, 2022), thanks mainly to the development of the automobile industry and the resulting increasing individual mobility.

The turning point was at the beginning of the last century when new digital technologies began to make their way into a sector that seemed totally alien to their use. In-store sales basically made up of meetings and agreements between people have been joined by online sales and the emergence of so-called e-commerce.The growth of e-commerce mirrors the growth of the internet; as more and more people have gained access to the digital world, they have become more interested in shopping there. Initially, many people were sceptical about online shopping, but as the potential and convenience of the system became known, fears were allayed. E-commerce offers convenience and efficiency to the shopping experience and allows shoppers to research, examine reviews, compare prices and make purchases at all hours of the day (Meyer, 2022). In recent years, social networks have also contributed to opening up other avenues for online retailers and creating new communication tools between customers and companies. In the world of online sales, sellers have the opportunity to sell and advertise products via social platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, TikTok, etc. Bearing in mind that in any retail business the relationship with customers is of paramount importance, today it is possible to improve the relationship between company and customer through omnichannel strategies, artificial intelligence, personalisation of the offer and systems capable of establishing a constant dialogue with the consumer (Maci, 2021).

The increasing popularity of digital devices, such as tablets and smartphones, and the ever-growing number of e-commerce sites have given a further boost to the evolution of online shopping. In trying to differentiate themselves from their industry competitors, more and more companies have taken advantage of technological advances and focused on giving their online users a real shopping experience. The simple online purchase made by viewing and choosing the product from the online catalogue and the subsequent payment phase, is progressively giving way to immersive online shopping experiences that allow one to try the product virtually through the use of virtual technologies.

The COVID-19 pandemic, with its various lockdowns, has given a further boost to digitisation and the growth of online shopping by encouraging the development of thousands of e-commerce sites, which have joined the traditional stores. The pandemic has essentially made an already explosive trend in online sales even more important (McAdams, 2021). Today, a different and certainly new scenario presents itself for most companies operating in the market. A scenario in which taking advantage of technological innovations enables the changing and growing needs of customers to be met. The COVID-19 pandemic that started in 2020 and the resulting restrictions have certainly highlighted the now indispensable role of technology for the retail of the future (Maci, 2021).

1.2 Technology & marketing

The exponential growth of digital technologies has influenced the retail sector and consequently also marketing. There has been a shift from traditional marketing that focused primarily on numbers and sales to experiential marketing that places the customer at the center of all its activity. With the spread of digital technologies, the consumer has gone from being a passive user to a protagonist in communication activities. This change has prompted companies to review their customer relationships and thus also their marketing strategies: from traditional strategies, they have switched to digital marketing (Crisantemi, 2022).

Taking into account the needs and desires of current consumers and at the same time the saturation of the market, companies are constantly trying to innovate and offer to the market something new in line with the customerneeds. Thanks to the analysis of purchasing behaviour data and consumer preferences, companies can now develop more targeted and customised marketing strategies to optimise their offerings according to market trends. For the elaboration of these strategies, digital technologies for user data mining and collection are necessary. New marketing techniques and strategies are therefore emerging that are based on a different way of experiencing the customer relationship that is not limited to just selling the product. By exploiting the communication channels introduced by digital technologies, e.g. web chats, the company is able to more efficiently and quickly take care of customer relations since they represent a direct and immediate communication channel between consumer and company (Crisantemi, 2022).

In this new marketing era, it is the whole way of surfing the net that is changing. This is due to the development of new applications of digital technologies that enable companies to create innovative and appealing online shopping environments for their potential consumers. The customer experience becomes increasingly immersive through the use of new digital technologies, such as 3D-printing, artificial intelligence, smart products, as well as Augmented and Virtual Reality. Specifically, these technologies allow to improve the engagement of customers that relate with products and brand in a more effectively way, with a proactive behaviour also in terms of product/service development and customization. In this new era where the virtual world and physical reality merge, the gap between the in-store shopping experience and the online shopping experience on business websites is mitigated as companies are able to offer their users a more natural shopping experience than standard e-commerce practices through the use of virtual realities. Augmented and virtual reality allow consumers to immerse themselves in virtually enhanced experiences due to their salient feature of intertwining the virtual and physical worlds. The ability they give to try products in their own environment or on their own body reduces the risks of online shopping and consequently increases sales. More and more realities are focusing on the use of these new digital technologies; even on Italian soil the number of companies seeking to offer their customers immersive and memorable experiences is increasing. In the following section, we will analyse the areas in which companies today make the most use of the potential of augmented and virtual reality.

1.3 Types of companies using virtual technologies

In recent years, the spread of augmented reality and virtual reality technologies has increased significantly. The use of augmented and virtual reality is day by day affecting more and more companies as they become increasingly aware of the benefits they can bring to their industry. Thanks to its ease of use, augmented/virtual reality is definitely the technology that is growing the most, finding application in various sectors: from entertainment to education, from automation manufacturing to interior design (Thompson, 2022). Although the areas of use for this type of technologies are potentially infinite, the most practical example to understand functionalities and ease of use concerns the furniture industry. With the use of everyday devices such as smartphones and tablets, users have the opportunity to enrich their environment with digital elements. For example, *Ikea Place* allows users in the virtual home space to place furniture in order to show the final effect of the furniture. In this way, consumers can get a good idea of how their flat will look before they have to buy a product.

The greatest potential of technology that uses virtuality (augmented and virtual reality) is to be able to show your customers a product in action, wherever they are and whenever they want. Many are already taking advantage of this possibility, e.g. some optical stores offer the possibility to try on eyeglasses virtually. Potential consumers once on the product page can activate their webcam, try the eyeglasses on their face and decide whether to order them (London, 2021). Recently, apps have also been launched that allow users to virtually try on shoes through augmented reality. Users choose the shoe model they like best from the catalogue, frame their feet and on the screen of their smartphone or tablet they see their chosen shoes on their feet. This allows customers to get a better idea of the product they are about to buy, leading to fewer returns. The same is true for the clothing sector, to cope with the problem of the wrong size of a garment resulting from online shopping it is now possible to use augmented reality to see garments projected onto one's body. In order to reduce the risks of online shopping, so-called virtual fitting rooms have been developed that attempt in some way to replicate the fitting room experience in physical stores. Even augmented and virtual reality have been applied to the beauty sector. More and more companies are allowing their users to virtually try out their products, such as lipsticks, foundations, eyeshadows, etc., by simply turning on the webcam of their device and framing their face (London, 2021).

Such type of technologies do not require contact with the real world; on the contrary, it invites one to completely estrange oneself from the known world in order to create a digital reality that can be modelled to one's liking. Through graphical reproduction, one can jump from one virtual place to another exploring duplicated views and corners of the world thanks to 360° camera systems and scanners. Smart devices such as visors are required to take advantage of this technology. The pioneers of augmented and virtual reality are undoubtedly video games and the video and photography industry. Initially, it was essentially the video game industry that benefited most from augmented reality, but as technological advances progressed, the entire entertainment industry began to exploit virtual reality displays to enhance the user experience. One example is the cinema: virtual reality has given lovers of the silver screen a whole new experience. The use of visors in front of the screen allowed viewers to see the film as if they were inside the individual scenes.

Specifically referring to virtual reality, over time it has extended its function to a wide variety of sectors ranging from tourism to the automotive sector, from aerospace to the legal sector. Particularly in the tourism sector, it is possible to travel with the imagination while remaining comfortably at home. Augmented reality viewers allow users to explore attractions and monuments anywhere in the world without taking any means to reach them. In the automotive sector, car manufacturers exploit certain features of virtual reality to show their customers and partners around the world, through navigable photographs and films, the interior of the vehicle and all the new features and comforts offered. Certainly, the aerospace sector could not do without the use of new digital technologies. NASA is using virtual reality to explore space; engineers and astronauts can thus explore the surface of a planet without ever having to move from their laboratories on earth or leave their spacecraft. In the legal sector, augmented reality viewers can help in courtrooms. Thanks to three-dimensional reconstructions, judge, prosecutor and other litigants can enjoy an immersive experience by exploring and studying the crime scene in every detail and thus analysing the reconstructions of the prosecution and defence in a more precise and timely manner.

Such technologies are even embracing the world of health and personal care with devices and apps designed to make life easier for doctors and other health professionals (Thompson, 2022). Apps are available on the market that allow the construction of three-dimensional models of the human body from ultrasound scans and other diagnostic examinations so that surgeons can explore a person body before entering the operating theatre and find the least invasive way to remove tumours or treat other diseases.

1.4. Consumer shopping experience

Taking into account the overall framework of retailing, it is worth comparing the different shopping experiences a consumer may have when purchasing a product. Physical and online stores offer precisely two different shopping experiences, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. When consumers purchase in-store, they have the opportunity to touch the products, to see them up close and, above all, to test them. In online shopping, on the other hand, the advantages just listed turn into disadvantages; the component missing from the traditional e-commerce world is precisely the direct contact between consumer and desired object. In an attempt to bridge the gap between in-store and online shopping, recent technological advances have ushered in a new era of online shopping that is essentially driven by virtual and augmented reality. The new virtual and immersive stores offer a more natural shopping experience than traditional e-commerce practices as they allow consumers to virtually try a product, to see how it looks in their environment or on their body.

While the fields of application were initially quite limited, as seen in the previous section, both augmented and virtual reality are entering new areas every day. In particular, the luxury sector will be analysed in this research, as given the high prices of the products, it was found interesting to ascertain consumer behaviour. Although luxury products have traditionally been sold in physical stores to convey a certain product quality and to provide a high level of service (Kim and Hwang, 2014), today more and more luxury companies are incorporating augmented and virtual reality into their digital strategies in order to offer their customers memorable shopping experiences.

1.5 Research aims and objectives

After a general introduction of the topic on which the present work is based, it is appropriate to exemplify the research objectives that served as the guiding thread for the entire research and, thus, dissertation. The aim of this study is to analyse consumer behaviour for luxury products in two different purchase contexts, i.e. physical store and virtual store. In particular, the research aims to assess whether the use of virtual reality in the online shopping experience allows consumers to perceive luxury, product quality and brand authenticity adequately and whether there is a substantial difference in the perception of these factors compared to the in-store shopping experience. By comparing the testing of a product in a traditional context with the testing of the same product in a more innovative context, it will be possible to understand which of the two experiences could better drive the consumer to purchase more. Therefore, it will be possible to verify how the different shopping experience can in some way influence consumer behaviour both in terms of purchase and product recommendation. The main purpose of this work is to understand whether the use of virtual reality to enhance the online shopping experience can affect the perception of luxury products by consumers compared to the traditional in-store experience. The ultimate aim of all this is to allow companies to analyse consumer behaviour and to ascertain their propensity to use virtual technology in purchasing contexts, and on the basis of this they will be able to devise more targeted marketing strategies.

1.6 Research structure

The present work presents a well-defined and clear structure. Following this introductory chapter are four, main chapters, each of which is dedicated to a specific purpose. Chapter two is dedicated to the presentation of the literature review on the various theoretical constructs considered for the purposes of the research objectives and the definition of the terminology used. The next part (Chapter three) elaborates on the aims of the study, presents the reference company in this research with its communication and marketing strategies, defines the research methodology and the variables used in the survey and finally presents the sample under analysis. Chapter four focuses on presenting the results obtained from the analysis of the variables included in the questionnaire administered and also highlights the most significant results. Finally, Chapter five concerns the discussion of the results and their interpretation for the development of theoretical and marketing implications, as well as the definition of the conclusions that can be drawn from them. Finally, the Appendix contains the questionnaire administered to the Italian subjects in the empirical research sample.

1.6.1 Summary of chapter two: Virtual technology and luxury products

Chapter two is divided into five main sections. The first section is an introductory part, describing how the online shopping experience has changed over the years due to the increasing advancement of digital technologies in the retail sector and presenting the new augmented and virtual reality systems that can be used in this sector to cope with the risks of online shopping.

The next (main)section focuses on the evolution of the luxury sector and specifically describes the purchasing behaviour that consumers of luxury products have enacted over the years by moving from traditional physical stores to innovative digital environments. The change in the luxury sector is followed by a comparison between physical stores and virtual stores in order to accentuate the differences between the two and the advantages and disadvantages that potential consumers might have in each purchasing environment taking into account the progressive change of e-commerce supported by the potential of augmented and virtual reality functions.

The third and fourth sections elaborate and exemplify the concept of luxury by referring to the authenticity of luxury and the perception of luxury, respectively. Both constructs are key elements of the field under study and as such are of fundamental importance to the objectives of this research.

Finally, the fifth and final section completes the theoretical part on marketing variables related to consumer behaviour, namely purchase intention and word-of-mouth. The above variables are concretely realised when consumers feel confident about the purchase they are about to make and when they feel satisfied with the purchase they have made by recommending it to others.

1.6.2 Summary of chapter three: Research methodology

Chapter three is mainly focused on presenting the methodology used and the company being researched, and on defining the research objectives. In the first part, the main purpose of the research is defined, namely to understand whether the use of virtual reality in the online shopping experience allows consumers to perceive luxury and whether there is a substantial difference in the perception of this compared to the in-store experience, or rather, whether the use of virtual reality to enhance the online shopping experience compared to the traditional in-store experience. This part is followed by the presentation of the company Dior, the story of its evolution over the years and the communication and marketing strategies used since the object examined during the present research is a pair of sunglasses of that brand.

Once this is done, the description of the experiment and the definition of how the constructs considered have been measured and, thus, the items included in the questionnaire administered are described. In outlining the questionnaire, the sections into which it is divided are specifically described, illustrating the variables, their dimensions and the individual items associated with them. Finally, a description of the sample of questionnaire respondents is given with particular reference to gender, age, household income and education.

1.6.3 Summary of chapter four: Research results

Chapter four concentrates mainly on presenting the results of analysis highlighting the differences between those who undertake an in-store shopping experience and those who undertake an online shopping experience using virtual reality. The data obtained from the analysis conducted have been exemplified through the use of graphs drawn up for each individual variable with its own dimensions, as these make it easier to highlight the most significant results.

1.6.4 Summary of chapter five: General discussion and conclusion

In Chapter five, the results presented in the previous quarter are discussed in general terms, focusing on the most interesting and surprising aspects. In particular, the focus was on the most significant differences found between consumers who go to the real store and those who instead visit the website for their purchases. A comparison was then made with the theoretical aspects identified in chapter two and the results obtained to arrive at specific theoretical implications. Furthermore, the implications in the field of marketing to which the conclusions obtained may lead were described. A concluding section on the limitations found in the research and suggestions for possible future research on the subject was included at the end of this work.

CHAPTER 2

VIRTUAL TECHNOLOGY AND LUXURY PRODUCTS

2.1 Introduction

In recent years, e-commerce has become an indispensable part of the overall retail framework. Due to the increasing competition in the retail sector, companies and retailers must find ways to offer truly memorable online shopping experiences in order to stand out from their competitors. Recent advances in digital technologies, such as virtual representations of reality (Augmented and Virtual Reality) offer efficient and novel tools to create innovative online environments and, thus, stores. Both Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) have the ability to create a kind of bridge between the physical world and the digital world. AR amplifies the real world by overlapping digital content, while VR completely replaces the real world with a digital environment. Using a mix of advanced simulation technologies, it is therefore possible to give consumers a more realistic representation of the point of sale (Borgers *et al.*, 2010) and above all to enhance their shopping experience.

Considering that online consumers "cannot interact with a salesperson or enjoy the atmosphere of a shop or smell, touch or try the product" (Beck and Crié, 2018, p. 279), Virtual Fitting Rooms (VFRs) are among the most promising technologies to overcome the inherent problems of online shopping (Lee *et al.*, 2020b). The concept of the VFR emerged in around 2005 and started to be widely reported after 2010, with the exponential growth of e-commerce (Dawndasekare *et al.*, 2016). The VFR is considered the online equivalent of an in-store changing room. To minimise the gap between the real store and the online store, VFRs allow shoppers to try on products virtually before purchasing through the use of a number of simulation techniques that provide a realistic and personalised shopping experience (Blázquez, 2014; Gültepe and Güdükbay, 2014). VFRs can potentially provide online shopping consumers with a fitting experience that is very similar to that of conventional in-store fitting (Blázquez, 2014).

Although AR-based VFRs have the potential to significantly affect consumer online shopping experiences with enhanced interactive features and the ability to better immerse consumers (Bonetti *et al*., 2018; Yim *et al*., 2017), they have yet to be widely implemented in the fashion industry. Despite the fact that VFR technology has been available in the marketplace for a while, it is still in the early stages of adoption. But in order to distinguish themselves from their competitors in the target sector and also to overcome the significant risks arising from consumer online shopping, an increasing number of companies, and in particular companies in the luxury sector, now propose VFRs on their websites exploiting the potential of AR.

2.2 From tradition to innovation in the luxury sector

The term "luxury" is routinely used in our daily lives to refer to products and services or a certain lifestyle, but often without a clear understanding of the concept of luxury as it takes many different forms for different people and depends on the mood and experience of the consumer (Wiedmann *et al*., 2007). The concept of luxury is certainly not easy to define as a subjective and multidimensional construct, but a strong element of human involvement, very limited supply and the recognition of value by others are key factors (Cornell, 2002).

Whereas necessities are utilitarian objects that relieve an unpleasant state of discomfort, luxuries are characterised as objects of desire that provide pleasure (Berry, 1994), and as non-essential goods or services that contribute to luxurious living and comfort beyond the indispensable minimum. "Defined as goods for which the simple use or display of a particular branded product brings esteem for the owner, luxury goods enable consumers to satisfy psychological and functional needs" (Wiedmann *et al.*, 2007, p. 2). In particular, these psychological benefits can be considered the main factor distinguishing luxury from non-luxury products or counterfeits (Arghavan and Zaichkowsky, 2000). Therefore, luxury brands compete on the ability to evoke exclusivity, brand identity, brand awareness and perceived consumer quality (Phau and Prendergast, 2000).

Prior research has consistently shown that luxury branding draws on specific logic (Dion and Borraz, 2017; Kapferer and Bastien, 2009), firmly grounded in key luxury attributes. Specifically, luxury brands are strongly associated with high quality and premium price, uniqueness and authenticity, as well as exclusivity and prestige image. Moreover, the recent focus on experiences has extended the core notion of luxury to encapsulate hedonism and aesthetics. Therefore, the luxury sector draws on unique attributes such as authenticity, exclusivity, hedonism, and aesthetic expression (Javornik *et al.*, 2021).

Luxury goods are defined as products with higher price points, perceived to be of superior quality and only accessible to those who can afford higher prices. Considering the price point of the products, the luxury sector can be divided into absolute, aspirational and affordable luxury (Achille *et al.*, 2018). According to Rambourg (2014), the order of luxury segments in terms of price point can be represented as a pyramid: at the base is affordable or accessible luxury, at the intermediate level is aspirational luxury and at the top of the pyramid is absolute luxury (see Figure 1). Generally, consumers who purchase accessible luxury have a tendency to purchase products online more than aspirational and absolute luxury consumers because the higher prices of these two segments pose greater risks to them (Dauriz *et al*., 2014).

Figure 1: *Luxury pyramid*

Source: D'Arpizio (2016)

In the past, the sale of all luxury products only took place through one channel, namely the physical store, but today it embraces innovation and moves towards digital. The creation of websites by luxury companies has given consumers the possibility to consult the product catalogue wherever they are and whenever they want. What could only be seen as an advantage, in reality also brings with it disadvantages, especially in terms of consumer perception of the product. In the following, the characteristics of the physical store and the online store will be analysed and the advantages and disadvantages of each shopping experience will be discussed.

2.2.1 Physical store vs. virtual store

Physical stores and virtual stores offer two different shopping experiences. In the case of traditional stores, consumers have the opportunity to walk around the store, touch the goods, see the colours live and be inspired by the store atmosphere. All these factors may lead consumers to purchase not only what they came into the store for but also other things. Some products such as jewellery and textiles with a high emotional component make more impact when seen in person and especially when touched: contact with the product allows consumers to immediately understand whether or not they like it. In the shopping experience in real stores, the emotional connection between shopper and salesperson plays an important role. This may not necessarily happen, but when it does, it certainly gives strength and value to the purchases. And finally, there is the concept of immediacy, i.e. all you have to do is walk into the store and make your purchase without having to wait for shipping time.

Online stores are equally comfortable but in totally different aspects. Potential consumers reach the website from their computer, tablet or smartphone, from home or on the road. Moving around the virtual shelves, they get to know the products in detail through images and data sheets. Moving around the virtual shelves they get to know the products in detail through images and data sheets, and in case of need, they can request immediate support through live chat. The website itself, based on previously selected or purchased products, also suggests other products to consumers that might be of interest to them. In addition, the newsletter service sends automatic updates to consumers on the arrival of new products and promotions. Online payment is convenient, flexible and even instantaneous if you are already a shopper on that website. After that, all that remains is to wait for the courier. Described in this way, the process of an online purchase may seem apparently less fascinating and attractive than a purchase in a shop. It is certainly less romantic than a traditional experience, but it offers consumers who choose it exactly what they expect: wide availability of products without going to the shop, quick price comparison and a clear time saving.

Katterattanakul and Siau (2003) summarised the characteristics of the virtual store compared with the physical one according to the following factors:

- *physical facilities*: layout and architecture are more flexible in case of virtual stores, as well as the response time of the virtual environment system is faster;
- *products presentation*: it is richer and more detailed in the case of virtual store;
- *services*: virtual stores offer a wider range of services, such as delivery policies, purchasing and decision support systems;
- *convenience*: it consists of the convenient location and parking in the traditional stores, while in the online context it represents the organization of the website;
- *visual appearance*: it refers to the atmosphere and attractiveness of the physical store, while in the virtual context it refers to the organisation and appearance of the website;
- *institutional factors*: such as reputation and company information.

The last two years have been a tough time for the retail sector. The COVID-19 pandemic has particularly affected marketing processes due to the relevant issues related to the management of physical sales channels and interactions with customers (Bettiol *et al*., 2021). The new scenario induced by the ensuing COVID-19 crisis raised issues concerning the reorganisation of business activities given the difficulty of physical interaction (Sheth, 2020) and abruptly accelerated the digitisation of companies. It is no coincidence that e-commerce grew exponentially during this period. The pandemic has prompted companies to rely on digital technologies to redefine business processes, customer relations and marketing strategies (Bettiol *et al*., 2021).

Most companies have experimented with and provided various virtual sales solutions for their customers in order to manage all the security regulations imposed by the government. At a time when physical interactions and mobility have been limited by lockdown, digital technologies have been highlighted as important tools for companies to overcome these limitations (Soto-Acosta, 2020). The online channel therefore turned out to be the most important channel for customers to get in contact with the company and carry out purchasing activities (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2020).

Will the rise of e-commerce sales lead to the closure of traditional stores in the future? There is no doubt that e-commerce has taken off in recent years, but it is still far from complete supremacy. Physical and online stores are two different but complementary realities, so it is necessary to get away from the belief that they are competitors. The two “souls of business” can certainly coexist and the two shopping experiences can be defined as successful on the basis of their mutual integration. This coexistence of the physical and online store increases the company visibility, consumer loyalty, catchment area and revenue. In fact, the new businesses are those that have combined physical and virtual experience in their sales process.

Consumers sometimes feel dissatisfied with what is offered by a traditional e-commerce store, and in these cases they have no option but to visit a real store. However, recent technological advancements have opened up a new era of online shopping that is essentially driven by VR and AR. Virtual stores provide a more natural shopping experience than standard e-commerce practices. Whether partial immersion using AR or an expansion to a fully virtual world with VR, virtual stores can significantly improve customer engagement. These recent technological developments can bridge the gap between physical and digital by making online products “tangible” and can greatly increase consumer confidence in their purchasing decisions.

Generally, consumers want to be confident in the choice of product, the fairness of the price and the ease of purchasing a product. Virtual stores can meet all these needs as they allow consumers to virtually try on products, instantly access information about them and also provide highly immersive and engaging shopping experiences (Davydov, 2022). With AR and VR, consumers can see how a product will look on them or in their environment. Therefore, a virtual store that exploits the potential of AR and VR provides consumers with personalised and satisfying experiences. Immersive shopping can evoke much stronger emotions from customers than common online shopping because AR and VR technologies offer customers interactive and truly memorable shopping experiences. Thus, immersive stores represent an advanced virtual point of sale, enriched with more functionalities (Pantano and Servidio, 2012) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: *Comparison between virtual and immersive stores*

	Virtual store	**Immersive store**
Facilities	Fast response Secure transaction System flexibility	Fast response Secure transaction System flexibility Entertainment
Product information	Product variety Detailed products information Personalized information	Product variety Detailed products information Personalized information
Service	Product selection assistance Payment selection Online support	Product selection assistance Virtual salesperson Online support
Convenience	Details about the firm Location indicator Navigational efficiency	Details about the firm Navigational efficiency More realistic navigation and interaction
Appearance	Pleasant Attractive	Pleasant Attractive More realistic appearance
Institutional factors	Requirements related to consumer's profile Firm's information	Requirements related to consumer's profile Firm's information Consumer's position tracer while in the immersive store

Source: Pantano and Servidio (2012)

2.2.2 The rising of digital and virtual technologies

Luxury products have traditionally been purchased in brick-and-mortar stores because of their high price. All those stores that have physical facilities and do not operate only through the Internet are called brick-and-mortar. These types of products are usually sold in real stores because they have the ability to mitigate the purchasing risks and to provide a high level of service quality (Kim and Hwang, 2014). However, this way of thinking is changing. With the growth of digital technology, luxury fashion consumers today are not only going to brick-and-mortar stores but also use online channels for their purchases as several luxury companies and retailers have started employing virtual technologies on their websites to provide comparable service quality and experience to the offline environment. However, the recent focus on improving customer experiences also in the online environment has led luxury brands to incorporate AR and VR into their digital strategies (see Table 2).

Table 2: *Virtual technologies cases by luxury brands*

Luxury brand	**Description of AR/VR**	**Strategic relevance for luxury brand**
Tiffany	Ring virtual try-on via smartphone application (2010)	Ring visualization and customization to support customer journey
Louis Vuitton	Virtual application visually transforming LV bags with artistic elements of Yayoi Kusama (2012)	Part of campaign promoting handbag collection
Hugo Boss	AR marker-based, brand-related visualization displayed in window of London's brand store (2014)	Location-specific visualization of brand world outside the store
Chanel	VR interactive visualization of Coco Chanel's workshop at Chanel's 'Mademoiselle Privé' exhibition, accessed via smartphone; Saatchi gallery (2015)	Immersive depiction of brand heritage
Burberry	AR Burberry smartphone application overlaying on physical surroundings fantasy-like, Burberry-inspired drawings by the artist Danny Sangra (2017)	Interactive engagement with brand aesthetics
Hermès	AR visualization of young women dancing on Rue du Faubourg (Hermès flagship store); accessed via smartphone (2017)	Visualizing brand aesthetics to appeal to younger segment 'Hermès girls'; Part of perfume campaign
Swarovski	VR face filter visualizing curated looks (e.g. Dragon Queen), initially exclusively in New York #crystalsfromswarovski pop-up stores (2017)	Immersive visualization of brand aesthetics
Fendi	Real-time visualization fashion shows and catwalks via AR smartphone application (2018)	Visualization of brand's exclusive events; Promoting new collection
Armani	High-end lipstick virtual try-on on Armani Beauty WeChat (2019)	Offering purchase optimization via social media
Chanel	AR Snapchat lens; Virtual gifts in Chanel Snowglobe in a holiday ski	Part of campaign celebrating the iconic perfume

	lodge activated at Manhattan location (2019)	
Dior	Dior So Light sunglasses virtual try-on filter on Instagram, accompanied by branded headband and fun backgrounds (2019)	Innovative product visualization on social media
Gucci	Gucci Ace sneakers' virtual try-on via smartphone application (2019); Features include special stickers and wallpapers on Gucci media	Immersive brand experience to engage with millennials 'Gucci Gang'
Harrods	AR smartphone application, virtual visualization of animals on the secret trail through in-store safari at Harrods (2019)	AR gamification enhancing store experience; Part of Harrods' Christmas campaign
Harrods	VR makeup try-on accessed via mirrors in the store (2019)	Product personalization to improve luxury store experience and purchase journey
Lancôme	AR game on smartphone app; Lancôme's signature virtual products hidden at exclusive Hong Kong locations to win prizes (2019)	Part of brand's 'Chinese New Year' campaign
Louis Vuitton	Snapchat AR filter activated via markers; Virtual visualization of handbags that change colours and display visual effects; Presented at Viva Technology conference (2019)	Preview of LV Men's FallWinter collection by Virgil Abloh
Prada	#PradaAugmentedSunset; Visualization of New York skyline, recorded in Prada headquarters (2019)	Part of Prada Resort 2019 collection
Rolex	Rolex watch virtual try-on via AR smartphone application (2019)	Supporting product consideration and customer journey
Tiffany	AR visualization of NYC craftsmen's workshop at brand's exclusive location in Seoul (2019)	Immersive visualization of brand's craftmanship

Source: Javornik *et al*. (2021)

AR and VR allow luxury consumers to immerse themselves in virtually enhanced experiences thanks to their unique characteristic to intertwine the virtual and the physical. The deployment of AR and VR offers fresh possibilities for conveying the unique attributes of luxury brands, contributing not only to brand experience but also to the customer journey (Kuehnl *et al*., 2019), and consequently growing brand equity. To better understand this contribution, it is appropriate to define the three concepts. “Brand experience is conceptualized as sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand’s design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments” (Brakus *et al.*, 2009, p. 52). The customer journey refers to the customer path, via touchpoints, to their decision to purchase an product. A customer does not usually decide to purchase an item immediately after discovering it for the first time, but looks at a product or brand several times before deciding on an action. Brand equity was defined by Aacker (1991) as a set of assets or liabilities in the form of brand visibility, brand associations and customer loyalty that add or subtract from the value of a current or potential product or service driven by the brand. Simply, brand equity represents the value of a brand. It is the simple difference between the value of a branded product, and the value of that product without that brand name attached to it (Rosenbaum-Elliott, 2015). However, growing brand equity while incorporating digital technologies has proved challenging due to concerns about how this may have a negative impact on luxury brands that are steeped in tradition and rely on retail encounters. Thus, luxury brands need to understand how best to incorporate digital technologies that support, rather than undermine, the luxury attributes (Holmqvist *et al.*, 2020) and contribute to brand equity (Chandon *et al.*, 2016). Taking into account that the unique attributes of luxury are authenticity, exclusivity, hedonism and aesthetic expression, certainly the attribute that could be particularly undermined by the use of digital technologies is authenticity, which will be better described later.

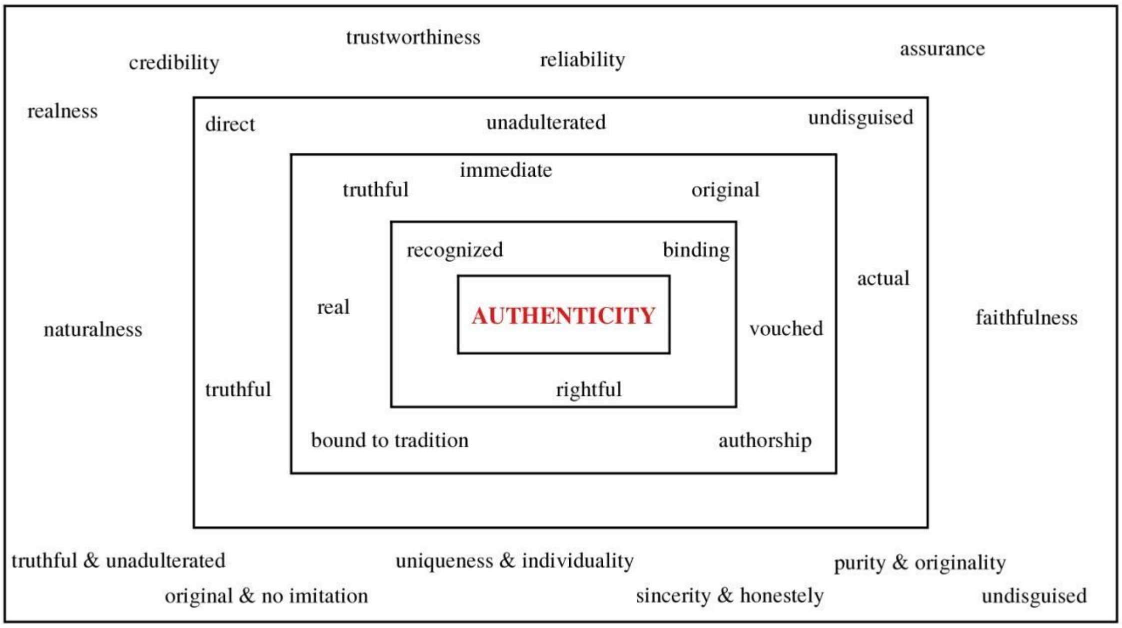
Existing research considers AR and VR “a breakthrough for luxury retailers in both online and offline channels” thanks to applications such as virtual fitting rooms

(Lee *et al.*, 2020a), but the potential role that AR and VR can play for luxury brands is far from fully utilised. Despite this, luxury brands represent the fastest growing sector among top global brands (Conti, 2018), partially due to the strategic efforts invested in digital marketing. Luxury companies have certainly recognised the sales potential of using the online channel, given the actual sales figures through this channel, and therefore aim to continue investing in this.

2.3 Luxury authenticity

The current noun "authenticity" has its origins in the Greek adjective "authentikós" and the late Latin adjective "authenticus", which means "vouched", "true" (Pandel, 2009, p. 30), "reliable", "correct" or "in relation to the originator" (Knaller, 2006, p. 18). The concept of authenticity cannot be captured in a simple definition, as argued by sociologist Wang (1999, p. 353) "[...] authenticity is not a matter of black or white, but rather involves a much wider spectrum, rich in ambiguous colors". It can be understood as a multifaceted and ambiguous concept, which has been defined in research with a wide range of terms (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Etymology of the term authenticity*



Source: Hitzler and Müller-Stewens (2017)

The construct of authenticity is well-known and discussed in many disciplines such as psychology, philosophy and sociology, but recently it has become one of the trending topics and key criteria for success in marketing (Dropulić and Ozretić Došen, 2021). Pine and Gilmore (2007) go so far as to say that authenticity has overtaken quality as the prevailing purchasing criterion. They consider authenticity as one of the four pillars, along with availability, cost and quality, that has to be managed in order for a brand to create a meaningful and lasting relationship with the customer. Although there is agreement on the importance of authenticity in branding, the definition itself still remains ambiguous. The all-encompassing view on brand authenticity was offered by Morhart *et al*. (2015), who define it as an outcome of objective facts, subjective mental associations and existential motives.

Authenticity represents a cornerstone for luxury branding (Morhart, 2021). Recent research has been conducted with the aim of shedding light on the meaning of authenticity in the realm of luxury brands and the challenges luxury brands face if they are to remain relevant as a source of self-authentication in the quest of consumers for genuine consumption experiences (Morhart, 2021). “More than ever, consumers seek what is genuine, familiar, and safe” (Dropulić and Ozretić Došen, 2021, p. 1085). In the modern world, which is increasingly virtual and thus artificial world, people appreciate and are driven by the actual values of brands. Brands play an important role in the lives of consumers since they use brands to build their authentic selves or to reconnect to a particular place, time, or culture (Napoli *et al*., 2013). They serve them as identity signals and part of their lives, which help them communicate their values and personality, build self-esteem, or enhance their identity through consumption (Schmitt, 2012; Stuppy *et al*., 2020).Thus, “consumers strive for real consumption experiences in their quest for increasing authenticity in a world of shallowness and hyperreality” (Morhart, 2021). Consumers rely on brands to express themselves, self-enhance, or self-verify (Aaker, 1999). At the same time, consumers are confronted with increasing commercialization, an overflow of the fake and an omnipresence of meaningless market offers (Boyle, 2004). To overcome this meaninglessness, consumers look for brands that are relevant, original and genuine: they increasingly search for authenticity in brands (Beverland, 2005; Brown *et al*., 2003). Nevertheless, increasing globalisation and industrial limitations in the luxury sector are seriously challenging authenticity in the luxury segment. Indeed, authenticity is considered one of the main challenges for the luxury segment of our time.

Before analysing the challenges posed by authenticity judgements for brands, it is crucial to understand how they are actually shaped in the minds of consumers. Three approaches show how consumers use different clues to evaluate brand authenticity. The first approach is *Indexical Cues*, which refer to attributes that provide consumers with evidence of what a brand claim to be (Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Indexical cues are evidence-based facts, so they relate to the objective authenticity perspective. Therefore, consumers pay attention to all those details that allow them to distinguish between "real" and "fake" luxury items. For example, the "Made in Italy" label incorporated in some luxury products is one such cue. Since a label is an official certification from a third party, it provides consumers with objective information and thus enhances the credibility and integrity dimensions of perceived brand authenticity (Carsana and Jolibert, 2018).

The second approach known as *Iconic Cues* refers to the communication style of the brand. One way for a company to project an authentic image is to emphasise the historicity, heritage, locality, tradition and essence of the brand in its communication activities (Beverland *et al.*, 2008). If a brand communicates a lot about its history or moral values, it consequently becomes more authentic in the minds of consumers. Luxury brands have a huge opportunity to elevate the customer experience by using their history and heritage to immerse customers in their brand universe, and technology such as virtual reality will further enhance this. In contrast to the previous approach, consumers do not rely on objective facts but on totally personal judgements derived from their impressions. They may accept something as authentic if it matches their idea of what the real thing looks like in their mind (Morhart, 2021). This brand communication style positively influences the dimensions of continuity and integrity of brand authenticity (Morhart *et al.*, 2015).

The last approach is *Existential Cues*, which is related to the customers themselves. If customers have the same values as the brand, they will identify with the brands and use them to express to others who they are. Existential cues are information that relate observers to their own reality, thus connecting them to their “true selves”. Taking the well-known brand Giorgio Armani as an example, its brand name and Italian brand personality might evoke feelings of pride for an Italian consumer. In this sense, brand values play an important role in making consumers feel true to themselves by consuming the brand. Thus, these three approaches demonstrate that the perception of authenticity by consumers can be based on concrete evidence, beliefs and personal awareness.

Evaluation of authenticity resides in the mind of a consumer and can be defined as a subjective evaluation of genuineness ascribed to a brand by consumers (Napoli *et al.*, 2013). It is therefore important to realise that people may perceive things and situations differently due to their cultural background, environment and experience. Therefore, the evaluation of truthfulness and genuineness along with the related evaluation of authenticity may be different (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Consequently, it must be underlined that the assessment of authenticity depends on individual judgement, one’s own identity and the given circumstances (Leigh *et al.*, 2006). Analysing how individuals form authenticity evaluations, however, is not enough for companies to understand how to deal with the challenges involved. For this reason, four dimensions have been identified that manifest the perception of brand authenticity by customers (Morhart, 2021):

- *Continuity*: indicates the timelessness of a brand and its ability to survive trends. In other words, it refers to how a brand is true to itself (Morhart, 2021). Most luxury brands are examples of continuous brands that evolve over time and transcend trends while remaining true to their roots;
- *Credibility*: refers to the honesty and transparency of a brand towards consumers. Specifically, the ability of a brand to keep its word, to deliver on its promises, makes it perceived as trustworthy by consumers (Morhart, 2021);
- *Integrity*: relates to the morality of the brand and the honesty in intentions. It denotes the moral purity of a brand, which means it is led by intrinsically motivated and passionate people who put creating value for their customers before profits (Morhart, 2021);
- *Symbolism*: probably the most important dimension today because it refers not so much to the brand but to the relationship of the brand with its customers. This dimension relates to the concept of existential authenticity because symbolism is the ability of a brand to help consumers discover their own identity.

Therefore, the more a brand is perceived as authentic in terms of continuity, integrity, credibility and symbolism, the more emotionally attached consumers are to this brand, and the more likely they are to choose it over a less authentic equivalent (Morhart, 2021).

2.4 Luxury perception

Luxury brands are not naturally luxurious by themselves; rather, they need to be perceived as luxurious by consumers (Hudders, 2012). This makes the management of consumer perceptions particularly important for luxury brands. Consumers perceive luxury brands as multifaceted combinations of attributes and will trade off less salient attributes for more salient ones when making evaluations of the brand level of luxury (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999, 2004). There is a considerable literature on the attributes or qualities that are prototypical of luxury brands. The key characteristics contributing to the luxury brand prototype are a history of heritage (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004), higher prices (Keller, 2009), higher quality (Kapferer, 1997), as well as being highly symbolic, associated with dreams/desires, and exclusivity (Bastien and Kapferer, 2013; Dubois and Paternault, 1995; Okonkwo, 2009).

The customer perception of the quality of a product or brand is predominantly the result of subconscious thought. Perceived quality is the impression of excellence that a customer experiences about a product or brand derived from sight, sound, touch and scent. In other words, perceived quality is the quality of a product according to the customer perception. Several academics have given a definition of the concept of perceived quality. Zeithaml (1988) defined perceived quality as different from objective or actual quality and specifically as the consumer judgement of the overall excellence or superiority of a product. A similar opinion is expressed by Aaker (1991, p. 85), defining the perceived quality as "the customer's perception of the overall quality or superiority of a product or service with respect to its intended purpose, relative to alternatives". In fact, the perceived quality is different from actual or objective quality, product-based quality, and manufacturing quality. It may lead to consumer satisfaction, which is determined by perceived performance and expectation (Chaudhuri, 2002). Although there are a lot of definitions provided by many academics, each of them has a shared common meaning, i.e. perceived quality is the consumer perception of the overall tangible and intangible components of the product and, above all, is different from the actual quality of products.

According to the luxury literature, there are five attributes relevant to the luxury status of a brand. *Recognizable* is the first attribute, which captures the perceived prominence of the product link to a luxury band (Han *et al*., 2010; Kapferer, 2012; Kapferer and Valette-Florence, 2018; Nueno and Quelch, 1998).There are two dimensions of recognisability: how well known is the brand and how prominent/conspicuous is the branding/styling on the specific product (e.g., a monogrammed Louis Vuitton bag or the distinctive quilted style of a Chanel clutch). *Superior quality/craftsmanship*, the second attribute, reflects the tangible quality of the creation process for the luxury product. A key factor in the ability of a luxury brand to command a high price is the presence of refined/superior ingredients and/or the quality of the crafting process (Heine and Gutsatz, 2015; Ko *et al*., 2019; Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). The next attribute, *superior customer experience*, reflects the performance of the interaction experience with brand representatives in the sales and service process, both in person and online (Atwal and Williams, 2009; Berthon *et al*., 2009; Klein *et al*., 2016). The fourth attribute, *resonates with how I see myself*, relates to the self-image-building motives of the consumer. Buying and displaying luxury brands is a form of self-expression, allowing consumers to use the luxury brands they own to signal actual or aspirational image (Ko *et al*., 2019; Liu *et al*., 2012; Seo and Buchanan-Oliver, 2019; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). The final attribute is unique from mainstream brands, which is the degree to which the luxury brand offers something exclusive to other brands considered crucial to luxury brand success and the capacity to command a price premium (Hennigs *et al*., 2013; Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004).

Brand perceptions arise from three main sources: (1) direct brand experience (e.g. buying the brand, experiencing its retail outlets), (2) word-of-mouth communications from others, and (3) advertising or other marketing communications exposure and events. Of these three factors, the customer direct experience with a brand is the most powerful source of brand perception. Extensive evidence shows that customers of a brand are two to three times more likely to hold perceptions about a brand than non-customers of a brand (Bird *et al*., 1970; Romaniuk *et al*., 2012). However, luxury brands rely on desire as an important characteristic and this desire is built up among both brand customers and non-customers in line with the "dream" formula (Dubois and Paternault, 1995). Therefore, it is expected that even non-customers of luxury brands might have considerable knowledge about brands such that the difference between customers and non-customers perceptions of a luxury brand would be little or none.

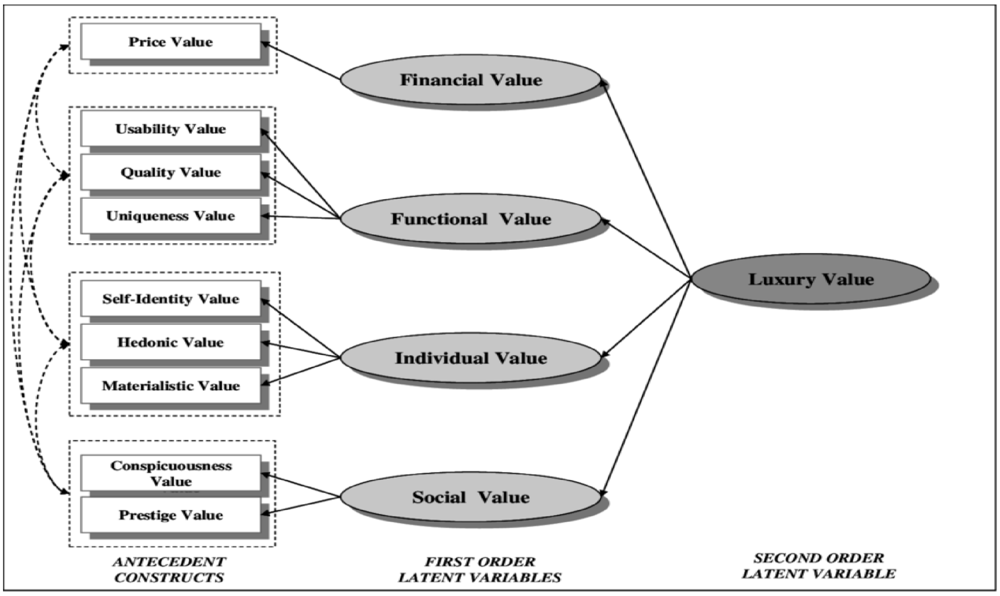
Vigneron and Johnson (2004) suggested that the amount of perceived luxuriousness of a brand can be managed if it can be measured. Based on this, they developed the *Brand Luxury Index* (BLI) to provide a tool to estimate the amount of perceived luxuriousness consumers' associated with a brand. Their measure contained five components: conspicuousness, uniqueness, quality, extended-self and hedonism. Three of the dimensions (quality, uniqueness and conspicuousness) are derived from personal perceptions, while the other two (hedonic and extended self) from non-personal perceptions. The dimension of perceived conspicuousness measured how much a brand was able to indicate the social status or wealth of an owner. Perceived uniqueness assessed the degree of rarity and exclusivity of a brand. Perceived quality was intended to measure brand superiority. The dimension of perceived hedonism was designed to measure how much a brand is able to offer hedonistic benefits to purchasers and users. Finally, the perceived extended self was developed to indicate the extent to which a brand expresses personal identity and success. These researchers hypothesised that the overall perception of the luxuriousness of a brand was a combination of different evaluations of these five dimensions.

Wiedmann, Henings and Siebels (2007) extend the model of Vigneron and Johnson, considering that in order to understand the luxury construct and consumers of luxury goods, all value sources of luxury perceptions need to be integrated into a multidimensional model (see Figure 3). Drawing on existing research literature, the new model considers four categories of aspects – social, individual, functional and financial – that represent the latent dimensions of luxury value:

- *Financial Dimension of Luxury Value Perception*: relates to the value of the product expressed in money and the sacrifice made by customers to obtain the product (Pop *et al*., 2011);
- *Functional Dimension of Luxury Value Perception*: refers to the core benefit and basic utilities that drive the consumer based luxury value such as the quality, uniqueness, usability, reliability, and durability of the product (Sheth *et al*., 1991);
- *Individual Dimension of Luxury Value Perception*: focuses on the customer's personal orientation on luxury consumption and addresses personal matters such as materialism, hedonistic and self-identity value;

• *Social Dimension of Luxury Value Perception*: "refers to the perceived utility individuals acquire by consuming products or services recognized within their own social group(s)" (Wiedmann *et al*, 2007, p. 4).

Figure 3: *The Conceptual Model*



Source: Wiedmann *et al*. (2007)

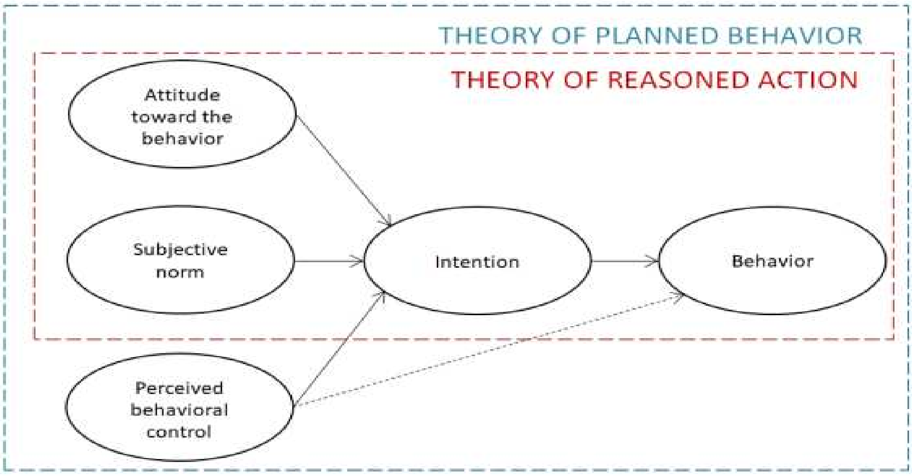
The research conducted by Wiedmann, Henings and Siebels leads to the conclusion that the customer perception of the value of luxury and the motivations for consuming a luxury brand are not only related to social aspects such as the display of status, success, distinction and the human desire to impress others, but also depend on the financial, functional and individual utility of a certain luxury brand.

2.5 Consumer behaviour

Consumer behaviour is greatly influenced and shaped by cultural, social, personal and psychological factors (Wang *et al*., 2010). The *Theory of Reasoned Action*

(TRA) and the *Theory of Planned Behavior* (TPB) have been used in several studies of consumer behaviour to provide an in-depth understanding of personal and social factors. Both have proven to be an effective tool for understanding the factors that influence consumer purchasing behaviour towards luxury goods. The TRA of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) posits that, in consumer decision-making process, attitude toward a behaviour is a direct predictor of behavioural intention. TPB is an extension of the previous theory whereby Ajzen (1991) no longer only takes into account attitude and subjective norm but also adds perceived behavioural control (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: *From Theory of Reasoned Action to Theory of Planned Behavior*



Source: Tommassetti *et al*. (2018)

TPB highlights three independent variables for behavioural intention, namely: attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control. Attitude refers to the degree to which a person has a favourable or unfavourable evaluation or appreciation of the behaviour in question (Ajzen, 1991). Consumers could have a favourable attitude towards buying a product if they considered that the product reflected their identities needs (Loureiro and Araújo, 2014). Consumers could have a favourable attitude towards buying a product if they considered that the product reflected their identities needs (Loureiro and Araújo, 2014). The subjective norm is a social factor that refers to the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform a behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). It places pressure on the performance or non-performance of a behaviour regardless of the attitude of individuals towards the given behaviour (Jain and Khan, 2017). Subjective norm plays a special important role when consumers are thinking about engaging in a new behaviour and they would be more eager to do so if they felt that doing so would gain them approval (e.g., praise, accolades) from close, important people in their lives (Fitzmaurice, 2005). Thus, the subjective norm refers to the influence of significant others on the performance of a behaviour of an individual (Jain *et al.*, 2017), as that of friends, relatives and other consumers in the social (Singh *et al.*, 2021). The third independent variable, perceived behavioural control, is the degree of difficulty an individual perceives when performing a specific behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Perceived behavioural control allows for the prediction of behaviours that people intend to perform, but are unable to perform due to lack of opportunities and/or resources such as time, money, skills (Jain, 2020). Thus, the more favourable the attitude and subjective norm with respect to the behaviour, and the greater the perceived behavioural control, the stronger should be an intention of an individual to perform a particular behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).

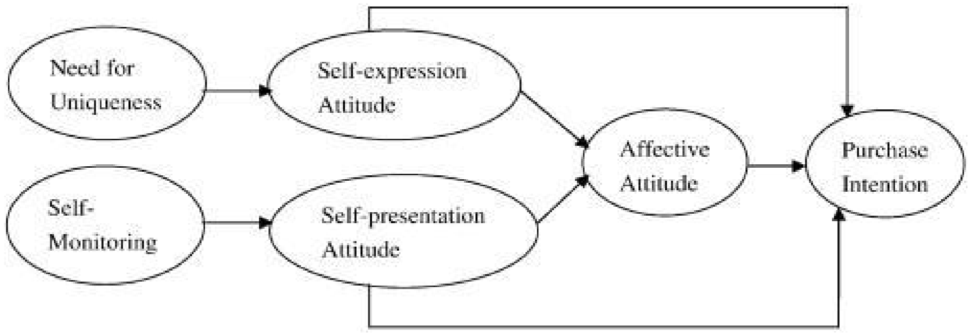
The desire for status and prestige drives much of the behaviour of luxury consumers in both offline and online channels. The conventional purchase decision-making process starts from the recognition of the need for the product, to the search for product information, purchase, use and evaluation after use. The purchase of luxury goods both online and offline, on the other hand, does not follow this path due to the significant role that feelings and psychology play in luxury purchase decisions. However, the consumers who are likely to buy luxury goods online are those with a prior offline relationship or exposure to the brands. This is because past shopping experiences in physical stores greatly influence the evaluation of the current online purchase.

Luxury consumers are willing to spend a lot to obtain exclusive, rare and quality products in order not so much to satisfy their own need, but above all to impress other people. Therefore, the consumption of prestige products can help people in their struggle for self-respect and social approval (Eastman *et al*., 1999). But despite the considerable amount of research on the consumption of luxury goods, there is still much to be understood about the determinants that influence consumers purchase intentions for luxury products.

2.5.1 Purchase intention of luxury products

Although luxury brands possess characteristics of premium quality, a heritage of craftsmanship, recognizable style, premium price, uniqueness, and global reputation (Nueno and Quelch, 1998), consumers purchase luxury brands mainly for symbolic reasons to reflect their individual or social goals (Wilcox *et al*., 2009). Generally, luxury consumers purchase a product because it reflects their central values and beliefs (self-expression) or because it reflects the social image they wish to convey (self-presentation) or both (Shavitt, 1989; Wilcox *et al*., 2009). Consumption of luxury brands is largely determined by social-function attitudes (i.e. self-expression attitude and self-presentation attitude) as consumers express their individuality (e.g., need for uniqueness) and exhibit their social standing (e.g., self-monitoring) through luxury brands (Wilcox *et al*., 2009). The distinctive image of luxury brands can satisfy the need for uniqueness, thereby arousing a self-expression attitude (Katz, 1960). Furthermore, the ability of luxury brands to symbolize social classifications and group affiliations can strengthen social image, arousing a self-presentation attitude (Park *et al*., 2008; Snyder and De Bono, 1985). The power of attitude is reflected in both cognitive responses, i.e. what we think and believe, and affective responses, i.e. what we feel and experience (Keller, 2001; Morris *et al*., 2022; Petty *et al*., 1997). Both self-expression and self-presentation attitudes reflect cognitive responses of consumers toward luxury brands, given that consumers attempt to communicate both their central beliefs and social status through luxury brands. .“Both self-expression and self-presentation attitudes can lead to affect – one’s feelings or emotions – a powerful predictor of behavior” (Bian and Forsythe, 2012, p. 1444). In addition to the social-function of self-expression and self-presentation attitudes, consumers choose luxury brands as a result of their affective attitude (Batra *et al*., 2000) because luxury brands provide hedonic rewards and sensory fulfilment (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). In this regard, Bian and Forsythe (2012) outlined the following conceptual model:

Figure 5: *Conceptual model*



Source: Bian and Forsythe (2012)

Therefore, consumers affective attitude also plays an important role in their cognitive–affective purchase intention formation (Kumar *et al*., 2009; Lee *et al*., 2008; Zajonc and Markus, 1982); this recognition is based on the understanding that consumers are both rational and emotional (Zajonc and Markus, 1982). Previous literature suggests that affect impacts consumers purchase intentions (Li *et al*., 1994) and that affect even has a stronger association with purchase intention towards fashion products than cognition. Affection may explain why consumers are willing to pay a premium price for luxury brands even if they can obtain equal functional benefits through cheaper non-luxury brands (Bian and Forsythe, 2012). Thus, social-function attitudes may impact purchase intentions either directly or indirectly through affective attitude. Given that attitude has a direct impact on intention toward a behaviour (Eastlick and Lotz, 1999; Penz and Stottinger, 2005; Szymanski and Hise, 2000), both self-expression attitude and self-presentation attitude toward luxury brands predict purchase intentions for luxury brands.

2.5.2 Word-of-mouth communications

Word of mouth (WOM) is one of the oldest ways of conveying information (Dellarocas, 2003) and one of the earliest forms of marketing communication. WOM communication has long been discussed in the marketing literature as WOM is considered one of the most influential factors affecting consumer behaviour (Daugherty and Hoffman, 2014). One of the earliest definitions of WOM was that suggested by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1966), who described it as the exchanging of marketing information between consumers in such a way that it plays a fundamental role in shaping their behaviour and in changing attitudes toward products and services. A year later, Arndt (1967) defined WOM as an oral, person-to-person communication tool between a communicator and a recipient who perceives the information received about a brand, product or service as non-commercial. Likewise, WOM has been defined as communication between consumers about a product, service, or company in which the sources are considered independent of commercial influence (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). These interpersonal exchanges provide access to information related to the consumption of that product or service over and above formal advertising, i.e., that goes beyond the messages provided by the companies and involuntarily influences the individual's decision-making (Brown *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, WOM is considered the most important information source in consumers' buying decisions (Litvin *et al.*, 2008; Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012) and intended behaviour. Furthermore, previous research indicates that consumers regard WOM as a much more reliable medium than traditional media such as television, radio, and print advertisements (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). That consideration is made because WOM is seen as a consumer-dominated marketing channel in which senders are independent of the market. This independence lends credibility and reliability to WOM communication because users generally trust other consumers more than sellers (Nieto *et al*., 2014).

In the luxury marketing literature, WOM has been identified one of the most powerful means of communication (Kim and Ko, 2012; Yang and Mattila, 2013).In particular, understanding WOM recommendation is significant in this area for several reasons. Firstly, consumers WOM associated with luxury brands helps develop their symbolic social status (Lee *et al*., 2015; Liu *et al*., 2012). Secondly, luxury consumers tend to rely on this personal information source to reduce the uncertainty associated with consumption experiences. WOM recommendation often comes from people we know, and therefore, tends to be considered more reliable than recommendations from formal marketing channels (Baker *et al*., 2016; Mangold *et al*., 1999; Stein and Ramaseshan, 2015). Thirdly, the predictive validity of WOM recommendation for actual purchasing is further evidenced because it involves social pressures to conform, making it an even more effective marketing communication channel (Libai *et al*., 2010; Stein and Ramaseshan, 2015; Sweeney *et al*., 2012).

The new form of online WOM communication is known as electronic word-of-mouth or eWOM (Yang, 2017). The concept of eWOM was introduced in the mid-1990s, when the Internet was beginning to change the way consumers interacted. eWOM can be generally defined as the sharing and exchange of information by consumers about a product or company through the Internet, social media and mobile communication (Chu, 2021). One of the most comprehensive conceptions of eWOM was proposed by Litvin *et al.* (2008), who described it as all informal communication via the Internet addressed to consumers and related to the use or characteristics of goods or services or the sellers thereof. Likewise, Hennig-Thurau *et al*. (2004, p. 39) conceptually defined WOM as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet”. Therefore, eWOM occurs when consumers exchange information online and can be observed in various forms such as user-generated content, online product reviews, personal e-mails and social media posts. The advantage of this tool is that it is available to all consumers, who can use online platforms to share their opinions and reviews with other users. The eWOM is therefore a tool that allows information to be passed along globally and quickly. Where once consumers trusted WOM from friends and family, today they look to online comments for information about a product or service (Nieto *et al*., 2014).

Today, consumers from all over the world can leave comments that other users can use to easily obtain information about goods and services. A negative or positive attitude towards a product or service will influence customers future purchase intentions. However, some previous studies have shown that consumers pay more attention to negative information than to positive information (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). Generally, negative product information is perceived as more diagnostic or informative than positive information and weighs more heavily in consumers judgements (Herr *et al.*, 1991).

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research objectives

The aim of the present study is to analyse consumer behaviour of luxury products in two different purchase contexts, i.e. physical store and virtual store. In particular, the research focuses on assessing how different shopping experiences can influence consumer behaviour both in terms of purchase and product recommendation. The presentation of the same product, a pair of sunglasses of the well-known luxury brand Christian Dior, through two different ways, i.e. actually worn in the store and worn using the new virtual technologies on the website, makes it possible to verify the potential changes in the consumer perception of luxury. In the current study, an attempt will be made to find out whether trying a product in a traditional context is more likely to lead to a purchase than trying the same product virtually in a more innovative context. The aim of this research will therefore be to understand whether the use of virtual reality to enhance the online shopping experience can actually affect the perception of luxury and, thus, the consumer behaviour, compared to the traditional in-store experience. This will enable companies to analyse consumer behaviours and ascertain their propensity to use virtual technology in purchasing contexts and based on this they will be able to devise targeted marketing strategies. In this regard, the present study intends to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: *How does the use of new virtual technology in the digital shopping context affect the perception of luxury products?*

RQ2: *In the luxury context, are there differences between the virtual and the traditional in-store shopping experience?*

3.3 Methodology

3.3.1 Research design

To reach the research purposes, as first step it has been considered the Dior case study to justify the choice of this brand in the development of the survey that is the operative core of the present research. Then, to empirically examine consumer perception of luxury and following purchase intention and WOM, linked to two different shopping experiences, virtual and in-store, an online survey data collection was conducted using *SurveyMonkey*.

3.2.2 Christian Dior case study

Dior is a French luxury fashion house created in 1946 by the designer Christian Dior. His revolutionary style, clearly visible from the launch of his first collection, quickly put the fashion house on the map as one of the most sought-after and beloved brands in the fashion space (Phillips, 2020). It was not long before Christian Dior went global. In 1948, a store was opened on Fifth Avenue and 57th Street in New York, bringing Christian Dior stateside for the first time (Phillips, 2020). With the worldwide launch also came an expansion of the collection as Dior realised the need to provide a complete fashion experience. That meant licensing the Dior name for accessories. The designer believed that a complete look was important and could not be so without the proper Dior accessories (Roman, 2021). In 1949 Christian Dior became the first luxury brand to have licensed production of his designs. Soon Dior was being manufactured all over the world and his brand name was spreading like wildfire. Licensing made Dior extremely profitable, although at first he was criticised for it by the French Chamber of Couture since it was looked at as cheapening the couture industry (Roman, 2021). Almost all other luxury couture brands also ended up licensing their brands when they saw the success of Dior. In 1978, however, the Boussac Group, which had backed the brand since its establishment, filed for bankruptcy and Dior was purchased by Bernard Arnault, the billionaire behind LVMH Moët Hennessy – Louis Vuitton. Despite being folded into LVMH, Christian Dior continued to be an independent brand maintaining its roots and expressing its values. Since Dior was created in 1946, the brand has remained a symbol of luxury, elegance and excellence, with a traditional image, but at same time an innovative (marketing and technological) evolution.

3.2.2.1. Dior virtual technologies

Dior is worth $42.7 billion and continues to grow in value because it is able to innovate and keep up with the times. The brand understood that technology held the key to innovating experiences for customers. In fact, over the years Dior has increasingly approached the world of augmented and virtual reality. In 2016, Dior took fashion shows to the next level with Dior Eyes. The intention of the brand was to offer something totally new that differed from traditional fashion shows. To achieve this, it created the Dior Eyes headset (see Figure 6). This is a virtual reality headset that allows Dior lovers to witness the backstage events of each show. With the innovative Dior Eyes device created in collaboration with DigitasLBi Labs France, Dior offers its customers a new immersive experience in the world of luxury.

Figure 6: *Dior Eyes*

Source: LVMH – Fashion & Leather Goods (2015)

In 2020 due to COVID-19 many companies had to reinvent themselves. Dior was part of the list. In mid-February, Dior started offering an innovative and truly memorable shopping experience, namely a virtual visit to its Champs-Elysées boutique (see Figure 7). In virtual reality, users can stroll through the Dior boutique on the most beautiful avenue in the world from the comfort of their own home (Duval, 2020); they can explore the shop, take a closer look at the products, discover the specifics of the product and its price before adding it to their basket.

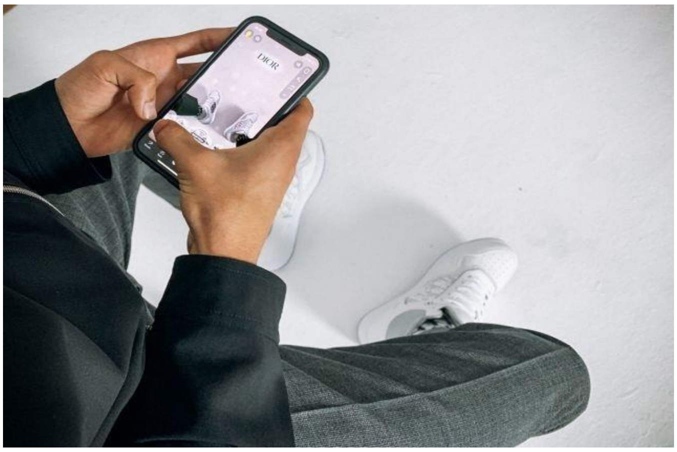
Figure 7: *Dior Champs-Elysées virtual store*

Source: Munster (2020)

Also due to Covid-19, many fashion houses were forced to re-imagine fashion shows in 2020 switching to socially distant, filmed and live-streamed presentations. Thus Dior, like many other brands, showed its pre-Fall 2021 collection via a virtual runway.

Given the restrictions imposed by governments to limit the spread of the virus and the consequent impossibility of physically going to stores to enrich wardrobes with the latest trends, some brands have tried to be imaginative to make online shopping more fun. For example, the French luxury brand Dior collaborated with the social network Snapchat in October 2020 to offer a new digital experience to its members (AFP-Relaxnews, 2020). In the new augmented reality experience, Snapchat users can virtually try on shoes before buying them. To test the shoes virtually, one simply clicks or scans the QR code from the Snapchat app, selects the sneaker model one wishes to try on, and visualizes it directly on one's feet with several outfits (see Figure 8). Once one has chosen the pair of shoes one likes best, one can order it directly from Snapchat or Dior.com.

Figure 8: *Virtual try-on of Dior shoes with Snapchat*



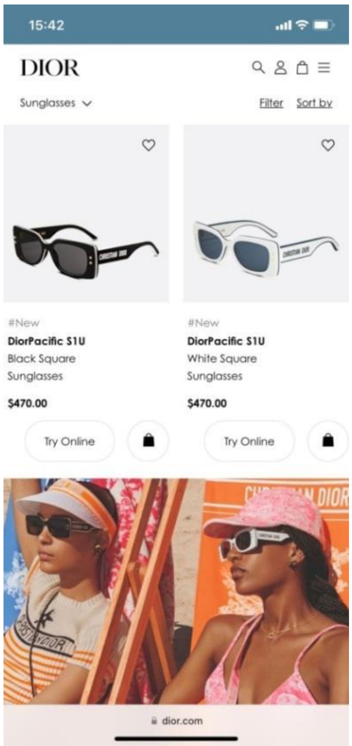
Source: AFP-Relaxnews (2020)

Dior goes after Generation Z not only by partnering with Snapchat, one of the most popular apps among young people, but also with a virtual beauty link-up. The Dior beauty arm attracted a younger generation of shoppers with the launch of a digital collection via a virtual metaverse. Since the beginning of the pandemic, virtual launches and digital metaverses have become quite common as beauty brands find innovative ways to meet shoppers demands – and they seem destined to stay (Bargh, 2021). Visionary and audacious Dior is the first beauty brand to join the Zepeto platform. By partnering with this social media app, it allows users to create 3D avatars of themselves to make its first foray into the virtual beauty space. Dior seeks to provide new beauty experiences for Dior Beauty lovers around the world. On the brand official website, users can virtually try on makeup products online to find their ideal look (see Figure 9). Furthermore, Dior proving to be a particularly technology-conscious company, also allows users of its website to wear sunglasses through the use of virtual reality (see Figure 10). Sunglasses testing is very similar to makeup testing: users stand in front of the camera and choose to try on the products they like best before proceeding to purchase them.

Figure 9: *Virtual try on makeup products*

Source: Dior website (www.dior.com)

Figure 10: *Virtual try on sunglasses*



Source: Dior website (www.dior.com)

Dior proves to be an incredibly innovative company that can readily cope with change. The way consumers interact with products has changed very rapidly due to digitisation and Dior has adapted to this very quickly. Added to this was the pandemic situation that has highlighted more than before the importance for brands of having a strong and engaging online presence as they have seen their physical stores closing down. Today, however, having a simple online presence is not enough to have a competitive advantage over other brands; to really stand out from competitors, it is necessary to look for new strategies (Gallo, 2020). The most recent trend that many companies are adopting to improve the customer's online shopping experience is the use of virtual technologies on their websites. Aiming to offer its consumers highly imaginative and immersive shopping experiences, Dior is one of the main brands which has fully adopted this technology. This new type of e-commerce interface appeals to the younger generations, who understand how it works and can easily interact with this it without encountering any difficulties (Gallo, 2020). Virtual reality not only creates a more entertaining shopping experience but also drives sales. Dior was one of the first brands to recognise the added value of augmented reality and to seek to implement it wisely within its marketing strategy.

3.2.2.2 Dior marketing strategy

The objective guiding the marketing strategies of the Maison Dior is mainly to offer consumers always something new while striking the right balance between tradition and innovation and maintaining its own identity. Since his first collection in 1947, Christian Dior an eclectic visionary was able to revolutionise the codes of the modern look establishing his style (Scannapieco, 2015), the so-called *New Look*. He delivered his vision of beauty to women through elegant, structured and extremely feminine lines until the Dior brand became the symbol of French luxury worldwide. As classic as it is visionary, the Maison Dior has a rich and extraordinary cultural heritage rooted in the French tradition of couture, elegance, romance and refinement (Bertrand, 2021). One of the brand winning moves has been to perfectly combine tradition and original spirit with research, innovation and differentiation. This tension between tradition and innovation is very much alive in the Maison today: creativity and vision remain the heart and soul of Dior (Bertrand, 2021).

Christian Dior marketing strategy helps the brand/company to position itself competitively in the market and achieve its business goals and objectives. Product, price, positioning and promotion can be considered the determinants of its success. As a manufacturer of luxury goods created to meet the styling needs of the high-class segment, Dior has a wide range of products in its marketing mix in three broad categories of men, women and children and has maintained its position as a creator of Haute-Couture. Dior designs and markets leather goods, ready-to-wear, footwear, timepieces, makeup, fragrances, skincare products, jewels and fashion accessories, such as sunglasses. Although it includes mostly female offerings, the company also has *Dior Homme* for men and *Baby Dior* for children. "Dior markets its products to high-class and high-income groups thanks to its quality guarantee and exclusive creations (Bhasin, 2019).

The pricing strategy is based on the concept of skimming the customer base. Therefore, it offers its products at a price so high that it can select its customers and reach the selected target group. With these luxury products, the company specifically targets elegant customers with a social distinctiveness. Furthermore, Dior has developed trustworthy relationships with customers that have helped the company to survive and prosper with premium prices (Bhasin, 2019). Customers do not hesitate to buy Dior products at premium prices as they are a guarantee of quality and a symbol of exclusivity. After all, it is a status symbol to be seen wearing a Dior product (Bhasin, 2019). Dior is distributed worldwide through an extensive network of sales outlets, spread practically over the entire international territory. Its products are available in more than 500 stores (see Table 3) divided between large retail chains and flagship boutiques.

Table 3: *Dior boutique location*

DIOR BOUTIQUE LOCATION			
Continent	**Countries**		**Total**
Americas	Brazil (2) Canada (6) Mexico (2) Puerto Rico (1)	Sint Maarten (1) St. Barthélemy (3) United States (94)	111
Asia – Oceania	Australia (7) Mainland China (32) Hong Kong SAR China (13) India (2) Indonesia (3) Japan (26) Macao SAR China (9) Malaysia (3)	New Zeland (2) Philippines (2) Singapore (9) South Korea (26) Taiwan China (15) Thailand (5) Vietnam (3)	157
Europe & Africa	Andorra (4) Austria (2) Belgium (1) Czechia (1) Denmark (1) France (80) Germany (11) Greece (3) Iceland (1) Iraq (1) Ireland (1) Italy (32) Kazakhstan (1) Luxembourg (1)	Monaco (2) Montenegro (1) Morocco (2) Netherlands (2) Norway (2) Portugal (3) Russia (6) South Africa (3) Spain (12) Sweden (1) Switzerland (7) Turkey (4) Ukraine (1) United Kingdom (9)	195
Middle East	Bahrain (3) Kuwait (6) Lebanon (3) Libya (1)	Oman (2) Qatar (7) Saudi Arabia (4) United Arab Emirates (16)	42

Source: Dior website (www.dior.com)

Dior sells all its products through its chain of retail stores in the global market but also through its various online stores at *dior.com*. Dior retail outlets reflect the luxurious image of the brand: they are spacious with an elegant ambience and a comfortable atmosphere. Outlets are at critical points to gain maximum advantage and its windows are beautifully decorated. Dior franchise stores are located at prime locations in important cities like New York, London, Milan (see Figure 11), Tokyo, Beijing and Paris. But the heart of the brand remains Avenue Montaigne in Paris, a place steeped in the myth and passions of the founder.

Figure 11: *Dior boutique in Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Milan*

Source: harpersbazaar.com

Recognising promotion as a very important part of marketing, Dior invests heavily in this aspect and uses several channels. Its commercials are aired on both social and electronic media and emphasise the elegance and quality of the brand. For its most accessible products, Dior launches a series of TV commercials with high-profile testimonials. For example, Natalie Portman, one of Hollywood most sought-after actresses, stars in the advertisement for the Miss Dior 2021 perfume. Dior also publishes its advertisements at proficient magazines such as *Vogue*, which caters to its target segment. The company takes customer relationship management very seriously. Brand rewards the loyalty of its regular customers by sending latest news about its products through email or post. It also offers invitations for pre-sale to selected few who are exclusive and regular buyers. The brand has also gained visibility through various celebrities using its products publicly. Ziyi Zhang, Blake Lively and Madonna are some of the celebrities who have been seen in public wearing this brand.

3.2.2.3 Dior communication strategy

Communication is an important tool for reaching the company potential customers. A correct communication strategy needs to be adopted to convey the message and satisfy customer demands. Dior adopted the following communication strategy for brand establishment and recognition. Being a high-end brand, Dior has been extremely active in participating in events to promote its brand. In the mid-1990s, Dior designed customers for films to promote its attire and style. Today, all over the world, celebrities from different countries showcase its creations through shows, events and films. It has long organised fashion shows to showcase its creations but has also set up an exhibition, the so-called Harrod's Dior Exhibition to show the history of the transition and new fashion trends in the industry. At events such as the Red Carpet, the Oscars and the Golden Globe, celebrities display customer designed especially for them by Dior on demand. Dior also organises exhibitions to display the company products or launch a new product line. This is an old-fashioned but very useful way of reaching out to potential customers. During exhibitions, companies have the opportunity to freely interact with their customers, receive feedback on their products and know their competitors' product line.

The most traditional but at the same time immensely satisfying sales technique for customers is personal selling as they can see and touch the products and test them. This type of selling allows the company to interact face-to-face with customers and help them more easily in their choice of products to purchase. Considering that loyal customers are the biggest brand ambassadors, direct marketing provides complete satisfaction to them by viewing and selecting the product of their choice and as per their requirements. The company has a loyalty program known as the Dior Loyalty Program through which it interacts with its customers via e-mail or post. This program consists of recording each transaction and adding loyalty points that can be used for further purchases or as a payback option. Dior even send invitations to their customers for the pre-launch of the new collection – presenting them with free samples, souvenirs, etc. It is a way to get loyal customers to visit their stores regularly and to increase the flow of customers. The strategy of rewarding loyal customers with royalty points and rewards not only enhances the company public image, but also encourages customers propensity to purchase. This strategy adopted by Dior is paying off: almost 80% of the business revenue comes from 20% loyal customers.

Like many fashion brands, Dior communicates its products but also its brand through various supports and media. Fashion magazines such as *Vogue* or *Marie-Claire* and TV spots are indispensable media for fashion brands as Dior. The advertisement is always very elegant and sophisticated with often the appearance of a famous person as the "muse" of the brand (Bougnoux, 2014). The logo is also present in a simple format, reflecting the strength of the brand with a clear identification and association with French luxury and high-quality products (Bougnoux, 2014). Print ads in magazines and newspapers create a huge brand awareness, and especially media ads in which models wear the Dior brand have created a space in the minds of target buyers. Like most luxury brands, Dior also prefers to use mainly English as the language of communication. English is today considered the main language of communication globally. This is why the international company Dior predominantly uses English in its advertising messages. However, it often happens that it adapts its campaigns to the language of the country in which the advertising message is to be conveyed so as to make its communication more successful. But even for the luxurious world of fashion, online presence has become a key point. Dior has a presence on the main social networks with a well- developed editorial planning. On Facebook, Instagram and Twitter it talks about the tradition, experience and craftsmanship behind the products. With engaging storytelling, it presents products often using evocative videos with great scenic effects as well as telling the "backstage" of major events (Scannapieco, 2015). Recognising digital communication as an important tool to reach a large number of customers in a small span of time and cost, the company wisely worked on it. Throughout its multi-channel communication, Dior shows itself as a contemporary and innovative brand; it experiments with different formulas and promotional messages to continually surprise and engage its audience, while remaining true to its historical vision (Scannapieco, 2015). Dior is a unique luxury brand that aims to be close to its customers (Bougnoux, 2014). Thanks to its strategies, it holds a particularly strong position among its competitors. Having therefore adopted well-defined marketing and communication strategies, it is able to capture the market and potential customers.

3.2.3 The survey

For the survey data collection and participant recruitment, a URL link to the survey was disseminated using social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Instagram* and *WhatsApp*. The administration of the questionnaire made it possible to analyse consumer behaviour linked to two different purchasing contexts, i.e. physical store and virtual store. Specifically, it made it possible to assess the customer perception of luxury for the same product sold through different distribution channels. In doing so, two advertisements were placed within the questionnaire, one relating to the traditional shopping experience and the other concerning the virtual shopping experience. In the first case, the image portrays two consumers (man and woman) who ideally, given the need to buy a pair of sunglasses and visiting a Dior store, chose to try on the model of sunglasses shown. In the second case, the same consumers (same man and same woman) are depicted trying on the same model of sunglasses via his/her smartphone using the virtual reality that Dior makes available on its website. Both advertisements feature the slogan "*Come in... and try on your luxury* sunglasses" with which Dior intends to stimulate the curiosity and interest of consumers in trying on its sunglasses by visiting both its physical stores and its website (see Appendix).

The decision to use an English-language advertisement in a non-English-speaking country is a purely strategic choice. The employment of the English language makes it possible to better attract the consumer attention, to make the advertisement more creative and eye-catching (Bhatia and Ritchie, 2008), and consequently contributes to enticing the consumer to purchase. Each survey participant was asked to look carefully at the two advertisements just described and to take them into account when completing all sections of the questionnaire.

3.2.3.1 Measurement scales

For the empirical research a questionnaire was developed based on the literature review. The questionnaire administered consists of a total of thirteen questions with the aim of specifically assessing the perception of luxury, brand authenticity, brand familiarity, purchase experience, purchase intention and word-of-mouth. At the end of the questionnaire, a section on social-demographic data was also included in order to find out the profile of the consumer. Established scales were used and adapted to the context to measure the constructs of this study. The following will detail the different constructs, technically called variables, used with their related items. First, a total of nineteen items from Park *et al.* (2021) were used to measure the four dimensions of the luxury perception, including perceived quality, social value, personal value and functional value. In particular, perceived quality is one of the salient dimensions of perceived brand leadership (Chang *et al.*, 2016; Chang and Ko, 2014) that reflects the key aspects of luxury. Perceived quality refers to a consumer evaluation of the overall excellence of a brand based on intrinsic and extrinsic cues (Asshidin *et al.*, 2016). In a luxury context, consumers explain quality criteria as materials, components, physical performance, workmanship and durability. Functional, personal, and social value are key dimensions of luxury value perceptions (Wiedmann *et al.*, 2009). Consumer value perception is a subjective concept (Kortge and Okonkwo, 1993), and it tends to influence the intention to share information and promote value of product or service when it accomplishes consumers' desires.

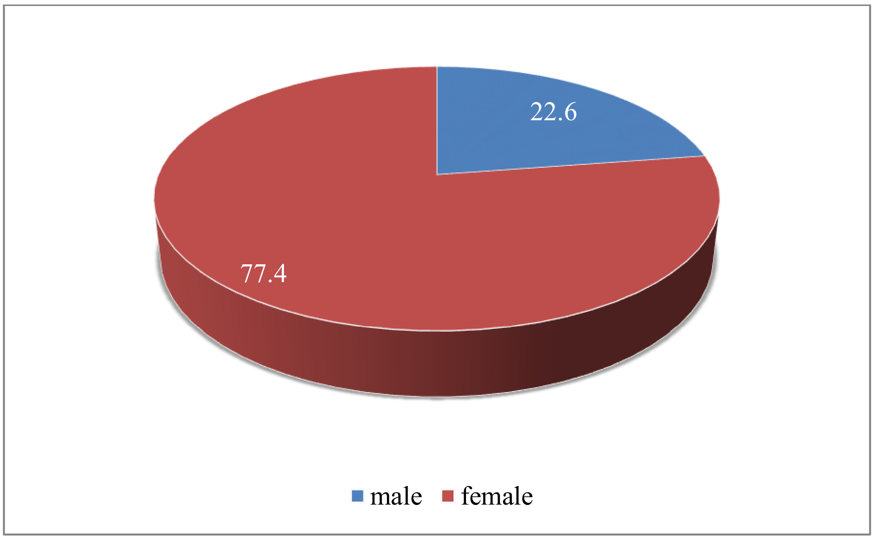
Thirty items were used to measure the authenticity of the Dior brand, with twelve items from Morhartet *et al.* (2015), twelve from Napoli *et al.* (2013) and six items from Schallehnet *et al.* (2014). Specifically, the items of Morhartet *et al.* (2015) aim to assess four dimensions: continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism. The continuity dimension reflects a brand timelessness, historicity, and its ability to transcend trends. Credibility is conceived as the brand transparency and honesty towards the consumer: the willingness and ability of the brand to deliver on its promises. The integrity dimension indicates the moral purity and responsibility of the brand, i.e. its adherence to good values and sincere care about the consumer. The last dimension reflects the symbolic quality of the brand that consumers can use to define who they are or who they are not. Symbolism is conceptualised as a brand potential to serve as a resource for identity construction by providing self-referential cues representing values, roles and relationships. The items from Napoli *et al*. (2013) again analyse brand credibility but also two other dimensions, namely brand reliability and brand intentions and brand credibility. This scale was created with the aim of psychometrically measuring brand authenticity from a consumer perspective. While the last items from Schallehnet *et al*. (2014) refer to the "philosophy" of the Dior brand.

To test the actual perception of luxury of the Dior product, the subject of the present analysis, four items were adapted from Park *et al*. (2021), while to test familiarity with the Dior brand, three items were adapted from Kent and Allen (1994). To measure the online shopping experience, five items relating to shopping enjoyment from Zaichkowsky (1985) were used and adapted, while three items were specially created to measure the shopping experience in the traditional store. Three items from Dodds *et al*. (1991) were also used to measure willingness to buy. Finally, a total of six items were used to measure word-of-mouth, specifically to test offline WOM four items were taken from Goyette *et al*. (2010) while to analyse eWOM two items were used from Daugherty and Hoffman (2014). The last two variables indicated, i.e. willingness to buy and WOM, are the typical marketing variables since they indicate the consumer action precisely in terms of marketing. In the present study, they are evaluated to actually test consumer behaviour in relation to the purchase and recommendation of Dior sunglasses. All items described above were measured using five-point Likert scale (with 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Demographic data were also collected, including age, gender, income and education and measured as single option choice.

3.2.3.2 Sample profile

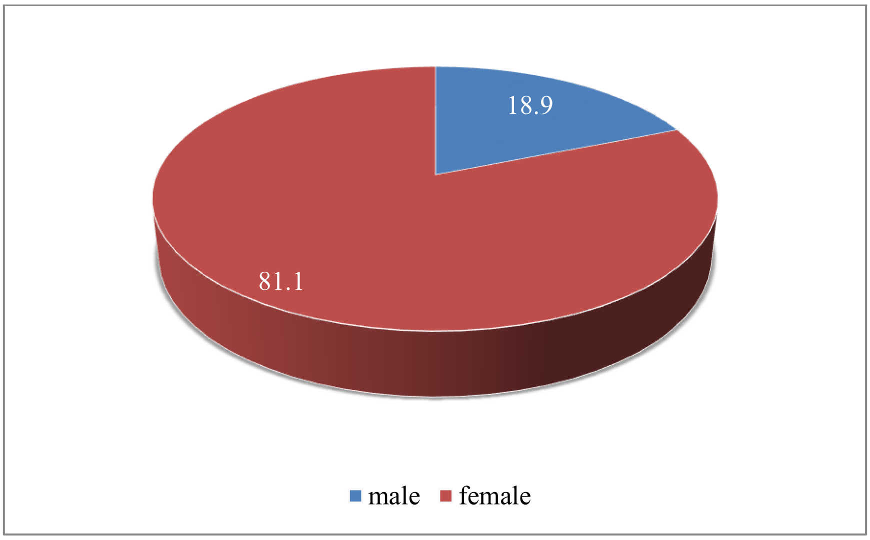
A total of 347 subjects participated in the survey by filling in the questionnaire containing the above-mentioned variables, but only 261 responses were retained for data analysis after 86 incomplete surveys were excluded. Specifically, there were 119 respondents for the traditional in-store shopping context and 124 respondents for the virtual reality shopping experience. The data were collected from potential Italian consumers in approximately one week between July 18 and 26, 2022. As shown in Figures 12 and 13, the majority of respondents were female. Specifically, there were 77.40 % female and 22.60 % male related to in-store shopping experience and 81.10 % female and 18.90 % male related to virtual reality shopping experience.

Figura 12: *Gender in-store*



Note: N = 119.

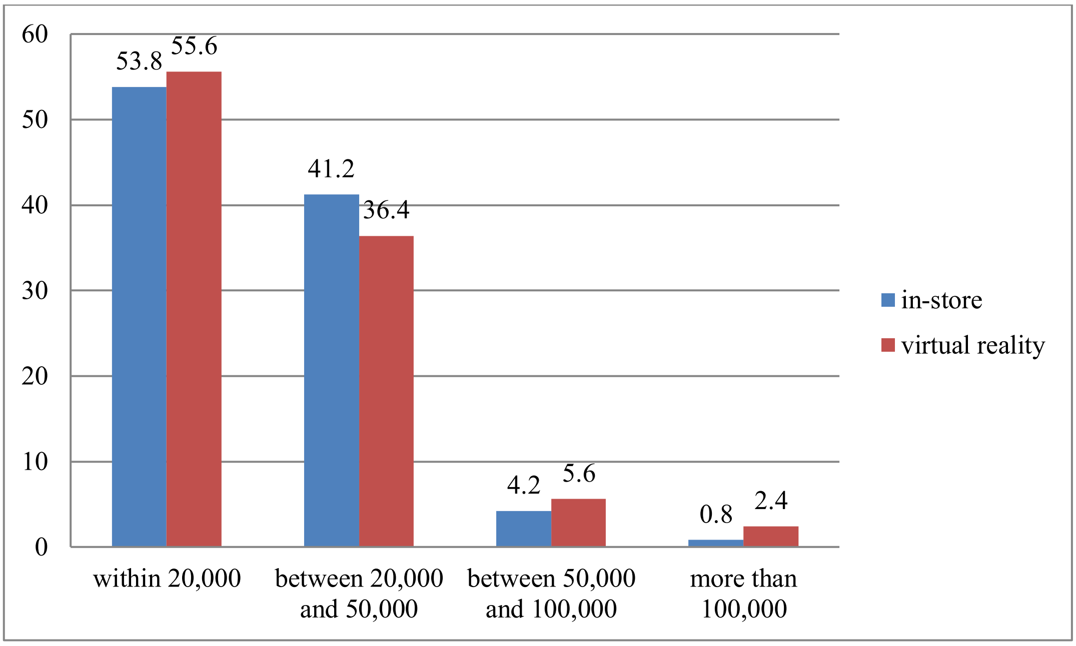
Figure 13: *Gender in virtual reality*



Note: N = 124.

In both shopping contexts, the average age of respondents is around 38 years old, specifically an average age of 38.63 in the case of the traditional store and 37.92 in the case of the virtual store. In addition, given the importance of delving into the concept of luxury, the subject of analysis in this research, each survey participant was asked about his/her family income. Most of the respondents reported having an income of less than EUR 20,000. Specifically, regarding the shopping experience in the traditional store, 53.80 % of participants stated that they had an income of less than EUR 20,000, followed by 41.20 % with an income between EUR 20,000 and EUR 50,000, 4.20 % with an income between EUR 50,000 and EUR 100,000, and only 0.80 % declared that they had an income of more than EUR 100,000. On the other hand, in the case of the most innovative shopping experience using virtual reality, 55.60 % of respondents indicated that they had an income of less than EUR 20,000, followed by 36.40% with an income between EUR 20,000 and EUR 50,000, 5.60 % with an income between EUR 50,000 and EUR 100,000, and only 2.40 % said they had an income of more than EUR 100,000. An overview of the percentages of family income relative to the two purchasing contexts is available in the following Figure.

Figure 14: *Income in-store and in virtual reality*

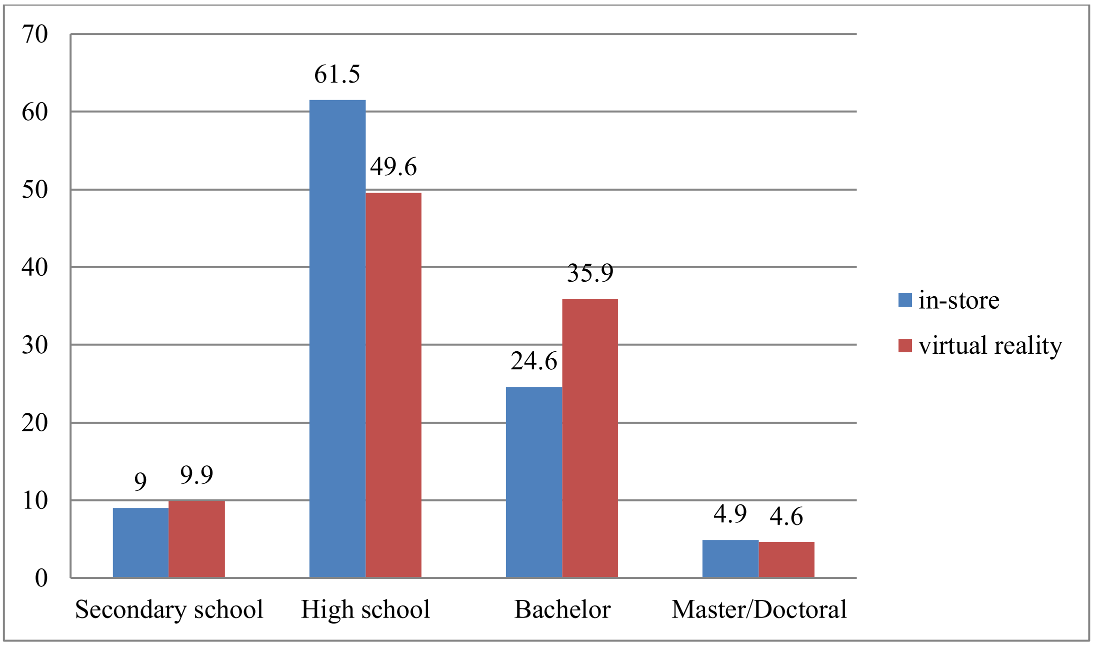


Note: N in-store = 119; N VR = 124.

Finally, the highest percentage of respondents to the questionnaire stated that they had a diploma as their qualification, respectively 61.50 % for the traditional context and 49.60 % for the more innovative context. Furthermore, as far as conventional purchasing experience is concerned, 24.60 % of respondents had a bachelor degree, 9.00 % said they had a secondary school diploma and only 4.90 % of respondents had a master or doctorate degree. In the case of virtual reality, on the other hand, the percentage of respondents with a bachelor degree is higher, with 35.90 % of respondents, followed by 9.90 % of respondents with a secondary school diploma and

4.60 % with a master or doctorate degree. A detailed overview of the education of survey respondents can be found in the Figure below.

Figure 15: *Education*



Note: N in-store = 119; N VR = 124.

3.4 Analysis methodology

After the collection of data through the survey questionnaire, analysis was carried out in order to achieve the research objective. Specifically, the intention was to compare for each developed section the answers given by potential customers of a physical store and potential customers of a virtual store. This was done by comparing the responses of the males and females of each group of potential consumers, and then also comparing the average age, education level and household income of each group.

As method of analysis, the comparison of the different variables' average was chosen to assess the differences between the two groups of potential customers. For the application of this mechanism, dependent variables are required, which in the present case are luxury perception, brand authenticity, product luxury perception, brand familiarity, online experience, in-store experience, and dependent variables, which in the present case are the marketing variables that allow the consumer behaviour to be assessed, i.e. intention to buy and online and offline word-of-mouth.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH RESULTS

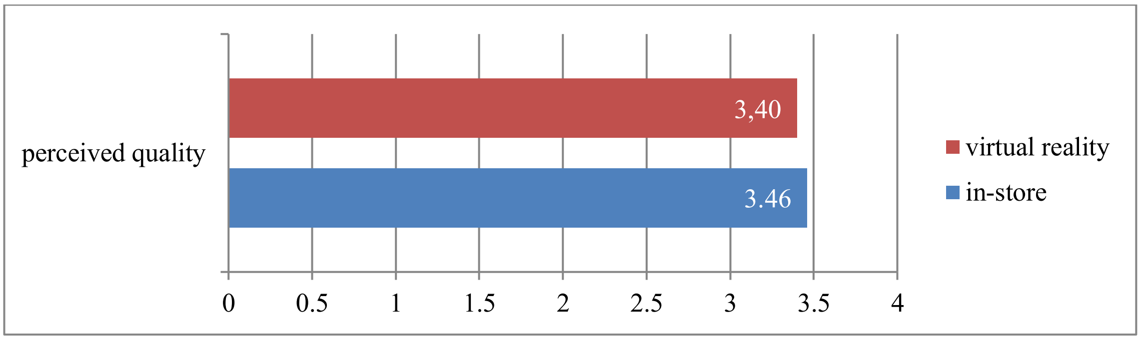
4.1 Presentation of results

The following chapter is dedicated to the presentation of the results obtained from the analysis of the data relating to the surveyed sample, i.e. potential Italian consumers of accessible luxury products (specifically, Dior sunglasses), highlighting in particular the significant differences by comparing the averages between potential luxury consumers in physical stores and potential luxury consumers in online stores exploiting innovative virtual technologies.

4.2 Luxury perception results

Concerning the perception of luxury, which has been assessed before the vision of image advertising the in-store or virtual context, four dimensions were specifically analysed, namely perceived quality, social value, personal value and functional value. The aim was to understand if the two groups have similar perception of Dior brand and products without the possible effects of the context experience. Figure 16 shows the figures for the average quality perception of both groups, i.e. 3.46 for consumers who undertake an in-store shopping experience and 3.40 for consumers who use websites for their purchases. As it can be observed, no substantial difference between the two groups, thus for all of them Dior brand and product are perceived to have a good quality (the averages of both groups are higher the mean value 2.5).

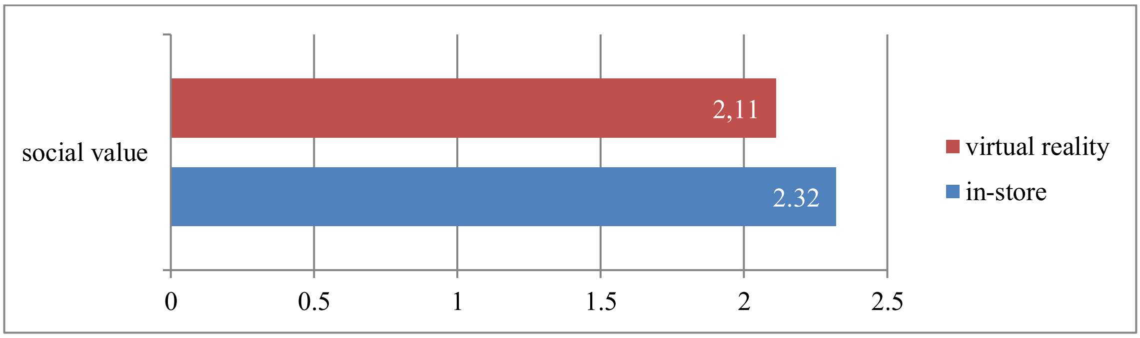
Figure 16: *Luxury perception – Perceived quality*



N In-store = 127; N VR = 134.

For the second dimension of luxury perception, i.e. social value, the results are shown in Figure 17. Also in this case, there is no significant difference between the two shopping experiences. For traditional consumers, an average of 2.32 was recorded, while more modern consumers recorded an average of 2.11.

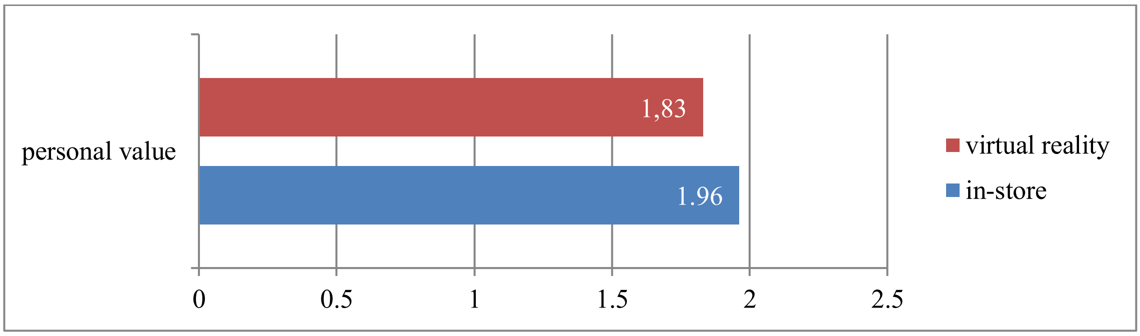
Figure 17: *Luxury perception – Social value*



N In-store = 127; N VR = 134.

As far as the personal value dimension is concerned, a subtle but not significant difference between the two shopping experiences is shown in Figure 18. The two averages reported, i.e. 1.96 for in-store consumers and 1.83 for online consumers, show that the personal value perceived by potential consumers is similar in the two purchase types.

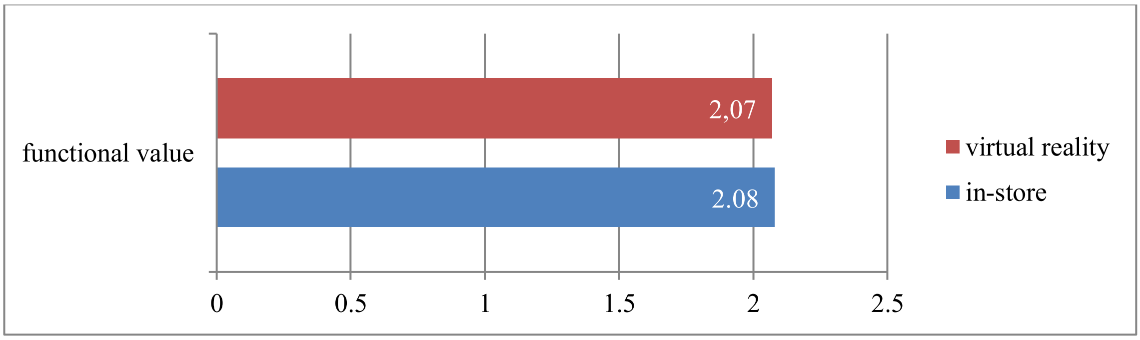
Figure 18: *Luxury perception – Personal value*



N In-store = 127; N VR = 134.

The non-difference between the two shopping experiences in terms of perceived luxury is most pronounced by the last dimension, namely functional value. As shown in Figure 19, the averages for the two groups of potential consumers is almost identical, i.e. there is an average of 2.08 for consumers in physical stores and an average of 2.07 for online consumers.

Figure 19: Luxury *perception – Functional value*

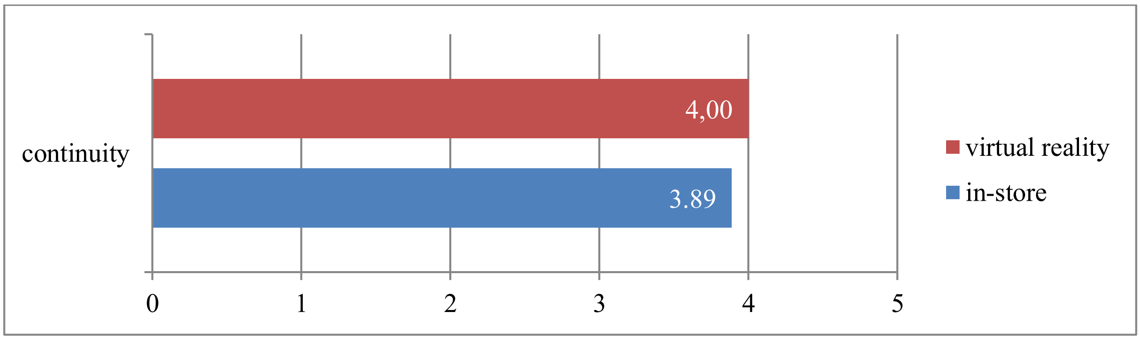


N In-store = 127; N VR = 134.

4.3 Brand authenticity results

As for luxury perception, also with regard to the construct of brand authenticity, the seven dimensions characterizing this construct, namely continuity, credibility, integrity, symbolism, reliability, intentions, philosophy were specifically analysed in order to verify the differences between the in-store and virtual shopping experience. In particular, as far as the continuity dimension is concerned, no significant differences stand out between the averages of the two shopping experiences as illustrated in Figure 20. In fact, the average reported by potential consumers in-store is 3.89 and that of online consumers is 4.00.

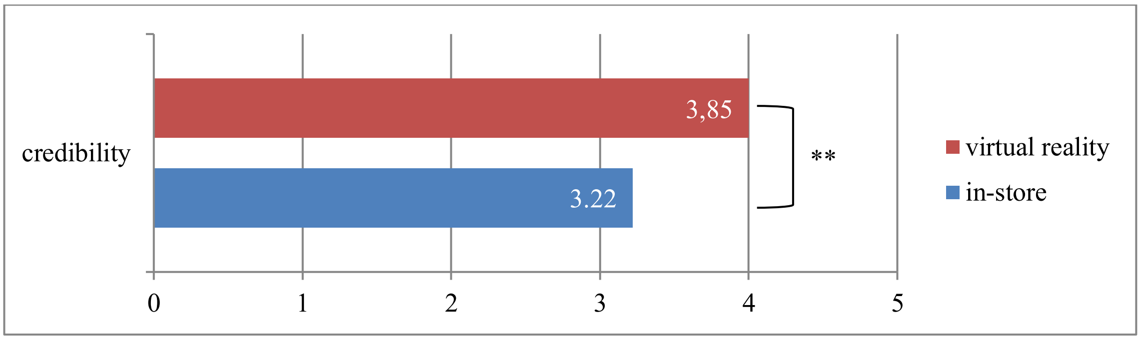
Figure 20: *Brand authenticity – Continuity*



N In-store = 127; N VR = 134.

The credibility dimension, on the other hand, shows a more significant difference as shown in Figure 21. Specifically, the average credibility for potential in-store consumers of luxury goods is 3.22 while that of potential online consumers is 3.85. Contrary to expectation, brand authenticity in terms of credibility is higher in the virtual shopping experience than in a real store.

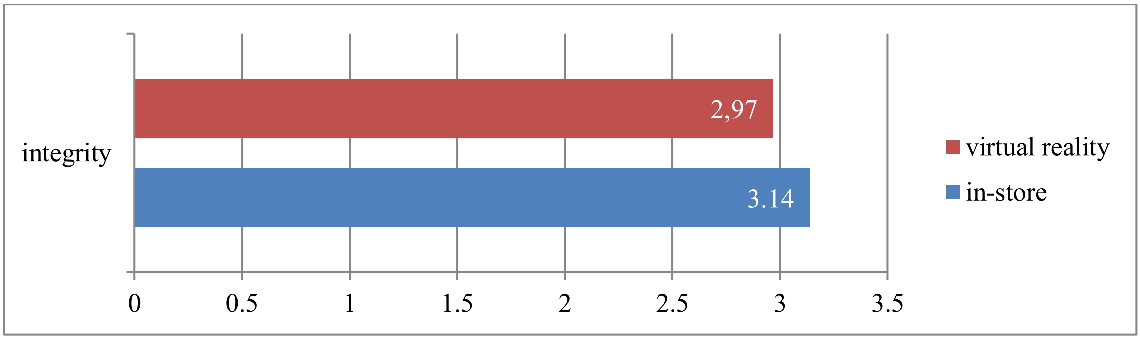
Figure 21: *Brand authenticity – Credibility*



N In-store = 127; N VR = 134; ** = $p < .01$;

No particular differences were recorded for the dimension of integrity. Participant responses generated two broadly similar averages as illustrated in Figure 22, with in-store consumers averaging 3.14 and virtual consumers averaging 2.97.

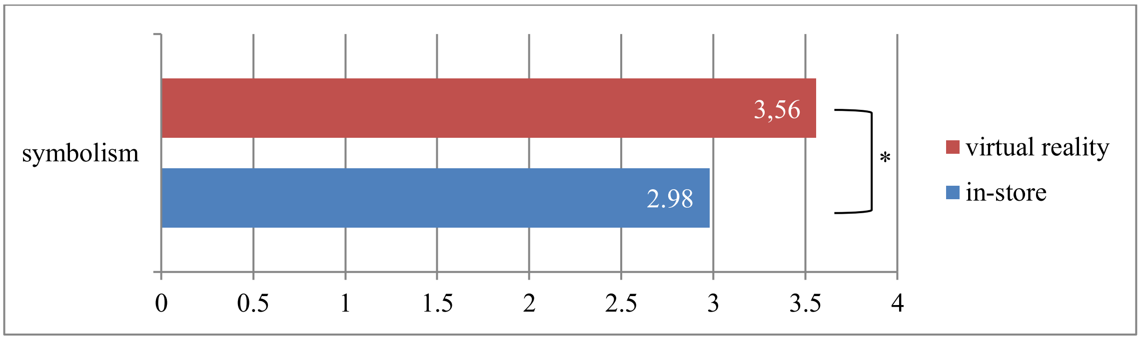
Figure 22: *Brand authenticity – Integrity*



N In-store = 127; N VR = 134.

As far as the dimension of symbolism is concerned, on the other hand, a more significant difference is evident. It is understood as the ability of the brand to transfer, first, and involve, afterwards, the consumer through the identity elements pertaining to it. The average symbolism generated by online consumers (3.56) is higher than that of consumers in physical stores (2.98) as can be seen in the Figure below.

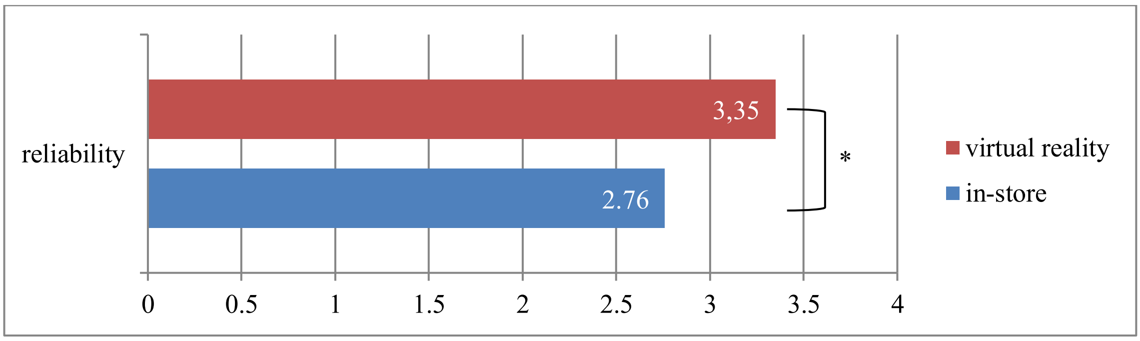
Figure 23: *Brand authenticity – Symbolism*



N In-store = 127; N VR = 134; * = $p < .05$.

A significant difference between the two shopping experiences is also evident for the reliability dimension in Figure 24. Specifically, an average of 2.76 is shown for real stores and an average of 3.44 for virtual stores. So contrary to expectation, the brand appears more reliable to the customer in the virtual context. This means that Dior demonstrates more reliability in what it promises the customer and about quality through its online channel.

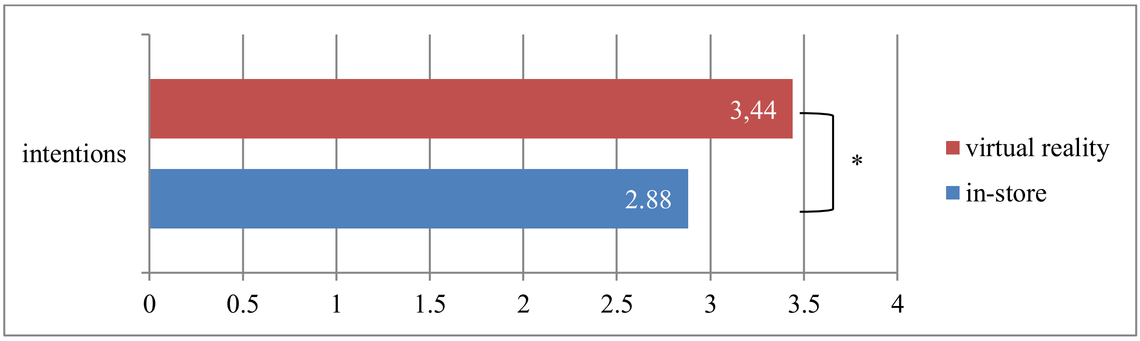
Figure 24: *Brand authenticity – Reliability*



N In-store = 127; N VR = 134; * = $p < .05$.

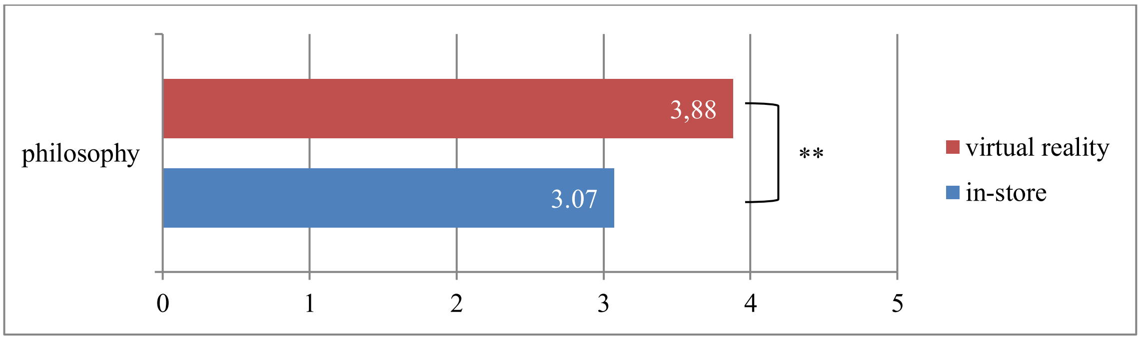
Added to the dimensions just described and analysed are the last two, namely intentions and philosophy of a brand. Both dimensions show significant differences between the two shopping experiences. Figure 25 exemplifies the data obtained for the intentions dimension by showing how the intentions of virtual consumers (3.44) are significantly higher than those of in-store consumers (2.88). While figure 26 shows the results obtained for the dimension of brand philosophy, namely 3.07 for the traditional experience and 3.88 for the innovative experience with virtual technologies.

Figure 25: *Brand authenticity – Intentions*



N In-store = 127; N VR = 134; * = $p < .05$.

Figure 26: *Brand authenticity – Philosophy*

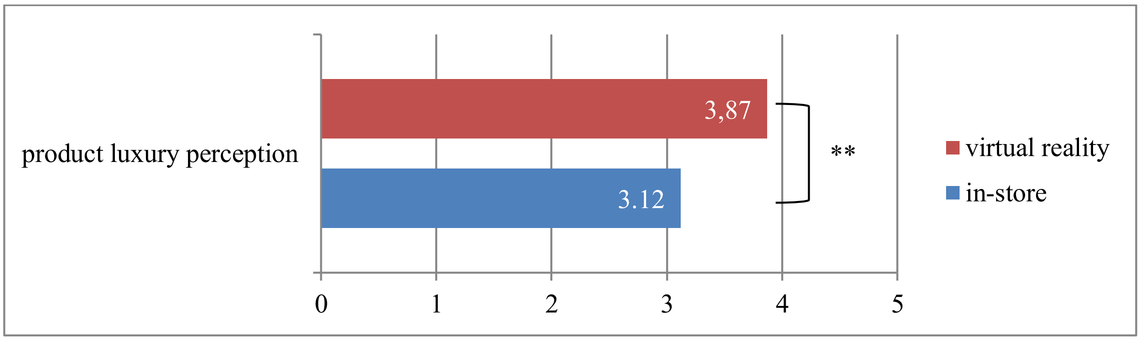


N In-store = 127; N VR = 134; ** = $p < .01$.

4.4 Product luxury perception results

In addition to a general assessment of Dior brand, it has been assessed also the specific (Dior sunglasses) product luxury perception. In this sense, there is a significant difference between the two shopping experiences as shown in Figure 27. In detail, the average with the largest value is for consumers with shopping experience in physical stores (3.88), which is significantly higher than the average for consumers with shopping experience on websites (3.12).

Figure 27: *Product luxury perception*

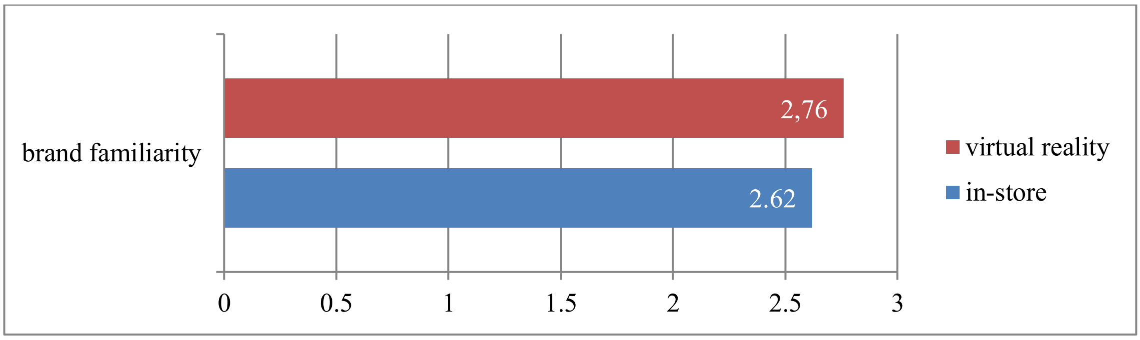


N In-store = 127; N VR = 134; ** = $p < .01$.

4.5 Brand familiarity results

With the aim to control the relevance of the brand on respondents' answers also brand familiarity has been tested and compared between the two different groups. As Figure 28 shows, there is no particular difference. The averages gleaned from respondent answers to the questionnaire show that brand familiarity remains almost unchanged.

Figure 28: *Brand familiarity*

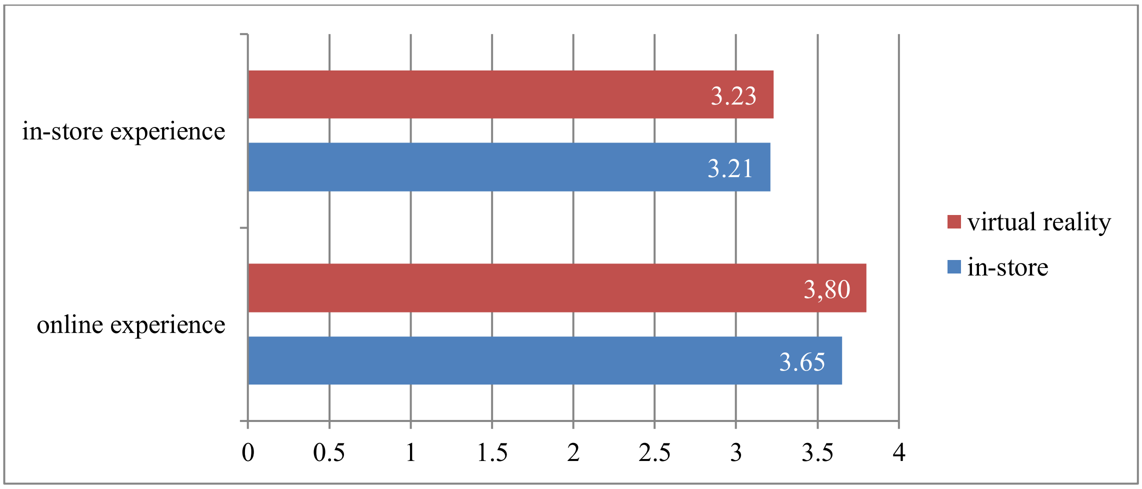


N In-store = 127; N VR = 134.

4.6 In-store & online experience results

Finally, regarding the assessing of individual predisposition towards the in-store and digital shopping experience, recorded data show no significant differences are noted as evidenced by the averages in Figure 29. This means that consumers do not have particular preferences for any type of the two shopping channels investigated.

Figure 29: *In-store & online experience*

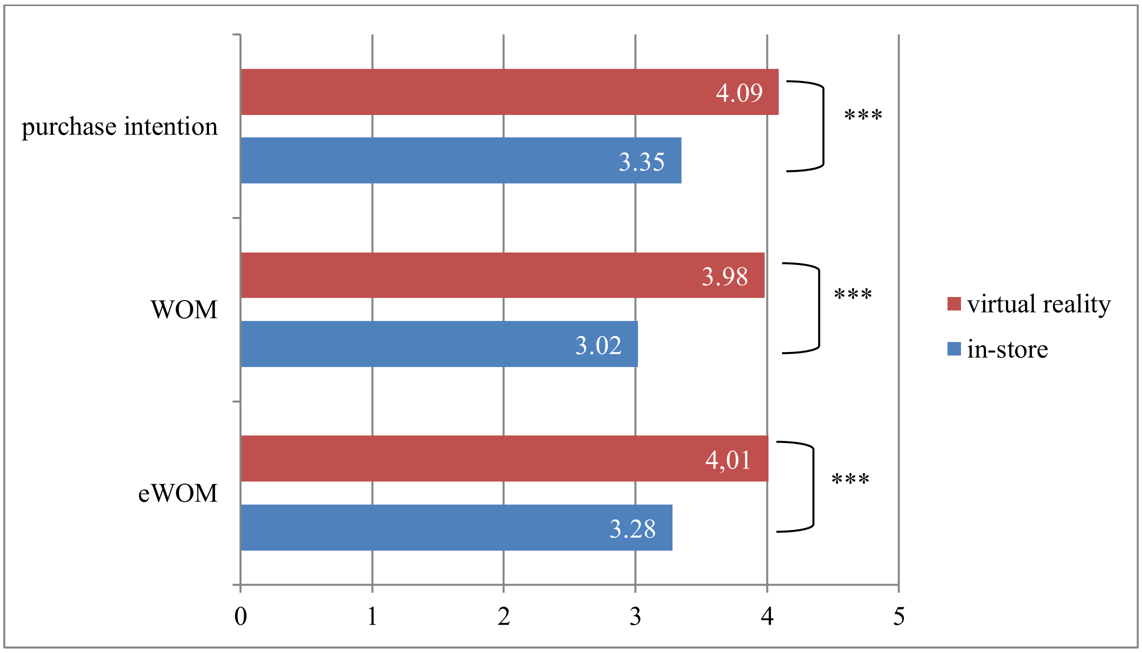


N In-store = 127; N VR = 134.

4.7 Consumer behaviour results

Particularly significant differences are found in the two marketing variables considered in the present research, namely purchase intention and word-of-mouth as shown in Figure 30. The average concerning purchase intention is purportedly higher in the case of online purchase (4.09) than in the case of in-store purchase (3.35). Similarly, WOM both offline and online is purportedly greater in the virtual shopping experience than in the physical store. In the case of offline WOM, an average of 3.02 is noted in detail for in-store purchase and an average of 3.98 for online purchase. While in the second case i.e. eWOM there is an average of 3.28 for traditional purchase and an average of 4.01 for virtual purchase. So unlike what was imagined, consumers are showing more inclination to purchase on websites than in physical stores.

Figure 30: *Consumer behaviour*



N In-store = 127; N VR = 134; *** = $p < .001$.

CHAPTER 5

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 General discussion

This research aimed at assessing the effects of virtual environment compared to the offline one on the consumer behaviour by mainly assessing luxury perception and luxury brand authenticity. In doing so, the research provides several insights when measuring consumer acceptance for the use of innovative augmented and virtual reality technologies for selling luxury products. Given the increasing number of companies oriented towards the use of these technologies for the sale of their products, it is interesting to see how consumers would behave if they were to try out these products using augmented and virtual reality. In particular, the present research showed that a luxury brand such as Dior, which makes extensive use of innovative technologies to try to keep up with the times, could consider the use of virtual technologies to spread the online environment and thus the online sales a very effective marketing strategy as it enhances the online shopping experience. However, although Dior, as other luxury brands, is an innovative brand that tries to offer its consumers something new at the same time, it tries to strike the right balance between tradition and innovation and maintain its identity. Considering the exponential growth of virtual technologies within the retail sector, this survey was conducted in order to understand how product testing using augmented and virtual reality impacts the consumer.

Having analyzed the data and presented them in the previous chapter, a general discussion of the results obtained with the different variables that were used to test how differently a luxury product sold through two different distribution channels might be perceived. Particular attention was paid to the perception of luxury perceived when considering the physical store experience and that perceived when considering the virtual experience visiting a company website. First of all, the results revealed no particular differences in luxury perceptions in the dimensions of perceived quality, social value, personal value and functional value by the two groups of respondents. Indeed, the results show how consumers perceive luxury in terms of quality, functionality and social prestige in an almost undifferentiated manner in the two different types of shopping experiences, thus the two groups have the same perception of luxury linked to the brand Dior. Thus is an important result because better stressed the results emerged from the analysis of two groups after viewing the images representing virtual and in-store experience.

As far as the brand authenticity variable is concerned, unlike the previous variable, there is a substantial difference between the two shopping experiences. The authenticity factor is particularly important for consumers of luxury products due to the possibility of buying non-original luxury products. But contrary to expectation, the answers given by the research participants revealed that the brand is perceived to be more honest, transparent and authentic in the online shopping experience and not in the direct experience in physical stores.

Surprising results were also obtained with regard to the variable on the perception of luxury of a product. The survey conducted using a pair of Dior sunglasses as an object of examination allowed to verify the perception of a luxury product triggered by the potential consumer trying it on in a physical store and the virtual one through the augmented reality system the brand provides on its website. Also in this case, differently from what might have been expected, the answers given by the participants in the research revealed a greater perception of luxury of a product by purchasing through an online channel and exploiting the potential of virtual reality.

In general, the present survey did not reveal a substantial difference for the brand familiarity variable as well as for the variables relating to the two shopping experiences, i.e. in-store and online. With regard to the familiarity the missing of significant difference is a good result because brand familiarity should not depend on channel where a consumer choice to have the shopping experience. Moreover, potential consumers did not show an absolute preference for physical stores because of the possibility they give to touch and try out products; on the contrary, they were ready to accept the new virtual technologies and test products through them as well.

After analysing the variables closely related to the concept of luxury, consumer behaviour was tested with reference to marketing variables such as purchase intention and word-of-mouth. With respect to purchase intention, it is interesting to note that consumers are more likely to buy the luxury product on the brand website than in store. This shows how positively consumers actually accept the orientation of companies to increasingly integrate the use of virtual technologies into their marketing strategies. In this sense, the results show how the use of augmented and virtual reality can positively influence the consumer purchasing behaviour, leading them to increase their purchases. Another analysed variable of relevance to marketing is word-of-mouth. Here again, one can see the effectiveness of virtual technologies in the luxury sector. Consumers in the online shopping experience have a significant propensity to recommend the product and brand compared to when they shop in physical stores. This propensity occurs both for the online word-of-mouth variable thanks to review systems but also offline e.g. typical conversations between friends.

5.2 Conclusions

The current empirical study examined consumer behaviour in two different shopping contexts, i.e., physical store and virtual store with the aim of assessing how different shopping experience can influence product perception in the luxury context and consumer behaviour, in terms of product purchase and product recommendation. The results obtained from this survey outline several issues for the retail sector for both practitioners and marketers. In particular, the findings show that virtual technologies as an online sales aid boost sales of affordable luxury products, such as in this case the purchase of a pair of Dior sunglasses. In this sense one sees confirmation of what has been previously argued, namely that accessible luxury consumers demonstrate a certain tendency to purchase online given the fact that prices, while being luxury, are quite affordable (Dauriz *et al.*, 2014; Taillez, 2017). However, despite the surprising trend toward online shopping in some respects, there is not a big gap between the two shopping experiences. Consumers certainly present themselves as inclined to embrace the use of new technologies and this represents the future of retailing, as augmented and virtual reality are able to effectively manage to narrow the gap between real and virtual. However, This does not show the complete supremacy of e-commerce and that the two shopping experiences, online and offline, at the moment can be seen on the basis of their mutual integration.

Although previous studies have dealt with consumer perceptions of luxury and others on user acceptance of a new technology, only a few researches have focused on the use of virtual technologies in the luxury sector by concretely verifying changes in consumer behaviors in purchasing processes. Focusing on the concept of luxury, the current study was able to ascertain consumer acceptance of innovative technologies and product perception using them. The recognition of the potential of virtual technologies in the retail sector is clear from the results obtained. Therefore, this research provides a basis for an evaluation framework to highlight potential consumer behavior toward the introduction of virtual and immersive technologies in online sales.

5.2.1 Theoretical implications

From a theoretical point of view, the results of the present research demonstrate that the perception of luxury and the certainty of brand authenticity are important in the purchase of a valuable product. Generally, consumer perception of luxury comes down to the perception of quality, which as stated by Zeithaml (1988) and Aaker (2009) is an entirely subjective factor that depends substantially on the consumer subconscious thinking; so too, brand authenticity, as stated by Napoli *et al.* (2013), resides in the consumer mind so it is found necessary to target them to incentivize purchases. In the in-store shopping experience, these two factors can be immediately validated by the consumer as they have the opportunity to touch and see their possible purchase up close. As argued in previous literature, direct brand experience, e.g. point-of-sale experience, is the most powerful source of brand perception (Bird *et al.*, 1970; Romaniuk *et al.*, 2012). In contrast, in the online shopping experience, in line with the "dream" formula (Dubois and Paternault, 1995) it is now necessary to create engaging and captivating platforms that capture the consumer attention and interest. This can now be achieved by integrating new virtual technologies into their online sales platforms that allow them to test products in an almost real way, even leading consumers to prefer the interactive online shopping experience over the traditional in-store experience, as evidenced by the results.

However, one must take into account the survey target sample, namely, it is a relatively young sample. In fact, the average age of the 261 research participants is about 38 years old. It is more young people who are fascinated by innovations and captivated by immersive platforms. This is why there is a greater propensity to use these technologies mainly in the younger age groups.

Finally, two other theoretically relevant aspects are purchase intention and word-of-mouth. Both factors are higher in the online shopping experience than in the offline shopping experience in the store, which is probably also due to the average age of the survey sample. Younger people prefer the online environment to live more involving shopping experience (in this case with the use of virtual technologies), also for (affordable) luxury products. As a relatively young sample that has grown up in the digital age, it shows a greater propensity to use the Internet and related technology not only with regard to the purchase itself but also with regard to the entire purchasing process. When deciding on and consulting new products to purchase, young people tend to listen to the opinions and advice of other users who have already had experience with that product through reviews left on various platforms. This increases sales and stimulates purchase intent.

5.2.2 Marketing implications

At this point, it becomes interesting to outline what companies can gain from the results. In particular, the results outline opportunities for companies and marketers in terms of new strategies to revamp websites and make them more attractive to consumers. Indeed, from a managerial and marketing point of view, the results of the present study provide a better understanding of the effects of virtual technology on consumer behaviour, especially in the context of affordable luxury products. To capture consumer interest in the online channel, retailers today are “forced” to adopt new interactive tools on their platforms since these, as evidenced by the data collected, influence product perception and consequently consumer behaviour. In this regard, companies should use these innovative systems to provide users with adequate product testing that can positively affect the finalization of purchase intention.

Moreover, this information could be used to adapt a cross-channel strategy or better consider an omnichannel strategy (Pantano and Servidio, 2012) in such a way as to break down online and offline barriers and proceed with a synergetic management of a store communication channels. For all products that can be tried on in physical stores but usually not online, e.g. clothing, eyewear, beauty products, retailers can adopt augmented and virtual reality technology aids to increase purchase intent. In addition to this, managers can use the data generated by the use of virtual reality to improve their marketing strategies. Thanks to technology, they are able to understand which article is the most tried, which one generates the highest conversion rate, etc. This data can then be reused by companies to create products and strategies more oriented to their target consumer profiles.

This type of study has made it clear how traditional marketing has transformed over the years into experiential marketing and how the experiential elements in the online environment is becoming fundamental to engaging the consumer. Compared to traditional sales, new online sales tools are able to capture the attention and interest of consumers more because they are more engaging, interactive and innovative. The findings provide important information on the orientation of younger consumers in particular towards the use of new technological tools for their online purchases, as they are intrigued by new things and are able to use all the functions related to digital devices. All the information gained from this survey in conclusion can be an excellent starting point in the development of more targeted strategies to improve corporate business strategies to improve performance.

5.3 Limitations and future works

Although this study offers important issues, there are some limitations which should be taken into account. First of all, taking a pair of luxury sunglasses as the object of survey, the research turns out to be limited to the affordable luxury segment. Probably the tendency to prefer the online shopping experience was also due to the price factor that is precisely more affordable than those found in the other segments of the luxury sector. In fact, products inherent in aspirational luxury and absolute luxury have a much higher price range and a consequent higher risk. It would be interesting, as future research, to check consumer behaviour for these other two types of luxury in order to obtain a general overview of the online purchasing trend for luxury products.

Another aspect that could be seen as a limitation of this research is the reference sample, which is relatively young. It would be advisable to extend the research and perhaps administer it directly to a sample with a different age group in order to verify whether the more adult subjects also accept and especially appreciate the use of new digital technologies in their shopping experiences.

Finally, a last limitation might concern the country where the questionnaire was administered, namely Italy. It would be interesting to extend the research and consider a larger sample with different purchasing habits to verify whether virtual technologies actually produce positive effects internationally and not only in a circumscribed territory such as Italy.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire

Digital luxury

Ciao,
sono Valeria, una studentessa del Dipartimento di Lingue dell'Università di Padova, che sta conducendo una ricerca sul marketing dei beni di lusso per la tesi di laurea magistrale in marketing esperienziale.
Nello specifico, sto cercando di indagare gli effetti delle tecnologie digitali sui prodotti di lusso e sul comportamento del consumatore.
La compilazione del questionario non richiederà più di 5 minuti.
La tua partecipazione sarebbe davvero utile per la ricerca!
Il questionario rimarrà anonimo e le poche informazioni socio-demografiche richieste, verranno analizzate solo in maniera aggregata.
Grazie in anticipo per la partecipazione.
Valeria

Digital luxury

* 1. Considerando i marchi e i prodotti di lusso, indica, su una scala da 1 (= per niente d'accordo) a 5 (= completamente d’accordo), quanto ti trovi d’accordo con le seguenti affermazioni:

	1. Per niente d'accordo	2.	3.	4.	5. Completamente d'accordo
I prodotti di lusso sono affidabili	○	○	○	○	○
I prodotti di lusso durano nel tempo	○	○	○	○	○
I prodotti di lusso sono di alta qualità	○	○	○	○	○
I prodotti di lusso sono sofisticati	○	○	○	○	○
I prodotti di lusso sono di ottima fattura	○	○	○	○	○
Possedere prodotti di lusso è sinonimo di successo	○	○	○	○	○
Possedere prodotti di lusso è sinonimo di ricchezza	○	○	○	○	○
Possedere prodotti di lusso è sinonimo di prestigio	○	○	○	○	○
I prodotti di lusso sono importanti perché permettono di essere accettati nella società	○	○	○	○	○
I prodotti di lusso ti permettono di aumentare lo status sociale	○	○	○	○	○
Acquistare prodotti di lusso aumenta la mia felicità	○	○	○	○	○
Per me è importante possedere prodotti di lusso molto belli	○	○	○	○	○
Fare shopping di prodotti di lusso, ti fa sentire l'eccitazione della ricerca	○	○	○	○	○
Fare shopping di prodotti di lusso, ti					

permette di dimenticare i problemi					
Lo shopping di prodotti di lusso permette di migliorare l'umore					
Acquistare prodotti di lusso ti permette di creare un'immagine personale difficile da imitare					
Mi piace possedere nuovi prodotti di lusso prima degli altri					
Il prezzo elevato applicato ai prodotti di lusso è sinonimo di qualità					
Sono disposto a pagare di più per ottenere il meglio					

Digital luxury

Leggere con attenzione

Leggi il testo sottostante e osserva attentamente per qualche minuto l'immagine riguardante un uomo e una donna che indossano un paio di occhiali da sole Dior. Successivamente, tenendo ben in mente quanto letto e l'immagine vista, rispondi nella maniera più spontanea alle domande che ti verranno poste, tenendo conto che non esistono risposte giuste o sbagliate, ma solo risposte che rispecchiano il tuo personale giudizio.

A 50.0% Al fine di promuovere i propri occhiali da sole, Dior ha da poco lanciato la campagna "*Come in...and try on your luxury sunglasses*" attraverso la quale invita ad entrare in uno **store** Dior per provare gli occhiali da sole!

B 50.0% Al fine di promuovere i propri occhiali da sole, Dior ha da poco lanciato la campagna "*Come in...and try on your luxury sunglasses*" attraverso la quale invita ad utilizzare la **realtà virtuale** dell'app Dior per provare gli occhiali da sole!

* 2. Considerando l'immagine degli occhiali da sole, pensa al marchio Dior e indica su una scala da 1 (= per niente d'accordo) a 5 (= completamente d'accordo) quanto ti trovi d'accordo con le seguenti affermazioni:

	1. Per niente d'accordo	2.	3.	4.	5 Completamente d'accordo
Dior è un brand con una storia	○	○	○	○	○
Dior è un brand senza tempo	○	○	○	○	○
Dior è un brand che sopravvive alle mode	○	○	○	○	○
Dior è un brand che non delude mai	○	○	○	○	○
Dior è un brand che mantiene le proprie promesse	○	○	○	○	○
Dior è un brand che ripaga i propri clienti	○	○	○	○	○
Dior è un brand con principi morali	○	○	○	○	○
Dior è un brand che ci tiene ai propri clienti	○	○	○	○	○
Dior è un brand che aggiunge valore alla vita delle persone	○	○	○	○	○
Dior è un brand che riflette valori importanti, ai quali le persone tengono	○	○	○	○	○
Dior è un brand che connette le persone con sé stesse	○	○	○	○	○
Dior è un brand che connette le persone con ciò che è davvero importante	○	○	○	○	○

Digital luxury

* 3. Continuando a tenere a mente gli occhiali da sole visti in precedenza e pensando al marchio Dior, indica su una scala da 1 (= per niente d'accordo) a 5 (= completamente d'accordo), quanto ti trovi d'accordo con le seguenti affermazioni:

	1. Per niente d'accordo	2.	3.	4.	5. Completamente d'accordo
Dior soddisfa le mie aspettative	○	○	○	○	○
Ho fiducia nel marchio Dior	○	○	○	○	○
Dior non delude mai	○	○	○	○	○
Il marchio Dior garantisce la soddisfazione del consumatore	○	○	○	○	○
Dior e un marchio che non crea dubbi in merito ai suoi prodotti	○	○	○	○	○
Dior è un marchio su cui ci si può affidare per soddisfare un'esigenza	○	○	○	○	○
Dior fa qualsiasi sforzo per soddisfare i propri clienti	○	○	○	○	○
Dior risarcirebbe in qualche modo i propri clienti che hanno un problema con il prodotto acquistato	○	○	○	○	○
Dior è un marchio affidabile	○	○	○	○	○
Dior è un marchio competente	○	○	○	○	○
Dior è un marchio sincero e onesto	○	○	○	○	○
Ho molta fiducia nella qualità del marchio Dior	○	○	○	○	○

4. Rimanendo concentrato sugli occhiali da sole e continuando a pensare al marchio Dior, indica su una scala da 1 (= per niente d'accordo) a 5 (= completamente d'accordo), quanto ti trovi d'accordo con le seguenti affermazioni:

	1. Per niente d'accordo	2.	3.	4.	5. Completamente d'accordo
Dior possiede una filosofia chiara che fa da guida alle promesse del brand	○	○	○	○	○
Dior sa esattamente cosa rappresenta e non promette niente che potrebbe contraddire la propria essenza	○	○	○	○	○
Considerando la propria promessa, Dior non fa finta di essere qualcos'altro	○	○	○	○	○
Considerando la propria promessa, Dior mostra sicurezza in sé stesso	○	○	○	○	○
Dior non altera la propria filosofia per seguire i trend di mercato	○	○	○	○	○
Il detto "va dove soffia il vento" non si addice a Dior	○	○	○	○	○

5. Ora concentrati sugli occhiali da sole Dior e indica, su una scala da 1 (= per niente d'accordo) a 5 (= completamente d'accordo), quanto ti trovi d'accordo con le seguenti affermazioni:

	1. Per niente d'accordo	2.	3.	4.	5. Completamente d'accordo
Considero gli occhiali da sole Dior un prodotto di alta qualità	○	○	○	○	○
Possedere occhiali da sole Dior è sinonimo di prestigio	○	○	○	○	○
L'acquisto di occhiali da sole Dior aumenta la mia felicità	○	○	○	○	○
Possedere occhiali da sole Dior ti permette di creare un'immagine personale unica	○	○	○	○	○

6. Pensando al marchio Dior, indica su una scala da 1 (= per niente d'accordo) a 5 (= completamente d'accordo), quanto ti trovi d'accordo con le seguenti affermazioni:

	1. Per niente d'accordo	2.	3.	4.	5. Completamente d'accordo
Conosco molto bene il marchio Dior	○	○	○	○	○
Ho già acquistato prodotti del marchio Dior	○	○	○	○	○
Ho già esperienza con gli occhiali da sole del marchio Dior	○	○	○	○	○

7. Pensa ora alle tue esperienze di acquisto online e indica, su una scala da 1 (= per niente d’accordo) a 5 (= completamente d’accordo), quanto ti trovi d'accordo con le seguenti affermazioni:

	1. Per niente d'accordo	2.	3.	4.	5. Completamente d'accordo
L'esperienza di acquisto online è piacevole	○	○	○	○	○
L'esperienza di acquisto online è interessante	○	○	○	○	○
L'esperienza di acquisto online è divertente	○	○	○	○	○
L'esperienza di acquisto online è eccitante	○	○	○	○	○
L'esperienza di acquisto online è attraente	○	○	○	○	○

8. Ora, invece, pensa alla possibilità di acquistare i prodotti in uno store fisico e indica, su una scala da 1 (= per niente d’accordo) a 5 (= completamente d’accordo), quanto ti trovi d'accordo con le seguenti affermazioni:

	1. Per niente d'accordo	2.	3.	4.	5. Completamente d'accordo
Anche se ricerco online le informazioni sui prodotti, preferisco poi l'esperienza di acquisto in negozio	○	○	○	○	○
Andare in un negozio migliora la mia esperienza di acquisto	○	○	○	○	○
Trovo che l'esperienza in negozio sia l'unico modo soddisfacente per acquistare un prodotto	○	○	○	○	○

* 9. Infine, concentrandoti sugli occhiali da sole Dior visti in precedenza indica, su una scala da 1 (= per niente d’accordo) a 5 (= completamente d’accordo), quanto ti trovi d'accordo con le seguenti affermazioni:

	1. Per niente d'accordo	2.	3.	4.	5. Completamente d'accordo
Se potessi, acquisterei con molta probabilità degli occhiali da sole Dior	○	○	○	○	○
Se dovessi acquistare degli occhiali da sole, prenderei in seria considerazione l'acquisto di un modello Dior	○	○	○	○	○
Allo stesso prezzo dei concorrenti, sceglierei di acquistare gli occhiali da sole Dior	○	○	○	○	○
Con molta probabilità consiglierei il marchio Dior	○	○	○	○	○
Con molta probabilità raccomanderei gli occhiali da sole Dior	○	○	○	○	○
Parlerei positivamente del marchio Dior	○	○	○	○	○
Parlerei positivamente degli occhiali da sole Dior	○	○	○	○	○
Lascerei una recensione positiva sul marchio Dior	○	○	○	○	○
Lascerei una recensione positiva sugli occhiali da sole Dior	○	○	○	○	○

Dati socio-anagrafici

10. Età

11. Sesso
- ◯ Maschio
- ◯ Femmina

12. Reddito familiare
- ◯ Entro 20.000 euro
- ◯ Tra 20.000 e 50.000 euro
- ◯ Tra 50.000 e 100.000 euro
- ◯ Oltre 100.000

13. Titolo di studio
- ◯ Licenza elementare
- ◯ Licenza media
- ◯ Diploma scuola superiore
- ◯ Laurea
- ◯ Master-post laurea/Dottorato

14. Lascia un commento sulla ricerca, se lo desideri

SUMMERY IN ITALIAN

Negli ultimi anni, lo sviluppo delle tecnologie di realtà aumentata e di realtà virtuale ha conosciuto una crescita esponenziale. Grazie alla loro facilità d'uso, le nuove tecnologie virtuali stanno progressivamente trovando applicazione nei settori più disparati: dall'intrattenimento alla formazione, dal settore automobilistico a quello aerospaziale, dall'arredamento all'abbigliamento. Sia la realtà aumentata che quella virtuale hanno la capacità di creare una sorte di ponte tra il mondo fisico e il mondo digitale. Nello specifico, la realtà aumentata amplifica il mondo reale con la sovrapposizione di contenuti digitali, mentre la realtà virtuale sostituisce completamente il mondo reale con un ambiente digitale.

La presente ricerca si focalizza sul settore della vendita al dettaglio e, in particolare, mette a confronto l'esperienza di acquisto tradizionale in negozio con l'esperienza di acquisto online convenzionale e infine con l'esperienza di acquisto online sfruttando le potenzialità delle nuove tecnologie virtuali. Nel caso dei negozi tradizionali, gli acquirenti hanno la possibilità di girare nel punto vendita, toccare la merce, vedere i colori dal vivo e lasciarsi ispirare dall'atmosfera del negozio. Tenendo conto che nelle pratiche e-commerce standard, gli acquirenti non possono interagire con un venditore o godersi l'atmosfera di un negozio o annusare, toccare o provare il prodotto, le nuove tecnologie di realtà aumentata e virtuale sono state inserite proprio con lo scopo di mitigare il divario tra il mondo fisico e quello virtuale per migliorare, di conseguenza, l'esperienza di shopping online. Che si tratti di un'immersione parziale con la realtà aumentata o di un'espansione a un mondo completamente virtuale con la realtà virtuale, i negozi virtuali possono migliorare significativamente il coinvolgimento online dei clienti. Questi recenti sviluppi tecnologici permettono alle aziende di creare e offrire ai loro potenziali consumatori delle esperienze virtuali paragonabili a quelle che si possono vivere in un negozio fisico, poiché altamente realistiche e immersive. Nella pratica consentono agli acquirenti di scegliere il prodotto desiderato dall'ampia gamma offerta e di provarlo virtualmente, sul proprio corpo o nel proprio ambiente, prima di acquistarlo.

Specificatamente, la presente ricerca si interessa al settore del lusso e ne analizza la relazione col mondo dell'e-commerce. I beni di lusso sono definiti come prodotti di ottima qualità con una fascia prezzo alta e accessibili solo a coloro che possono permettersi prezzi più elevati. In passato la vendita di tutti i prodotti di lusso avveniva soltanto attraverso un unico canale, ovvero il negozio fisico, a causa del loro prezzo elevato, oggi invece questo settore abbraccia l'innovazione e si dirige verso il digitale. Tenendo conto della fascia prezzo dei prodotti, il settore del lusso può essere suddiviso in lusso assoluto, aspirazionale e accessibile. Il presente studio, con l'obiettivo di analizzare il comportamento del consumatore in relazione all'acquisto online di un paio di occhiali da sole del marchio Christian Dior, esamina specificatamente il settore del lusso accessibile. La creazione dei siti web da parte delle aziende di lusso dà la possibilità ai consumatori di poter consultare il catalogo prodotti ovunque si trovino e in qualsiasi momento ne abbiano voglia. Inoltre, l'aggiunta dei sistemi integrati di realtà aumentata e virtuale modificano le esperienze di acquisto dei consumatori di lusso, in particolare in termini di percezione del lusso e autenticità del marchio.

La percezione da parte del cliente della qualità di un prodotto o marchio è prevalentemente il risultato del pensiero subconscio. La qualità percepita corrisponde alla percezione che il consumatore ha delle componenti tangibili e intangibili di un prodotto e soprattutto è diversa dalla loro qualità effettiva. Perciò i marchi di lusso non sono lussuosi di per sé, ma devono essere percepiti come tali dai consumatori. Ciò rende la gestione delle percezioni dei consumatori particolarmente importante per i marchi di lusso. I consumatori percepiscono i marchi di lusso come combinazioni sfaccettate di attributi e scambiano gli attributi meno salienti con quelli più salienti quando valutano il livello di lusso del marchio. Esiste una considerevole letteratura che parla degli attributi o delle qualità prototipiche dei marchi di lusso; le caratteristiche chiave che contribuiscono al prototipo del marchio di lusso sono una storia di eredità, prezzi elevati, ottima qualità, oltre a essere altamente simbolici, associati a sogni/desideri ed esclusività.

Anche la valutazione dell'autenticità è soggettiva, poiché risiede nella mente del consumatore e dipende dal suo giudizio individuale, dalla sua identità e dalle circostanze in cui si trova. Il concetto di autenticità è ben noto e discusso in molte discipline come la psicologia, la filosofia e la sociologia, ma di recente è diventato uno dei temi di tendenza e uno dei criteri chiave per il successo nel marketing. In questo nuovo ambito, l'autenticità è considerata come uno dei quattro pilastri, insieme alla disponibilità, al costo e alla qualità, che devono essere gestiti affinché un marchio possa creare una relazione significativa e duratura con il cliente. Nel mondo odierno sempre più virtuale e artificiale, i consumatori cercano ciò che è autentico, familiare e sicuro. Le marche servono loro come segnali di identità e come parte della loro vita, aiutandoli a comunicare i loro valori e la loro personalità, a costruire l'autostima o a migliorare la loro identità attraverso il consumo.

Dopo aver presentato il quadro teorico di riferimento su cui è basato il presente lavoro, è opportuno presentare gli obiettivi di ricerca che hanno fatto da filo conduttore all’intera indagine. Lo scopo del presente studio è analizzare il comportamento del consumatore di prodotti di lusso in due contesti di acquisto diversi, vale a dire negozio fisico e negozio virtuale. In particolare, la ricerca mira a valutare se l’uso della realtà virtuale nell’esperienza di acquisto online permette al consumatore di percepire il lusso, la qualità del prodotto e l’autenticità del marchio e se vi è una differenza sostanziale nella percezione di questi fattori nell’esperienza di acquisto in negozio. La visualizzazione di un medesimo prodotto, un paio di occhiali del noto marchio di lusso Christian Dior, indossato realmente e indossato servendosi delle nuove tecnologie virtuali permette di verificare effettivamente quale delle due esperienze di acquisto spinge maggiormente il consumatore all’acquisto. Dal confronto tra la prova del prodotto in un contesto tradizionale e la prova del medesimo prodotto in un contesto più innovativo sarà, dunque, possibile osservare come la diversa esperienza di acquisto possa in qualche modo influenzare il comportamento del consumatore sia in termini di acquisto che di raccomandazione del prodotto. La finalità del presente lavoro è quello di capire se l’utilizzo della realtà virtuale per migliorare l’esperienza di acquisto online possa effettivamente compromettere la percezione del lusso con eventuali effetti negativi sul comportamento dei consumatori rispetto alla tradizionale esperienza in negozio. Questo consentirà alle aziende di analizzare il comportamento dei consumatori e di verificare la loro propensione all’utilizzo della tecnologia virtuale nei contesti di acquisto e sulla base di questi avranno la possibilità di elaborare delle strategie di marketing più mirate.

Per raggiungere gli scopi della ricerca, innanzitutto è stata presentata la Maison Dior per giustificare la scelta di questo marchio nello sviluppo della presente indagine. È stata presentata come un’azienda contemporanea e innovativa, che sperimenta diverse formule nella sua comunicazione multicanale col fine di stupire continuamente e coinvolgere il suo grande pubblico. Successivamente, per esaminare empiricamente la percezione del lusso da parte dei consumatori e le conseguenti intenzioni di acquisto e passaparola legate a due diverse esperienze di acquisto, virtuale e in negozio, è stata condotta una raccolta dati tramite sondaggio online utilizzando *SurveyMonkey*. Per la raccolta dati e il reclutamento dei partecipanti è stato diffuso un link all'URL del sondaggio utilizzando piattaforme di social media come Facebook, Instagram e WhatsApp. Per verificare il comportamento dei consumatori di fronte a due scenari di acquisto differenti, sono stati inseriti all'interno del questionario due annunci pubblicitari, uno relativo all'esperienza di acquisto tradizionale e l'altro relativo all'esperienza di acquisto virtuale. Nel primo caso, l'immagine ritrae due consumatori (un uomo e una donna) che idealmente, dato il bisogno di acquistare un paio di occhiali da sole e visitando un punto vendita Dior, hanno scelto di provare il modello di occhiale raffigurato. Nel secondo caso, gli stessi consumatori (lo stesso uomo e la stessa donna) sono raffigurati mentre provano lo stesso modello di occhiale da sole tramite il loro smartphone utilizzando la realtà virtuale che Dior mette a disposizione sul suo sito web. In entrambi gli annunci pubblicitari è presente lo slogan "*Come in…and try on your luxury sunglasses*", con cui Dior intende stimolare la curiosità e l'interesse dei consumatori nel provare gli occhiali da sole recandosi sia nei suoi punti vendita che visitando il suo sito web. A ciascun partecipante al sondaggio è stato chiesto di guardare con attenzione i due annunci pubblicitari appena descritti e di tenerne conto per il completamento di tutte le sezioni del questionario.

Il questionario sviluppato per la presente ricerca è composto da un totale di tredici domande che mirano a valutare specificatamente i seguenti costrutti: percezione di lusso, autenticità del marchio, esperienza di acquisto in negozio, esperienza di acquisto online, intenzione di acquisto e passaparola. Ciascuno di questi costrutti, chiamati tecnicamente variabili, sono stati inseriti all'interno del questionario con i loro relativi *item*. Innanzitutto, sono stati utilizzati diciannove *item* per misurare le quattro dimensioni della percezione del lusso, vale a dire qualità percepita, valore sociale, valore personale e valore funzionale. Di questi senz'altro la dimensione più saliente è la qualità percepita, che si riferisce alla valutazione da parte del consumatore dell'eccellenza complessiva di un marchio sulla base di elementi intrinseci ed estrinseci. Generalmente, i consumatori spiegano i criteri di qualità come materiali, componenti, prestazioni fisiche, lavorazione e durata. Il valore funzionale, il valore personale e quello sociale sono le dimensioni chiave della percezione del valore del lusso. La percezione del valore da parte dei consumatori è un concetto soggettivo e tende a influenzare l'intenzione di condividere le informazioni e promuovere il valore di un prodotto o di un servizio quando questo soddisfa i desideri dei consumatori. Per misurare l'autenticità del marchio Dior sono stati utilizzati un totale di trenta *item*. Questi *item* hanno permesso di analizzare le seguenti dimensioni di autenticità: continuità, credibilità, integrità, simbolismo, affidabilità, intenzioni e "filosofia" del marchio. Con questi *item* è stato possibili verificare l'atemporalità e la capacità del marchio di trascendere le tendenze, la trasparenza e l'onestà del marchio nei confronti del consumatore, la possibilità del consumatore di identificarsi col marchio e la "filosofia" che sta alla base dell'azienda. Seguono ulteriori *item* per esaminare l'effettiva percezione di lusso di un prodotto Dior, la familiarità dei consumatori col marchio Dior e la loro esperienza di acquisto sia in negozio che online. Infine, sono stati inseriti all'interno del questionario, *item* che analizzano le tipiche variabili di marketing, ossia l'intenzione di acquisto e il passaparola sia online che offline. Per misurare i costrutti di questo studio sono state utilizzate scale consolidate in letteratura e sono state in parte modificate col fine di adattarle ai due contesti di acquisto oggetto di analisi. Inoltre, tutti gli *item* appena descritti sono stati misurati utilizzando la scala Likert a cinque punti (da 1 = per niente d'accordo a 5 = completamente d'accordo). Alla fine del questionario è stata inserita anche una sezione dedicata ai dati socio-demografici in modo da conoscere il profilo del consumatore.

Un totale di 347 soggetti ha partecipato al sondaggio compilando il questionario contenente le variabili sopracitate, ma solo 261 risposte sono state prese in considerazione per l'analisi dei dati dopo l'esclusione di 86 sondaggi incompleti. I dati sono stati raccolti da potenziali consumatori italiani in circa una settimana tra il 18 luglio e il 26 luglio 2022. Nello specifico, si contano 119 partecipanti per il contesto di acquisto tradizionale in negozio e 124 rispondenti per l'esperienza di acquisto con la realtà virtuale. Grazie alla sezione dedicata ai dati socio-demografici, è stato possibile riscontrare una maggioranza di intervistati di sesso femminile, una maggioranza di partecipanti diplomati e percentuali elevate per quanto riguarda due fasce reddituali, vale a dire reddito inferiore a 20,000 euro e reddito tra 20,000 euro e 50,000 euro, in entrambi i contesti di acquisto.

Dopo la somministrazione del questionario, si è proceduto con l'analisi dei dati raccolti al fine di raggiungere gli obiettivi della ricerca. Nello specifico, l'intento era quello di confrontare, per ogni sezione sviluppata, le risposte date dai potenziali clienti delnegozio fisico e quelle dei potenziali clienti del negozio virtuale. Come metodologia di analisi è stata scelta l'analisi delle medie per analizzare le differenze tra le medie dei due gruppi di potenziali clienti. Per l'applicazione di questo meccanismo sono necessari delle variabili dipendenti che in questo caso sono la percezione di lusso, l'autenticità del marchio, la percezione di lusso del prodotto, la familiarità del marchio, l'esperienza di acquisto online e l'esperienza di acquisto nel punto vendita, e delle variabili dipendenti che nel caso specifico sono le variabili di marketing, quali l'intenzione di acquisto e il passaparola online e offline, che permettono di valutare il comportamento del consumatore.

Dal confronto tra le risposte date dai potenziali clienti nel punto vendita e quelle date dai potenziali clienti online sono emersi dei risultati sorprendenti. Innanzitutto, i risultati non hanno evidenziato particolari differenze nella percezione del lusso nelle dimensioni della qualità percepita, del valore sociale, del valore personale e del valore funzionale da parte dei due gruppi di intervistati. Infatti, i risultati mostrano come i consumatori percepiscano il lusso in termini di qualità, funzionalità e prestigio sociale in modo quasi indifferenziato nelle due diverse tipologie di esperienze di acquisto, per cui i due gruppi hanno la stessa percezione del lusso legato al marchio Dior.

Per quanto riguarda l'autenticità del marchio, a differenza di quanto emerso rispetto alla percezione del lusso, si riscontra una differenza significativa tra le due esperienze di acquisto. Il fattore autenticità è particolarmente importante per i consumatori di prodotti di lusso a causa della possibilità di acquistare prodotti di lusso contraffatti. Tuttavia, contrariamente alle aspettative, le risposte fornite dai partecipanti alla ricerca hanno rivelato che il marchio è percepito come più onesto, trasparente e autentico nell'esperienza di acquisto online e non nell'esperienza diretta nei punti vendita.

Risultati sorprendenti sono stati ottenuti anche per quanto riguarda la percezione del lusso di un prodotto. L'indagine condotta, utilizzando come oggetto d'esame un paio di occhiali da sole Dior, ha permesso di verificare la percezione di uno stesso prodotto di lusso dalla prova reale in un punto vendita e dalla prova virtuale sul sito web dell'azienda. Anche in questo caso, diversamente da quanto ci si sarebbe potuto aspettare, le risposte fornite dai partecipanti hanno rivelato una maggiore percezione di lusso di un prodotto acquistando attraverso un canale online e sfruttando le potenzialità della realtà virtuale.

In generale poi, non è emersa alcuna differenza sostanziale per quanto riguarda la familiarità con il marchio e per la rilevanza delle esperienze di shopping reale e online. Per quanto riguarda la familiarità, l'assenza di differenze significative è un buon risultato perché la familiarità con il marchio non dovrebbe dipendere dal canale in cui il consumatore sceglie di fare i propri acquisti. Inoltre, i potenziali consumatori non hanno mostrato di preferire in maniera assoluta i negozi reali data la possibilità che danno di toccare e provare i prodotti, anzi si sono dimostrati pronti ad accettare le nuove tecnologie virtuali e a testare i prodotti anche attraverso di esse.

Dopo aver analizzato i fattori legati al concetto del lusso, è stato analizzato il comportamento del consumatore facendo riferimento alle variabili di marketing. Rispetto all'intenzione di acquisto, è interessante notare come i consumatori sono più propensi ad acquistare il prodotto di lusso sul sito web del marchio che in negozio. Ciò dimostra come effettivamente il consumatore accetti in maniera positiva l'orientamento delle aziende ad integrare sempre di più l'utilizzo delle tecnologie virtuali nelle loro strategie di marketing. In tal senso, i risultati ottenuti dimostrano come l'utilizzo della realtà aumentata e virtuale possa influenzare positivamente il comportamento di acquisto dei consumatori, portandoli ad aumentare i loro acquisti. Anche nel caso del passaparola si può notare l'efficacia delle tecnologie virtuali nel settore del lusso. I consumatori nell'esperienza di acquisto online presentano una significativa propensione a raccomandare il prodotto e il marchio rispetto a quando acquistano nei punti vendita. Tale propensione si verifica sia per il passaparola online grazie ai sistemi di recensione, sia per quello offline, ad esempio nelle tipiche conversazioni tra amici.

I risultati ottenuti da questa indagine delineano diverse questioni per il settore della vendita al dettaglio, sia per gli operatori del settore che per i responsabili del marketing.In particolare, i risultati dimostrano che le tecnologie virtuali come supporto alle vendite online favoriscono le vendite di prodotti di lusso accessibili, come in questo caso l'acquisto di un paio di occhiali da sole Dior. In questo senso si conferma quanto già sostenuto in precedenza, ovvero che i consumatori del lusso accessibile dimostrano una certa tendenza ad acquistare online, dato che i prezzi, pur essendo di lusso, sono abbastanza accessibili. Tuttavia, nonostante la sorprendente tendenza all'acquisto online per alcuni aspetti, non c'è un grande divario tra le due esperienze di acquisto. I consumatori si presentano certamente inclini ad accogliere l'utilizzo delle nuove tecnologie, ma non del tutto disposti a fare a meno della vendita diretta in negozio nonostante la realtà aumentata e quella virtuale riescano a ridurre drasticamente il divario tra reale e virtuale. Ciò dimostra che siamo ancora lontani dalla completa supremazia dell'e-commerce e che le due esperienze di acquisto al momento possono definirsi vincenti sulla base della loro integrazione reciproca.

Dal punto di vista teorico, i risultati della presente ricerca dimostrano che la percezione del lusso e la certezza dell'autenticità del marchio sono importanti nell'acquisto di un prodotto di valore. Nell'esperienza di acquisto in negozio questi due fattori possono essere avvalorati nell'immediato da parte del consumatore poiché ha la possibilità di toccare con mano e di vedere da vicino il suo possibile acquisto, mentre risultano essere elementi critici nel contesto online tradizionale. Tuttavia, oggi le nuove tecnologie virtuali permettono di testare i prodotti in maniera quasi del tutto reale portando addirittura i consumatori a preferire l'esperienza di acquisto interattiva online rispetto a quella tradizionale in negozio, così come evidenziato dai risultati ottenuti.Infine, altri due aspetti teoricamente rilevanti sono l'intenzione di acquisto e il passaparola. Entrambi i fattori risultano più alti nell'esperienza di acquisto online rispetto a quella offline nel negozio, probabilmente ciò è dovuto anche all'età media del campione dell'indagine (38 anni circa). I più giovani preferiscono l'ambiente online per vivere un'esperienza di acquisto più coinvolgente (in questo caso con l'uso di tecnologie virtuali), anche per i prodotti di lusso (a prezzi accessibili). Essendo un campione relativamente giovane, cresciuto nell'era digitale, mostra una maggiore propensione all'utilizzo di Internet e delle tecnologie connesse non solo per quanto riguarda l'acquisto in sé, ma anche per l'intero processo di acquisto. Nella fase decisionale e di consultazione di nuovi prodotti da acquistare, i giovani tendono ad ascoltare le opinioni e i consigli di altri utenti che hanno già avuto esperienza con quel prodotto attraverso le recensioni lasciate sulle varie piattaforme. Ciò permette di incrementare le vendite e di stimolare maggiormente l'intenzione di acquisto.

Dal punto di vista manageriale e di marketing i risultati ottenuti, innanzitutto, forniscono una migliore comprensione degli effetti della tecnologia virtuale sul comportamento dei consumatori, soprattutto per quanto riguarda i prodotti di lusso a prezzi accessibili. Inoltre, i dati generati dall'uso della realtà virtuale possono essere riutilizzati dalle aziende per migliorare le proprie strategie di marketing. Grazie alla tecnologia sono in grado di capire qual è l'articolo più provato, qual è quello che genera maggiore tasso di conversione ecc. Questi dati poi possono essere sfruttati dalle aziende per creare prodotti e strategie maggiormente orientati ai profili dei consumatori di riferimento.

Sebbene questo studio offra questioni importanti, ci sono alcuni limiti che devono essere tenuti in considerazione. Innanzitutto, prendendo come oggetto d'indagine un paio di occhiali da sole di lusso, la ricerca risulta essere limitata al segmento del lusso accessibile. Probabilmente la tendenza a preferire l'esperienza di shopping online è dovuta al fattore prezzo che risulta essere appunto più accessibile e meno rischioso rispetto a quelli presenti negli altri segmenti del settore di lusso. Sarebbe interessante verificare il comportamento dei consumatori per le altre due tipologie di lusso, assoluto e aspirazionale, col fine di ottenere una panoramica generale della tendenza all'acquisto online dei prodotti di lusso. Un altro aspetto che potrebbe essere considerato un limite di questa ricerca è il campione di riferimento, che è relativamente giovane. Sarebbe opportuno estendere la ricerca a un campione di età diversa per verificare se anche i soggetti più adulti accettano e soprattutto apprezzano l'uso delle nuove tecnologie virtuali nelle loro esperienze di acquisto. Infine, un ultimo limite potrebbe riguardare il paese in cui il questionario è stato somministrato, ovvero l'Italia. Sarebbe interessante estendere la ricerca e considerare un campione più ampio e con abitudini di acquisto diversi per verificare se effettivamente le tecnologie virtuale produco effetti positivi a livello internazionale e non soltanto in un territorio circoscritto.

In conclusione, considerato che la presente ricerca fornisce un quadro generale sul potenziale comportamento dei consumatori verso l'introduzione di tecnologie virtuali e immersive nella vendita online, tutte le informazioni ricavatepossono essere un ottimo spunto nell’elaborazione di strategie più mirate per migliorare le prestazioni aziendali.